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THE PAINTERLY ASSAMBLAGE OF SAINT NICHOLAS IN PRILEP AND THE ISSUE OF AESTHETICAL RE-BRANDING



Key words: *St. Nicholas – Prilep, fresco painting, painterly expression, stylistic idiom, artistic ateliers, cultural branding*

The article refers to the “bipolar” stylistic configuration of the fresco ensemble in the church of St. Nicholas in Prilep and its unsubstantiated chronological determination. In that context, the author gives her arguments in favour of the date enclosed in the commissioners’ inscription as the common terminus of the execution of the painterly arrangement. Having in mind the obvious distinction between the two artistic idioms left by the authors of the fresco program of the church, she discusses the causes of such unconventional approach to the creation of the last peace of sacral art in the diversified and exuberant cultural production of 13th century Byzantine Macedonia.

The Intro

The 13th century artistic production of Byzantine Macedonia can easily be determined as kaleidoscopic. The reasons for the vast diversity of stylistic manners and visual expression could be traced back to the chaotic and permanently changeable historic circumstances, as well as to the persistently prevailing and highly competitive political rivalry over the geostrategically significant Macedonian territory¹. The unstable historical milieu has shown its most severe repercussions in the sphere of social life and urban privileges; however, the domains of cultural production and artistic creativity were massively affected, as well, particularly by the demise of the khetorial initiatives in the main centers of architectural and painterly production, Constantinople and Thessalonica being the first among them.

In the aftermath of the Paleologan restitution of the Byzantine Empire, Macedonia became the main territory of the massive political and military progress of the Serbian Monarchy², which caused further de-

composition of the already vulnerable tissue of its cultural and artistic coherency. In that regard, instead of authoritatively guided development of painterly trends, Macedonia witnessed a wide palette of stylistic currents encompassed by the definition of artistic pluralism, authorized by the honourable professor Petar Miljkovic Pepek³, the most renowned scholar in the domain of 13th century Macedonian fresco painting. The different stylistic tendencies that originated throughout the 13th century and existed simultaneously within the pluralistic artistic development until the turn of the 14th century can be categorized in several distinctively conceived painterly matrixes⁴. Marked by specific features in the exposition of the visual constellation of the pictures, these stylistic trends testify to the existence of a particularly rich cultural environment situated in the territory of Macedonia, the authenticity of which has no parallels in the entire history of Byzantine painting. On the other hand, the concurrent existence of, at least, seven different artistic idioms within the frames of a relatively small geographic region can be seen as a cultural “communication breakdown” between the leading authorities in the domain of khetorial enterprises that caused the “sustainable” misguidance of painters’ creative approaches and attitudes. Regardless of our

¹ Б. Панов, *Македонија во XIII век (до 1261 година)*, Историја на македонскиот народ I, Скопје 2000, 470-479.

² М. Панов, *Византиска Македонија (историја)*, Македонија. Милениумски културно-историски факти, том 2, Скопје 2013, 1223.

³ P. Miljković-Pepk, *Un courant stilistique dans la peinture du XIII^e siècle en Macédoine*, Културно наследство IV, Скопје 1971, 23.

⁴ E. Dimitrova, *Seven Streams. The Stylistic Tendencies of Macedonian Fresco Painting in the 13th Century*, Niš & Byzantium Symposium, The Collection of Scientific Works VI, Niš 2008, 193-206.



1. *St. George, Kurbinovo (1191), Annunciation (detail)*
1. *Св. Ѓорѓи, Курбиново, Благовести (детал)*

contemporary viewpoints and scholarly meditations, the monuments of fresco painting from the 13th century exhibit a complex picture that reveals the pursuit of a vivid, exciting, resplendent and exuberant painterly vision; one among them in particular.

The church dedicated to St. Nicholas in Prilep has provoked a great deal of scholarly interest both by its breath-taking decorative architectural glamour, as well as the strikingly non-conventional, highly elusive and hectically picturesque painterly features⁵.

