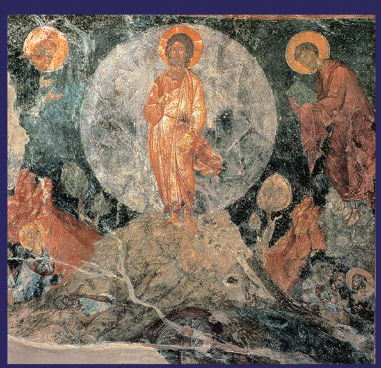
Dr Uroš T. Todorović
(Ouresis Todorovich)

Modernism of the Frescoes of Mistra

From the Byzantine Frescoes of Mistra to the 20th Century Abstract Painting



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Foreword

This is an intriguing and well overdue publication, equally suited for non-experts and experts of Byzantine art and culture, as well as art appreciators more generally. The first part of this study can prove very useful particularly to a first-time visitor of Mistra, who is simply looking for an overview of the renowned Byzantine frescoes of the place.
On the other hand, the second part of the study constitutes a concise, highly original, in-depth consideration of the hitherto underappreciated significance of the aesthetics of the Mistra frescoes. In many respects, this part may also serve as an indicative introduction to Todorović's major work, entitled *Byzantine Painting through Contemporary Eyes: Hermeneutics of Spiritual Vision* (Sebastian Press, 2023).

It should be noted that the aesthetics of the Mistra frescoes entails an experience which is conveyed through abstraction, as well as through the relationship between realism and the transcendental, and through what Todorović calls 'embodied light.' All three aspects are discussed in this study so as to put forward, on the one hand, the diachronicity of Late Byzantine painting and, on the other, to explore the connections and affinities between the latter and Modern artistic developments. The conclusions are, simply put, surprising and revelatory!

Being equally an experienced iconographer, a fresco painter, a contemporary artist and a Byzantinist, Uroš (Ouresis) Todorović is a philosopher of art who shares with us his in-depth understanding of the frescoes of Mistra, which he studied meticulously *in situ*. Also, by virtue of his other publications, such as the highly original and insightful study of the marble-panels in Hagia Sophia of Constantinople (Sebastian Press, 2015), he has demonstrated a unique level of understanding concerning the most demanding aspects of Byzantium's artistic output. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that this publication 'liberates' the frescoes of Mistra from their merely archaeological context and brings them alive to our contemporary sphere of interest.

In its last segment, in a very insightful way, this study touches briefly on the prospects and challenges of what is generally known as Contemporary Byzantine Painting,

an artistic domain rapidly developing as we speak. In fewer words, this publication is a concise guide to the frescoes at Mistra, as well as a perfect guide to their deepest aesthetic significance and contemporary relevance.

Dr Vassilis Adrahtas, Lecturer
Western Sydney University and University of NSW, Australia

Dedication

In loving memory of my mother, a painter of Light,
Stanka Todorović (1946–2018).

Introduction

The reader who is familiar with the history of Byzantine painting at Mistra should feel free to skip this part and proceed at once to the second part of this chapter: *Modernism of the Frescoes of Mistra.*

This study was initially written as a comprehensive chapter of a PhD thesis,[1] while its much shorter version is included in our recently published book entitled *Byzantine Painting through Contemporary Eyes: Hermeneutics of Spiritual Vision.*[2] This final version of the text is characterised by a twofold purpose, corresponding to its two respective parts: The first part, which bears the title *Frescoes at the Larger Churches of Mistra* may be useful as a general guide for appreciating the frescoes of Mistra, while the second part aims at demonstrating their Modern character and their often underappreciated aesthetic significance. Therefore, this publication is suited both for the readers who are less familiar with Byzantine painting and for those who are well-versed in this field. Also, in the appendix we have included a concise historical overview of the Byzantine fortress of Mistra.

Today, in quite a mystagogical way the preserved sections of frescoes in Mistra initiate a careful contemporary observer to a specifically Byzantine worldview which did not cease to exist because it exhausted its inspirations or because it was surpassed by the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th century. Rather, this celestial worldview entailed in the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting (13th to mid–15th century) became compara-

[1] Uroš T. Todorović, "The Diachronic Character of Late Byzantine Painting: The Hermeneutics of Vision from Mistra to New York" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2012).