⁵ Ф. Месеснел, *Црква Светог Николе у Марковој вароши код Прилепа*, Гласник Скопског Научног Друштва XIX, 1938, 37-52; Б. Бабиќ, *Краток преглед на историјатот на Марков Град, со посебен осврт на црквата "Свети Никола"*, Стремеж 3-4, Прилеп 1954, 62-64; Р. Милковиќ-Пеpek, *Contribution aux recherches sur l'évolution de la peinture en Macedoine au XIII^e siècle, L'art byzantin du XIII^e siècle*, Beograd 1967, 195-6; Б. Бабиќ, *Три грчка фреско натписа на ѕидовима црква средњовековног Прилепа из друге половине XIII века*, Зборник за ликовне уметности 5, Нови Сад 1969, 29-30; В. Ј. Ђурић, *Византијске фреске у Југославији*,



2. *St. Nicholas, Prilep (1298), Virgin in the apse (detail)*
2. *Св. Никола, Прилеп (1298), Богородица во апсидата (детал)*

The investigations of its painterly décor were mainly aimed towards two distinctive goals: determination of its stylistic features in terms of establishment of its place within the development of artistic currents of the late 13th century, and definition of its chronologi-

Beograd 1974, 15, 19; R. Hamann-Mac Lean, *Grundlegung zu einer Geschichte der mittelalterlichen Monumentalmalerei in Serbien und Makedonien*, Giessen 1976, 289-291; Б. Бабиќ, *Црката Св. Никола во село Варош (Прилеп)*, Споменици за средновековната и поновата историја на Македонија IV, Скопје 1981, 501-507; Р. Милковиќ-Пеpek, *Sur la chronologie de l'église de saint Nicolas à Varoš près Prilep*, Studien zur byzantinischen Kunstgeschichte. Festschrift für Horst Hallensleben zum 65. Geburtstag, Amsterdam 1995, 73-84; Р. Kostovska, *The prophetic figures and their quotations in the church of St. Nicolas in Varoš, near Prilep*, Balcanoslavica 25, Prilep 1998, 159-173; eadem, *Симболичното значење на претставата на Христовото Крштење во црквата Свети Никола во Варош, кај Прилеп*, Balcanoslavica 26-27, Прилеп 1999-2000, 39-52; eadem, *Програмата на живописот во црквата Св. Никола во Варош кај Прилеп и нејзината функција како гробна капела*, Зборник за средновековна уметност 3, Скопје 2001, 50-77; eadem, *The image of Saint Romanos as a Soldier and his role in the program of the church of St. Nicholas near Prilep*, Balcanoslavica 28-29, Прилеп 2001, 163-169; S. Korunovski - E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia. L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, Milano 2006, 98-100, 147-152; E. Dimitrova, *Seven Streams. The Stylistic Tendencies of Macedonian Fresco Painting in the 13th Century*, 203-204; E. Димитрова - С. Коруновски - С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, Македонија. Милениумски културно-историски факти, том 3, Скопје 2013, 1630-1631, 1678-1679.



3. *St. Nicholas, Prilep (1298), Archangel Michael in the apse*
 3. *Св. Никола, Прилеп (1298), Архангел Михаил во апсидата*

cal ambivalence in regard to the two different artistic handwritings detected in the church interior⁶. The reasons for such a “sustainably biased”, as well as intentionally oriented approach to the examination of the visual characteristics of the painted program in the temple are twofold: the non-comparable authenticity in the configuration of the painterly elements, which has no existing analogies in the history of 13th century Byzantine art, and the striking dissimilarities in the execution of the two painterly units – the one ornamenting the curved surface of the apse vs. the other decorating the walls of the nave. In that regard,

⁶ В. Ј. Ђурић, *Византијске фреске у Југославији*, 15, 19; R. Hamann-Mac Lean, *Grundlegung zu einer Geschichte der mittelalterlichen Monumentalmalerei in Serbien und Makedonien*, 289-291; Б. Бабиќ, *Црквата Св. Никола во село Варош (Прилеп)*, Споменици за средновековната и поновата историја на Македонија IV, Скопје 1981, 501-507; P. Miljković-Perek, *Sur la chronologie de l'église de saint Nicolas à Varoš près Prilep*, 73-84; П. Костовска, *Зидно сликарство Светог Николе у Вароши код Прилепа*, Београд 1998 (MA Thesis, University of Belgrade); E. Dimitrova, *Seven Streams. The Stylistic Tendencies of Macedonian Fresco Painting in the 13th Century*, 203-204.

this article intends to give some substantial arguments in favour of the most rational chronological determination of St. Nicholas' fresco arrangement, as well as the process of its origination and cultural significance.

The Issue

Commissioned by the members of a noble family, the church dedicated to St. Nicholas in Prilep displays an unpretentious ground plan, as well as modest dimensions of its architectural constellation, yet a luxurious and complex visual design of the façade articulation⁷. The detection of the two consecutive building phases reflected in the two different building techniques - of the dado zone and of the higher registers of the walls of the church exterior, has not yet been precisely determined in terms of their chronological inter-relation⁸. Their co-relation to the alleged phases of the painterly decoration⁹ is even more confusing, having in mind the vertical arrangement of the chronologically consecutive architectural components in opposition to the horizontal disposition of the two already mentioned distinctive fresco units. Resulting from the restrictive and rather conventional scholarly approach towards the idea of conservative qualities of Macedonian fresco painting from the 13th century, i.e. the ignorance of the pluralistic and highly pictorial development of artistic trends, the theory of a century-long time span in the execution of St. Nicholas' fresco painting has been tempted by younger scholars who devoted their investigation to the cultural production of 13th century Byzantine Macedonia¹⁰. Taking into consideration

⁷ Ф. Месеснел, *Црква Светог Николе у Марковој вароши код Прилепа*, Гласник Скопског Научног Друштва, Скопје 1938; R. Findrik, *Konzervatorski radovi na arhitekturi crkve sv. Nikole u selu Varoš kod Prilepa*, Zbornik zaštite spomenika kulture XVI, Beograd 1965, 201-218; В. Кораћ, *Две градитељске фазе на цркви Св. Николе у Прилепу*, Зборник посветен на Бошко Бабиќ, Прилеп 1986, 123-126; С. Коруновски, *Црковната архитектура во Македонија во XIII век*, Скопје 2000 (PhD Thesis, University of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, Skopje), 48-54; S. Korunovski - E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, 98-99. Е. Димитрова - С. Коруновски - С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, 1630-1631.

⁸ В. Кораћ, *Две градитељске фазе на цркви св. Николе у Прилепу*, 123-126; С. Коруновски, *Црковната архитектура во Македонија во XIII век*, 55-58.

⁹ В. Ј. Ђурић, *Византијске фреске у Југославији*, 15, 19.

¹⁰ П. Костовска, *Зидно сликарство Светог Николе у Вароши код Прилепа*, 310-315; Е. Димитрова, *Seven Streams. The Stylistic Tendencies of Macedonian Fresco Painting in the 13th Century*, 203-204.



4. *St. Nicholas, Prilep (1298), Archangel Michael in the apse (detail)*
 4. *Св. Никола, Прилеп (1298), Архангел Михаил во апсидата (детал)*

the many different options that could have been the cause of the stylistic *mélange* in the execution of the fresco panorama of the temple of St. Nicholas, the author of this article strongly oppose any idea of two temporally distant painterly phases, with another theory that refers to the socio-cultural background of the actual khetorial enterprise. The elaboration of that theory is the main goal of this paper.

Namely, the “troublemaking chronological distance”, ascribed to the creation of the two painterly units¹¹, is, by all means, due to the striking stylistic disparity between the two different handwritings left by the masters in the apse and on the walls of the nave. In that regard, the fresco painting in the altar belongs to the category of the “stylistic conservatism” nurtured by the adherents of the perpetuated Late Comnenian visual expression, the main components of which are: the arabesque play of the drawing in the modelling of the forms, the linear itemization of the painterly masses, as well as the dynamism of the motion in the execution of the draperies. Exhibiting the continued vitality of Late Comnenian dynamic aestheticism, the painting in the apse of St. Nicholas appears as a belated representative of this elegant and graceful artistic discourse, interwoven with spiritual

beauty of the forms and transcendental energy of the lines, united in a painterly sophistication the origins of which could be traced back to the Kurbinovo fresco ensemble (Fig. 1). However, the imposingly accentuated role of the line in the configuration of the compositional structures, the restless drawing and its graphic animation permeated with strong fractalization of the masses and the vivid, picturesque qualities of the colouristic range (Figs. 2, 3) do not link the apsidal decoration of the church in Prilep with the refined and glamorous Kurbinovo fresco arrangement¹²; with the harsh accents in the application of the drawing, as well as the severe segregation of the painterly surface, St. Nicholas altar could be seen only as a distant “relative” of the stylistic manner employed in the execution of the Kurbinovo ensemble.

On the other hand, the apsidal decoration of St. Nicholas displays many stylistic similarities with the fresco painting in the church dedicated to St. Nicholas in the village of Manastir in Mariovo (1271), as well as in the church of St. John the Theologian Ka-

¹¹ В. Ј. Ђурић, *Византијске фреске у Југославији*, 15, 19.

¹² Ц. Грозданов - Л. Хардерман Мисгвиш, *Курбиново*, Скопје 1992, 29-33; Ц. Грозданов, *Курбиново и други студии за фрескоживописот во Преспа*, Скопје 2006, 44-47; Е. Димитрова, С. Коруневски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, 1597-1607.