[2] Uroš T. Todorović (Ouresis Todorovich), *Byzantine Painting through Contemporary Eyes: Hermeneutics of Spiritual Vision* (Sebastian Press, 2023).

The electronic version of this book can be accessed through the following link: https://online.flipbuilder.com/szto/bdpr/?fbclid=IwAR3jGF98lHoj5txcrXim-hsO3-4OJt9TUEc3CkOplcQsl7Z5HFqysLcKwPU

tively constrained in the painting of the Post Byzantine period (mid–15th to late 17th century) due to the Ottoman conquest, whilst remaining misunderstood in the West until the beginning of the 20th century. While observing a fragment of a fresco that preserves the grace and freshness of the brush of a Byzantine painter, a contemporary observer is essentially reading a historical and aesthetic *text*, which directly testifies to a diachronic kind of enlightenment and a yet to be appreciated modernism which occurred before the Modernism of the 20th century.

Given that in the past century a great scholarly interest in Byzantine art emerged, until now frescoes of Mistra have been discussed many times in various publications. However, while the existent publications which relate to the art at Mistra include to a limited extent certain aesthetic considerations of frescoes,[3] they do not elaborate adequately on their deeper aesthetic significance and their diachronic character. The diachronic character of the frescoes at Mistra is owed considerably to the theological basis of their aesthetic conception. Nevertheless, besides the context of the ecclesial tradition, this diachronic character can also be observed by how some of the great Modern painters of the 20th century creatively adopted in their work certain aspects of the aesthetics of Byzantine painting, including those that characterise the frescoes at Mistra.

In the first part of this chapter we shall discuss mainly the frescoes at the larger churches of Mistra, therein relying on our own *in situ* research, as well as relying on the most significant publications on Mistra frescoes thus far, such as those by Manolis Chatzidakis, Myrtali Acheimastou-Potamianou, Mary Aspra-Vardavaki and Melita Emmanouil.[4] Our overall approach in the first part of the chapter will be rather synoptic as it constitutes a kind of an extended informative introduction to the topic of the second part of the chapter.

In the second part of this chapter, while adhering to certain visual demonstrations and comparisons with examples of Modern painting of the 20th century, we shall attempt to demonstrate the aesthetic relationship between Byzantine painting at Mistra and Modern abstract painting of the 20th century. The main aim of this exercise is to demonstrate and elaborate on the diachronic character of frescoes at Mistra and therein of Late Byzantine painting generally. The second part of this chapter concludes with a

[3] Robert Byron and David Talbot-Rice, *The Birth of Western Painting: A History of Colour, Form, and Iconography, Illustrated from the Paintings of Mistra and Mount Athos, of Giotto and Duccio, and of El Greco* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1930).

[4] Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005). Μυρτάλη Αχειμάστου-Ποταμιάνου, *Μυστράς: Ιστορικός και Αρχαιολογικός Οδηγός* (Αθήνα: Έσπερος / Κλειώ, 2003). Μαίρη Άσπρα-Βαρδαβάκη, Μελίτα Εμμανουήλ, *Η Μονή της Παντάνασσας στον Μυστρά: Οι τοιχογραφίες του 15ου αιώνα* (Αθήνα: Εμπορική Τράπεζα της Ελλάδος, 2005).

concise appraisal of the contemporary relevance of the relationship between Modern abstract painting of the 20th century and frescoes of Mistra. In that concise appraisal, we touch on the prospects for further innovation in the domain of Contemporary Byzantine Painting.

Part I

Frescoes at the Larger Churches of Mistra

Frescoes at the Larger Churches of Mistra

St Demetrius

The first of the large churches of Mistra to be built under the metropolitan jurisdiction of Lakedaimonia is that of St Demetrius (Mitropoli), most likely founded by a metropolitan known as Eugenios, between 1262 and 1272. In 1291–92 the church of St Demetrius was renewed by a very influential intellectual of that period, namely, the president of Crete and metropolitan of Lakedaimonia, Nikiforos Moschopoulos (1289–1315) and his brother Aaron, who together had renewed the church, adding the narthex and the west arcade. Nikiforos Moschopoulos was active in the domains of education and art and was in close contact with the most respected writers and intellectuals from Constantinople, such as Maximos Planoudis and Manuel Philes.[5]

After his service as the metropolitan of Lakedaimonia (1286–89 until 1315), Nikiforos Moschopoulos moved to Constantinople, where he might have also played a role as a patron and propagator of the new aesthetic orientation in painting (known today as the Palaiologan Renaissance).[6] It was probably on the basis of his achievements as president of Crete and as metropolitan of Lakedaimonia, including the renovation of the church of St Demetrius, that Nikiforos Moschopoulos was later most likely invited by the greatest art patron of the period, emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos, to continue his activities in Constantinople.