5. *St. Nicholas, Prilep (1298), Archangel Gabriel in the apse (detail)*
 5. *Св. Никола, Прилеп (1298), Архангел Гаврил во апсидата (детал)*

neo in Ohrid (ca. 1275)¹³. The stylistic similarities between the fresco painting in these three churches established the grounds for another assumption of an earlier dating of the apsidal frescoes in Prilep than the year indicated by the donor's inscription, which could be brought into correlation with the period of the activity of deacon and referendarius John's painting studio in the seventies of the 13th century¹⁴. However, one has to keep in mind the obvious dissimilarities between the stylistic expressions explicated in the three monuments, as well. In that regard, the tendency to infuse a slightly plastic accord in the shaping of saintly images and the minute attention to details in the execution of the costumes from Manastir's decoration, obviously differ from the predominantly linear configuration of the facial structures and the rationally flat treatment of the draperies in Prilep; the refined graphicism of the drawing in Manastir seems to have lost its floating energy in the Prilep ensemble, while the delicate tonal colouristic expression of the Manastir's frescoes seems to have melted down into a picturesque palette of raw nuances in the Prilep's

ensemble¹⁵. It is also evident that the ornamentally glamorous shapes of the saintly images from Manastir have been transformed into much softer, feathery-like forms in Kaneo¹⁶, while in Prilep they retain the density and coherence of the painterly approach from the late 12th century¹⁷. Nevertheless, the comparison of the painting in the church of St. Nicholas in Prilep with the frescoes in Manastir and Kaneo, as well as the evident compatibility of the painterly elements of their ensembles are references that should not be omitted in any serious and argumentative analysis of the artistic development of 13th century Macedonia. This particularly refers to the attempts of investigation of the Late Comnenian painterly expression, as well as of the aesthetic principles promoted by the multi-productive and mega-active artistic atelier of the deacon and referendarius John.

If we turn our attention to the second painterly unit executed in St. Nicholas, i.e. the frescoes in the nave of the church, we have to admit that the most striking

¹³ S. Korunovski - E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, 150.

¹⁴ П. Костовска, *Зидно сликарство Светог Николе у Вароши код Прилепа*, 314-315; eadem, *Црквата Свети Никола во с. Манастир*, Скопје 2008 (PhD Thesis, University of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, Skopje), 456-458.

¹⁵ E. Dimitrova, *Seven Streams. The Stylistic Tendencies of Macedonian Fresco Painting in the 13th Century*, 197.

¹⁶ П. Костовска, *Зидно сликарство Светог Николе у Вароши код Прилепа*, 460.

¹⁷ E. Dimitrova, *Seven Streams. The Stylistic Tendencies of Macedonian Fresco Painting in the 13th Century*, 194-195.



6. *St. Nicholas, Prilep (1298), Raising of Lazarus*
 6. *Св. Никола, Прилеп (1298), Воскресението на Лазар*

difference in comparison to the apsidal painting is the ravaging energy which bursts out of every picture, as well as of each compositional element. The lively contours outlined in the attempt to grasp the saints' images permeated with sensitive expressiveness, the three-dimensional impression that the modelling of the figures generates through the meticulous treatment of the draperies and the dynamism of the postures of the numerous figures in the compositions contribute to an emphatic persuasiveness of the depicted scenes (Figs. 6, 10). The suggestive physiognomies, the intensity of the temperate motion of the figures, the expressive rhythm of the gestures and the inventiveness in the selection of genre elements are the most remarkable components in the vivid creative matrix of the painted panorama in the nave of the temple (Figs. 8, 9)¹⁸. The emphatic dimensions of the compositions, the harmony of the optical impression in their arrangement, the stout figures of the saints that emanate weight and volume (Fig. 10), the plastic accents in the configuration of the forms and the increased number of protagonists in the depicted events (Fig. 7) are the basic elements that constitute

the painterly expression of the masters who worked in the naos in their endeavor to come closer to the Balkans' artistic trends current in the second half of the 13th century.

However, their great leap forward in regard to the masters of the altar decoration is the decisive opposition to the conservatism which refers to the explicitly emphatic respect for the Late Comnenian painterly canon. In their artistic expression, it emerges only as a hardly perceptible remnant in the discrete presence of graphicism that is no longer a dominant means of expression. Although evident in the treatment of certain components of their painterly procedure, it retreats before the pronounced tendency for the application of "more progressive" methods, such are: the modelling of the lively contours of saintly images, the plastic accent in the configuration of the forms, the intensity of the motion which accentuates the picturesque visual impression of the scenes, as well as the expressive rhythm of the gestures, as the most representative components of the exuberant creative inspiration of the masters¹⁹. Although their tal-

¹⁸ Е. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, 1679.

¹⁹ S. Korunovski - E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, 150-151.



7. *St. Nicholas, Prilep (1298), Betrayal*
 7. *Св. Никола, Прилеп (1298), Предаството на Јуда*

ents and skills differ, the two masters who executed the fresco ensemble of the nave homogenized their painterly techniques in the achievement of a unified impression of an explosive and euphoric atmosphere of the depicted events, permeated with passionate rationalism and moderately controlled sensibility. With the anxiously spirited brushstrokes, the dense impasto, the lively colour palette and explosive vivacity of the compositions they created a work of art unique in its visual imposition that has no parallels in the Byzantine art of the 13th century.

The Idea

With a purpose of solving the puzzle created by the two different artistic handwritings applied in the interior of the church of St. Nicholas in Prilep, we will give a few new arguments in opposition to the idea of production of the fresco ensemble in the time span of almost a century, as well as to the hypothesis that the altar decoration is executed a few decades earlier than the painting which ornaments the nave of the temple. Namely, our *first of all* and most substantiated argument is the commissioners' inscription preserved on the southern wall of the naos²⁰, the content of which confirms the year of 1298 as a pre-

cise chronological reference to the origination of the painted decoration. In that regard, the painters left a "personal note" with the exact information that they have completed the fresco arrangement of the church in November of the mentioned year. Having in mind the fact that November was the month which indicated the end of the painterly season in Byzantium (before the beginning of the wet and therefore highly unfavourable wintery climate) on one hand, as well as the modest dimensions of the edifice (allowing the decoration of the church to be accomplished within one painterly season) on the other, we have no doubt whatsoever that the project for decoration of St. Nicholas church was launched, as well as finalized in the course of 1298. At least, that is what the donors' inscription, preserved in the temple's interior, strongly suggests.

Although the khetorioral note gives an indisputable written confirmation of the date when the painted decoration in the church was created, some scholars have and still might argue that the year of 1298

²⁰ Б. Бабић, *Три грчка фреско натписа на зидовима цркава средњовековног Прилепа из друге половине XIII века*, 29-30.



8. St. Nicholas, Prilep (1298), Betrayal (detail)
8. Св. Никола, Прилеп (1298), Предавството на Јуда (детал)

could easily be only the *terminus post quem non* for the frescoes of the temple. Calculating with the two building phases of the edifice and awkwardly translating them into the presupposed painterly phases of its fresco decoration, they might seek a solution to the puzzle in the chance that the donors' inscription from 1298 mentions only the names of the commissioners of the second phase, while the identity of their predecessor has been omitted from the written text. However, having in mind the khetorial inscription preserved in the interior of the church dedicated to St. Nicholas in the village of Manastir (ca. 16 miles from Prilep), where the donor has included the name of his more-than-two-centuries chronologically distant predecessor²¹, one can hardly sustain the allegation that the noble and, by all means, devotionally religious family from Prilep could have ignored the name and identity of the original founder of their endowment.

Second of all, the modest dimensions of the edifice are also a strong opponent to the possibility of an

extended process of decoration of the church with a time lapse of more than nine decades²². According to this theory, the temple should have been re-instated for fresco painting after a mega-pause of almost a century, a period in which the monument must have been left in a status of creative hibernation. Since the Fourth Crusade has been referred to as a main culprit in the situation of *decoration breakdown* of St. Nicholas, it seems that the dramatic fall of Constantinople in 1204 is a kind of an exaggerated reason for solving the problem of abortion of the painterly activities in the church as an immediate and fateful impact of the political situation in the capital of the Empire. Funded upon the idea of the instant collapse of all Byzantine institutions even in the distant realm of provincial government, as well as of the sterile and almost imaginary artistic production of 13th century Macedonia, the mentioned theory filled the gap of a more substantiated interpretation for several decades. At the end, it simply gave way to another *retro-active* and argumentatively unreliable *theorem* of an earlier, yet not too exceeding chronological antedating of the apsidal painting vs. the decoration of the nave. Again, the starting point was the approximate stylistic comparison of the altar frescoes to the painterly

²¹ Д. Коцо - П. Миљковић-Пепек, *Манастир*, Скопје 1959, 6-11; Ф. Баришић, *Два грчка натписа из Манастира и Струге*, Зборник радова Византолошког института 8/2, Београд 1968, 16-17; П. Костовска, *Зидно сликарство Светог Николе у Вароши код Прилепа*, 36-39.

²² В. Ј. Ђурић, *Византијске фреске у Југославији*, 15, 19.



9. *St. Nicholas, Prilep (1298), Trial by Pilate*
 9. *Св. Никола, Прилеп (1298), Судењето кај Пилат (детал)*



10. *St. Nicholas, Prilep (1298), Road to Golgotha*
 10. *Св. Никола, Прилеп (1298), Патот кон Голгота*

manners of some authors who temporally belonged to some previous artistic generations²³.