In any case, bearing in mind his influential acquaintances, who were also inclined towards disciplines of art and literature and therefore would have had access to the best of artists of the period, there is little doubt that the gifted, highly educated and artistically-inclined Nikiforos Moschopoulos not only added the narthex to the existing church of St Demetrius, but also personally assigned the decoration of the interior of the narthex to its historical creators.

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[5] Steven Runciman, *Μυστράς* (Καρδαμίτσα, 2003), 115.

[6] The last historical reference to Nikiforos Moschopoulos dates to 1322. See: Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005), 26.

As pointed out by Chatzidakis, although the frescoes at St Demetrius are not very well-preserved, the wall surface of the preserved segments is large enough for one to distinguish the successive divisions of separate iconographical programs, as well as the particular character of varied artistic tendencies, which correspond to different phases of the monument's history.[7] With the exception of the later frescoes, which date to the 17th and 18th centuries, the decoration of the interior of St Demetrius consists of two distinct phases, the first from 1272 to 1288 and the second, from 1291–92 to 1315. This second phase is associated with the appointment of Nikiforos Moschopoulos as metropolitan of Lakedaimonia.[8]

The first phase at St Demetrius

The first phase (1272–1288) of the decoration of the interior of St Demetrius most likely commenced from the altar. Among other themes, it includes a depiction of the standing Virgin with child in the conch of the apse of the altar. This first phase is characterised by clear, and at times somewhat simplified forms, where deliberately stocky figures are depicted with disproportionately large heads, as is the case in the portrayal of St Demetrius, to whom this church is dedicated. However, other compositions of the same phase (1272–1288) convey different stylistic tendencies and a notable variety in artistic expression – evidence of the likely participation of more than one artist, as well as evidence of distinct chronological stages. There are five scenes from the life of the Virgin: *The Annunciation of Anna and Joachim*, *The Receiving of the Gifts*, *The Birth of the Virgin*, *The Blessing of the Priests*, and *The Presentation of the Virgin*. There is also a depiction of *Jesus among the priests*, and the scene of the *Wedding at Cana*. As stated by Chatzidakis, these compositions, painted probably in the period between 1283 and 1288, after metropolitan Theraponta and before the arrival of Nikiforos Moschopoulos, were not planned as part of one unified program, but were completed in separate and not so coherent stages – they lack order in their program and their style lacks unity.[9] Subsequently, the arrival of Nikiforos Moschopoulos, more accurately, his art patronage, has resulted in the completion of frescoes of a far more daring style. Unfortunately, these frescoes are only partially preserved.

The most interesting compositions of the first phase (1272–1288) in St Demetrius are those with eschatological themes: *The Preparation of the Throne* (*image 3*), which is de-

[7] Ibid., 35.

[8] We note that some evidence indicates that Nikiforos Moschopoulos did not arrive in Mistra before 1304. See: Steven Runciman, *Μυστράς* (Καρδαμίτσα, 2003), 115.

[9] Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005), 38–39.

picted in the ceiling of the diaconicon,[10] and the depiction of *Christ in Glory* being seated upon the cherubim as the Righteous Judge, located on the eastern wall of the diaconicon. On each of the side walls of the depiction of *Christ in Glory*, there are nine figures of angels turned towards Him in a worshiping position. In these scenes we observe a very pronounced eschatological content. In *The Preparation of the Throne* (*image 3*), the missing figure of Christ evokes a sense of immediacy and expectation, where the contrast between the warm and cold tones of colour, as well as the clear, geometric-like drawing, abstractly narrate the theological message: they convey the feeling of an otherworldly space, one which is given birth by light – as opposed to space which is seen through the means of light. This can most clearly be detected in view of the circular rings of the mandorla (glory), which, as seen in *image 3*, while expanding from the centre, become gradually lighter.