²³ Б. Бабиќ, *Црквата Св. Никола во село Варош (Прилеп)*, 501-507; P. Miljković-Peprek, *Sur la chronologie de l'église de saint Nicolas à Varoš près Prilep*, 73-84;

In case there has been a certain time gap between the two different fresco arrangements applied in the apse and on the walls of the nave, one should de-

Group of authors, *Macedonian Cultural Heritage. Christian Monuments*, Skopje 2008, 130.



11. St. Nicholas, Prilep (1298), Lamentation
11. Св. Никола, Прилеп (1298), Оплакувањето



12. St. Nicholas, Prilep (1298),
Fresco painting in the vault
12. Св. Никола, Прилеп (1298),
Фрескосликаството во сводот на црквата

termine the cause of such a peculiar chronological disorder of the fresco decoration executed in the relatively small church of St. Nicholas. If the painting in the altar has indeed preceded the frescoes in the naos for several decades, such a baffling situation is far from being reflected in the architectural configu-

ration of the edifice²⁴. Moreover, as Professor Korunovski precisely points, the altar frescoes expand on portions of the apse which are clearly covered by external masonry dated in 1298²⁵. The profound analysis of the architecture, founded upon the painstaking examination of all building and decorative components of the edifice appears to be anything but a solid argument towards substantiation of the theory of different chronological determination of the two painterly units executed in the temple. The unified technique of architectural configuration of the edifice along the east-west axis, as well as its unique temporal reference, seem to have constructed a *double dare* and posed a serious scholarly challenge to the already shaky theory of the *bi-dated* fresco decoration of St. Nicholas. In the same sense, the time span of couple of decades which allegedly divides the chronological origination of the two fresco units and ascribes the older one to the painting studio of the deacon John, holds no water to *hose* the idea of a painterly residue of the great master's carrier; on the contrary, it also dries up easily when some elements of a more elaborated and interdisciplinary configured approach are introduced in the process of examination, as well as all aspects of the creation of the temple of St. Nicholas are taken into serious account.

Third of all, we have no doubt in the process of successiveness in the execution of the two units of fresco painting in the temple of St. Nicholas, having in mind the order of painterly activities in regard to the spatial organization of the medieval church's in-

²⁴ С. Коруновски, *Црквата архитектура во Македонија во XIII век*, 55-57.

²⁵ Ibidem, 58.



13. *St. Nicholas, Manastir (1271),
Communion of the Apostles (detail)*
13. *Св. Никола, Манастир (1271),
Причестувањето на апостолиите (детал)*



14. *St. Nicholas, Manastir (1271),
Communion of the Apostles (detail)*
14. *Св. Никола, Манастир (1271),
Причестувањето на апостолиите (детал)*

terior. According to the instituted tradition, the visual decoration of the sacral monuments in Byzantium used to start with the application of the fresco programme in the dome, followed up by the execution of the painting in the altar space, after which, the walls of the nave, the pillars, as well as other elements of the inner architectural configuration of the edifice were ornamented with murals²⁶. Since the church of St. Nicholas in Prilep, according to its structural matrix, does not belong to the category of domed edifices, i.e. lacks the element of the calotte as the highest architectural surface of the interior (as well as the initial point of painterly arrangement of the temple), it is more than admissible that the process of application of the fresco programme was launched in the altar and continued in the nave of the building. In that sense, the apsidal frescoes must have been executed prior to the ones applied in the naos of the church for a period of time which has to be determined more

²⁶ On the issue of structural approach to each painterly element in the domain of sacral painting, see: O. Demus, *The Making of Byzantine Art. The Methods of Byzantine Artist*, Studies in Byzantium, Venice and the West, Vol. I, London 1998, 22-30.

precisely. According to our analyses of the painterly manner of the two fresco units created in the church, that period appears to be much shorter than a few decades, let alone an entire century, as suggested by some previously mentioned scholars.

Namely, as our investigations of the 13th century Macedonia have already shown²⁷, the addiction to the Late Comnenian painterly tradition can be witnessed throughout the whole period in question, until the very end of the epoch. The number of monuments which artistically belong to this reliance on the “verified qualities of painterly expression from the heroic past” is remarkable, while their chronological amplitude is quite extensible²⁸. In that regard, the linear fractalization of the facial structure of the saintly images, the elongated anatomic configuration of the represented figures, the playful rhythm of the wavy draperies, the accentuated graphic concept of the painterly elements, as well as the tamed sonority of the colours applied, seem as if they have been

²⁷ E. Dimitrova, *Seven Streams. The Stylistic Tendencies of Macedonian Fresco Painting in the 13th Century*, 194 -198.