If we were to exclude the figures of angels and other representational elements from this scene, we would arrive at a result reminiscent of the painting of some of the most renowned 20th century abstractionists, such as Paul Klee (*image 2*), and Kazimir Malevich – a painter who understood his artistic practice as religion.

The second phase at St Demetrius

Although commendable, the style of the frescoes of the first phase at St Demetrius is in many ways superseded by the frescoes of the second phase (1291/92–1315), located in the middle aisle (nave), mainly in the western parts of the south aisle of the main church, and inside the narthex. As we have already stated, some of the frescoes dating to the second phase are not well preserved. Their following aspects undoubtedly reflect the style known today as the Palaiologan Renaissance: the narrative character, the Hellenistic aura, the daring experimentation of colour-contrasts, the emphasised plasticity of form, the *eurhythmos* of the drawing and the elegant rendering of movement.

The frescoes of the second phase at St Demetrius, associated with the patronage of Nikiforos Moschopoulos (1291/92–1315), include a variety of themes. Most unfortunately, the scenes from the life of Jesus, which are located in the middle aisle (nave), are missing their upper section (the head area), as the walls on which they are painted have been cut during a disastrous attempt at renovation (in the 15th century).[11] Starting from the sanctuary, the succession of themes (preserved only above the arch level on the south side), includes: *The Annunciation, The Birth, The Escape to Egypt, The Massacre of the Innocents,*

[10] Diaconicon (or diakonikon) is a chamber on the south side of the central apse of the church.

[11] Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005), 26.

The Presentation of Child Christ into the Temple, Baptism, Transfiguration, The Raising of Lazarus, The Entry into Jerusalem, The Last Supper and *The Betrayal of Judas*. In addition to these scenes, on the western wall, there are some traces of the scene of the *Crucifixion*. None of these compositions are entirely preserved. Chatzidakis deems that the author of the composition of the *Betrayal of Judas* appears to be the most daring of the painters who worked on this section.[12] In particular, in the *Betrayal of Judas*, we observe a fast and light movement, expressive rendering of the folding of the drapery, wide and free brushwork and daring chromatic synthesis.[13]

In the western section of the south aisle of the main church, the wall surfaces contain the finest, albeit fragmented, of the Mistra frescoes. These include the figures of apostles (there are eight figures whose upper section is almost entirely preserved – two of which are in the eastern section), which are depicted in lively motion and reveal experimentations in the colour palette. These frescoes share stylistic similarities with those mentioned previously. They also include the depictions of miracles performed by Christ in Galilee, which are arranged in three rows: one above the windows and two in the arched ceiling – as well as an additional composition on the western wall at the end of the south aisle.

As shown in *image 4*, the depictions of miracles performed by Christ in Galilee (in the arched ceiling) comprise a unified and unbroken succession of compositions, where the architectural features – an aspect of the Hellenistic influence – are employed to provide structure, as well as depth, to the rhythmically envisaged painted surface. Accordingly, these architectural elements are connected by a depiction of a continuous red curtain which falls over their high points in a rhythmical manner (also a Hellenistic influence). In each scene, the figure of Christ is easily detected, as it is the only one with a halo around the head, and its movement is much calmer than that of the figures in the crowd. As pointed out by Chatzidakis, with their overall arrangement and their elegance, these scenes (*Christ's miracles in Galilee*) are reminiscent of the frescoes of the church of Chora in Constantinople.[14]

There are also other compositions, which are most likely the work of another painter, such as *The Second Coming* in the narthex, coupled with the scenes of *Hell* – which are characteristic for their attention to detail. As shown in *image 5*, the red flames embrace the tormented, while the snakes, which are wrapped around them, are biting their bodies. In the same image, to the left, we observe the depiction of a chained figure enclosed by flames.

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[12] Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005), 40.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 42.

These tormented figures do not express any emotions, as the narrative is conducted mainly through the formal aspects: the snakes, the flames, and the hung figure. Paradoxically, to a contemporary eye, the rhythmic movement of the flames, the picturesque rendering of snakes, as well as the harmony of colours (intense earthy red, varied tones of ochre, deep earthy blue, as well as light accentuations), can collectively amount to a pleasant sensation – one which is quite foreign to the notions of torment.

It could be said that these details of the torment are horrifying according to their meaning but beautiful according to their inner content and their picturesque simplicity. Thus, if we needed to define the peculiar beauty of the painting of the Palaiologan period in a few words, we would consult Kandinsky, who said: "Beautiful is that which stems from an inner psychological necessity. Beautiful is that which is internally beautiful."[15]

Similar to other examples of Palaiologan painting, in most of the compositions of the second phase at St Demetrius, we observe a consistent influence of Hellenistic aesthetics. That said, the fresco compositions of the second phase in St Demetrius[16] constitute also a stylistic transition. The transition towards an earthier palette can be detected in compositions such as *The Preparation of the Throne*, which is a part of the scene of *The Second Coming* in St Demetrius (in the narthex). It is our view that, some decades later, in the style of frescoes of the church of Perivleptos at Mistra (c.1350–1375), this earthy palette became identified (at the very least subconsciously) with the notion of the atmospherically spread and omnipresent light. The occurrence of this phenomenon owes to the influence of the hesychast teaching.[17]

Vrontochi: Saints Theodore and *Hodigitria*

In the Monastery of Vrontochi (Vrontochion) there are two churches: Saints Theodore and Hodigitria. The church of Saints Theodore was built around 1290–1295. Its construction was most probably commenced under abbot Daniel in 1290, and completed before 1296 by abbot Pachomios, who later, in 1310, also commenced the construction of the

[15] Our translation. The excerpt in Greek reads as follows: «Ωραίο είναι εκείνο, που πηγάζει από μια εσωτερική αναγκαιότητα. Ωραίο είναι εκείνο που είναι εσωτερικά ωραίο». See: Wassily Kandinsky, *Για το Πνευματικό στην Τέχνη* (Εκδόσεις Νεφέλη, 1981), 149.

[16] We note again that in the frescoes of the second phase in St Demetrius, some depictions of the life of Christ lack their upper section, more specifically: they lack their head area, due to a later (15th century) most unfortunate architectural rearrangement instigated by metropolitan Matheos. See: Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005), 26–27.

[17] See: "The Relationship between Hesychasm and the Aesthetics of Late Byzantine Painting" in: Uroš T. Todorović (Ouresis Todorovich), *Byzantine Painting through Contemporary Eyes: Hermeneutics of Spiritual Vision* (Sebastian Press, 2023), 121–173.

nearby church of Hodigitria, whose frescoes, apart from those in the south-east chapel, are a product of his art patronage.[18] From the frescoes in Saints Theodore there remain only fragments, whose poor preservation does not permit their proper appreciation. Some observations made by Chatzidakis, include the view that the liberated rendering of forms – which are still visible, their liveliness, and warm colour combinations, are related to the aesthetics of the frescoes in the northern aisle of St Demetrius (Mitropoli) at Mistra.[19]

The frescoes of the church of Hodigitria (also known as Afentiko), completed probably between 1312/13 and 1322, are also most characteristic of the Palaiologan epoch. Here also, we observe multiple themes within a single composition, figures pressed together in rhythmic motion, architectural elements which function as compositional settings in the background, as well as curtains stretched through or hung over these. The colour combinations of these frescoes are particularly noteworthy. We observe interesting variations of brown tones, and of earthy red of draperies and roofs, contrasted by varied tones of green – applied also in the draperies, and of blue in the backgrounds; these tones of green and blue are balanced by yellow and ochre, which are applied mainly in the landscape (*image 6*). The emphasis on the colour-harmony among the distinctly outlined surfaces, which was propagated by the painters of these frescoes, is a characteristic phenomenon of this period, and is evident in varied degrees in earlier decorations of other churches – such as that of St Demetrius, in Mistra.

In Hodigitria, the painters seem to have achieved a distinct maturity of expression, an expression which, especially in its drawing, is by a notable degree more abstracted than that in both phases of the painting at St Demetrius. We shall briefly elaborate on this phenomenon. We have selected a detail from the scene of *The Healing of Peter's Mother-in-law*, shown in *image 7*, in order to point out the following aspects of the stylistic progress observed: (a) the figures pressed together in a manner which does not merely describe, but rather, insinuates the movement of Christ's figure (in dark blue) towards the seated female figure, (b) this movement clearly flows from left towards right, in a sense that the rhythmically connected figures primarily allude to, rather than describe, a progression towards the right, (c) the schematic rendering of the drapery, as well as the inner-illumination of these three figures, are aspects which are consciously exploited in an attempt to imply that the figure of Christ has made the actual steps from left towards the right of the composition. All of what has been said above is most obvious since the contours of the legs of the middle figure simultaneously outline the contours of the legs of

[18] Inside the south-west chapel of Hodigitria there is (was) written evidence of Pachomios' devout efforts in founding and decorating this church.