²⁸ Ibidem, 195, 197.



15. St. John the Theologian Kaneo, Ohrid (ca. 1275-1280), *Communion of the Apostles* (detail)
 15. Св. Јован Богослов Канео, Охрид (околу 1275-1280), Причестувањето на апостолиите (детал)



16. St. John the Theologian Kaneo, Ohrid (ca. 1275-1280), *Communion of the Apostles* (detail)
 16. Св. Јован Богослов Канео, Охрид (околу 1275-1280), Причестувањето на апостолиите (детал)

“obediently” adopted from the glamorous artistic legacy of the great Kurbinovo master. However, the harsh accents of the thickening lines in the execution of the drawing, the dull method in the configuration of the painterly masses, the awkward approach to the elaboration of the hardly weightless folds of the garments, as well as the intentional distortion of the figural proportions disclose the fact that the Kurbinovo master remained the main source of inspiration for

many generations of artists, who inimitably, yet persistently went along his creative route until the end of the 13th century.

Rejecting the highly unfocused theory of a century-long chronological gap dividing the execution of the two fresco units, some of the scholars who engaged themselves in the investigation of the visual decoration of St. Nicholas in Prilep came up with an idea of a much shorter painterly *intermezzo*.



17. St. Demetrius, Prilep (ca. 1290), *Officiating Church Fathers*
 17. Св. Димитрија, Прилеп (околу 1290), *Службата на архијереите*

The comparison of the apsidal frescoes of the Prilep church to the ones executed in the altars of Manastir (1271) and Kaneo (ca. 1275-1280), ascribed to the painting studio of Referendarius John, as well as to the altar murals of St. Demetrius in Prilep (ca. 1290)²⁹, is certainly much more appropriate in terms of their chronological compatibility. However, the similarities between the mentioned fresco ensembles could be sustained only to a certain extent, while the obvious distinctions speak in favour of a similar, yet far from identical painterly discourse: the cohesive modulation of the tonally elaborated draperies of the apostolic figures in the Communion in Manastir (Fig. 13), the severe geometric construction of the folds in the Eucharistic scene in Kaneo (Fig. 15), the tangible elegance in the visual structure of the garments in the Officiating ceremony in St. Demetrius (Fig. 17) and the abstractly frolicsome arrhythmia of the Archangel's attire in St. Nicholas (Fig. 3), can hardly be seen as components of the same painterly idiom, let alone of the same painterly *executioner*. Furthermore, the naively picturesque facial expression of the images in the Communion scene in Manastir (Fig. 14), the impassive flat-liners of the apostolic portraits in Kaneo (Fig. 16) and the waggishly nuanced facial characters of the two archangels in St. Nicholas (Figs. 4, 5) can, under no circumstances, be designed and/or executed by the same author, unless he deliberately

tried to work differently each time he was engaged in painterly activities.

On the ground of all the above mentioned (the content of the donors' inscription, the dimensions, as well as the architectural configuration of the church, the conservative stylistic manner of the apsidal painting vs. the picturesque murals executed in the nave and the painterly exclusiveness of the altar frescoes in comparison to other works of art from the last quarter of the 13th century), we strongly believe that the date mentioned in the meticulously written commissioners' inscription (1298) refers to both fresco units, executed in close succession one after the other. In that regard, we have no doubt that the decoration of the church has been started in the apse, followed up by the fresco ornamentation of the nave and completed by the khetorial document, written by the fresco masters in November 1298, as a testimony to the successfully accomplished painterly project in the church. Of course, it is needless to say that the apse and the nave of St. Nicholas have not been decorated in the same painterly manner, nor by the same artist, the reason of which could only be the old-fashioned approach of the master who was engaged to work in the altar space of the temple. Painting the frescoes in 1298, a few years after the decoration of St. Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid has already introduced the new, "modern" and highly attractive Paleologan visual expression, he must have been evaluated as conservative, outdated and retroactive by the producers, i.e. investors of the church. Therefore, in the resumption of the painterly decoration, he was simply replaced

²⁹ В. Ристић, *Црква Св. Димитрија у Прилепу*, Синтеза X, 3-4, Багдала, Крушевац 1979, 211-215; П. Костовска, *Црквата Свети Никола во с. Манастир*, 448.

by two *more progressive* masters, who were given the assignment to accomplish the murals in the nave by the end of the year³⁰. Hence, the church of St. Nicholas displays an interesting painterly binomial which consists of the conservative, tenderly sentimental and retro-stylistic frescoes in the altar, as well as the penetrably ambitious and tactually imposing pictures in the nave (Fig. 12). United in a genuine decorative ensemble of ambiguous aesthetic qualities, the fresco arrangement of St. Nicholas in Prilep is a unique example of highly intended artistic re-branding in the 13th century Byzantine visual culture. Aimed at mod-

ernization of traditional painterly elements through the intentional differentiation of the “progressive” artistic form from the “regressive” visual retention, this process of stylistic revitalization encompassed by the fresco painting of the temple gave a new aesthetic identity even to the surviving portion of the conservative pictures. Objectified as a pursuit of the artistic novelties vs. the downfall of conventional practices, it has brought the tradition and the innovation together in a unique piece of art with no existing comparative analogies in the painterly production of Eastern Middle Ages.

³⁰ E. Dimitrova, *Seven Streams. The Stylistic Tendencies of Macedonian Fresco Painting in the 13th Century*, 203-204.

Елизабета ДИМИТРОВА

ЛИКОВНИОТ АСАМБЛАЖ ВО ЦРКВАТА Св. НИКОЛА ВО ПРИЛЕП И ПРОБЛЕМОТ НА ЕСТЕТСКОТО РЕБРЕНДИРАЊЕ

Резиме

Ликовниот бином зачуван во црквата Св. Никола во Прилеп веќе долго време претставува стилска загатка за византиските студии, особено поради шпекулативните теории за постарото хронолошко потекло на олтарниот живопис во црквата, датиран во широкиот временски габарит од почетокот до осумдесеттите години на XIII столетие. Комненските рецидиви визуелизирани во радикалниот графичизам којшто ги обликува ликовите и драпериите во апсидалната школка versus живописната фузија на разновидни стилски компоненти вклучени во сликарството на наосот, создава од декорацијата на Прилепскиот Св. Никола исклучителна по впечатокот и енигматична по контекстот ликовна целина, неповторена по своите естетски вредности во целокупната историја на византиското сликарство. Поаѓајќи од содржината на ктиторскиот натпис, димензиите и архитектонската конфигурација на црквата, социо-културниот бекграунд на нејзиното настанување, како и од стилскиот дискурс на двата фрескоаранжмана зачувани во нејзиниот ентериер, трудот фрла нова светлина врз проблемот на ликовниот “биверзитет” на сликарството во храмот на Св. Никола во Прилеп. Притоа, елаборацијата на проблемот со различниот стилски дуктус на живописот во олтарот и на оној во наосот на црквата не поаѓа од паушалната идеја за хронолошкото несовпаѓање во нивната продукција, туку од потребата за одржлива културолошка вредност на неговата визуелна рецепција од страна на инвеститорите, создавачите и посетителите, т.е. од неговите визуелни конзументи.

Во тој контекст, сметаме дека годината 1298 од ктиторскиот натпис, изведен во црквата, претставува хронолошка референца за целокупното сли-

карство, почнато во олтарот, продолжено во наосот и завршено со поставувањето на донаторската инскрипција. Притоа, причината за различните стилски одлики на фрескоживописот во храмот најверојатно се должи на конзервативниот стилски манир на мајсторот ангажиран да го наслика олтарот; негувајќи го доцнокомненскиот ликовен сентиментализам во крајот на XIII век, во времето на иницијалниот развој на новиот експлозивен палеологовски стил, тој секако оставил впечаток на старомоден и ретрограден зограф, емоционално врзан за традиционализмот на претходната ликовна епоха. Поради тоа, во понатамошниот процес на изведбата на фрескодекорацијата во храмот, тој бил едноставно заменет со двајца “попрогресивни” мајстори, кои добиле задача да го завршат живописот до крајот на наведената година. Оттука, двете фрескоцелини зачувани во црквата Св. Никола во Прилеп не претставуваат продукт на парцијален, временски-изолиран и визуелно-некомпатибилен ктиторски перформанс, кој се случил независно од културолошката свест на нивните продуценти. Напротив, насочен кон модернизација на традиционалните ликовни елементи низ тенденциозната диференцијација на “прогресивната” уметничка форма во однос на “регресивниот” визуелен рецидив, овој процес на стилска ревитализација на сликарството во храмот му дал нов естетски идентитет дури и на зачуваниот дел од конзервативната декорација. Објективизиран како потрага по уметнички новитети наспроти одумирањето на конвенционалните практики, тој ги обединил традицијата и иновациите во единствено ликовно дело, без постоечки стилски аналогии во целокупната византиска фрескопродукција.