[19] Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005), 51.

the two figures adjacent to it. This observed impression of transient movement is most clearly reminiscent of Cubist as well as of Futurist painting – styles that were dominant in Europe of the 20th century.

St Sophia

On the church of St Sophia there is a preserved founder's inscription: *Manouil Kantakouzenos Palaiologos Despotis Ktitor.*[20] Manouil was the first despot of Morea (1348–1380) who probably also founded the monastery of Perivleptos in Mistra around 1350, although clear evidence about the founders of the latter is not preserved. Unfortunately, very few fragments of frescoes are preserved at St Sophia, and they date to the third quarter of the 14th century. Besides the fact that the iconographic program at St Sophia is analogous to that at Perivleptos, there is also a notable stylistic association between the painting decorations at these two churches.

In St Sophia, despite the fact that only certain sections remain and despite the fact that these are not very well-preserved, if one enters the southeast chapel with an artificial light (as the interior is very dark) they will be impressed by the warmth of expression in the small-scale composition of the *Birth of the Virgin* on the western wall, where the depicted architectural elements ascend towards the small dome as if aiming to converge, while the depicted figures, despite their humble simplicity, radiate with an otherworldly kind or refinement (*image 8*). What we have here is the coexistence of the silence of the mind and the power of expression, as the latter is entailed in the former. On the north wall of the same southeast chapel the enthroned Christ is preserved in fragments. The preserved sections of Christ's face, as well as his overall figure stand as evidence that the most skilful painters were employed here, some of whom possibly worked also on the decoration at Perivelptos.

Perivleptos

The church of Perivleptos is built almost as an extension of a rock which is why some sections of its interior are reminiscent of a cave. There are three smaller chapels that surround the main church. Located at the southeast end of the wall of the Byzantine town of Mistra the Perivleptos church was built in the period in which Manuel Kantakouzenos was the Despot of Morea (1348–1380). The appeal of its frescoes is of the same level as that of the most representative examples of 14th century Byzantine art, such as

[20] The original inscription in Greek reads as follows: «*Μανουήλ Καντακουζηνός Παλαιολόγος Δεσπότης Κτήτωρ*». Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005), 69.

the mosaics and frescoes of the Church of Chora in Constantinople. Given that the church of Perivleptos was built almost as an extension of a rock, its interior is best lit during the first part of the day, and as the angle of the daylight changes, the light within the church decreases and it becomes more difficult for the frescoes to be properly appreciated.

The painting decoration was most probably completed after that of St Sophia of Mistra, between 1350 and 1375 during the rule of Manuel Kantakouzenos (1348–1380). Together with the frescoes of Pantanassa, the frescoes of Perivleptos constitute the best-preserved group of frescoes at Mistra. It is possible that four painters worked at Perivleptos, as four distinctive painterly expressions can be discerned.[21]

Nevertheless, in comparison to other earlier churches of Mistra, the painting at Perivleptos is characterised by a greater coherence and stylistic consistency. This may indicate that either a specific atelier worked at Perivleptos, meaning a group of collaborating painters which constituted a distinct local school,[22] or that a group of already collaborating painters came especially from Constantinople to paint the frescoes consistently. In any case, the frescoes at Perivleptos constitute a development whose aesthetic roots can be observed in the second phase of painting in the church of St Demetrius and in the painting of Hodigitria at Mistra.

In comparison to earlier examples of frescoes of the Palaiologan period, in compositions at Perivleptos the sense of light becomes more atmospheric while simultaneously a delicately elaborated plasticity of forms is retained (*images 21* and *22*). Also, in some of the depicted themes, such as *Nativity*, *Baptism* and *Transfiguration*, the tendency towards abstraction is perhaps more pronounced than the one we already observed in Hodigitria.

It is very probable that the remarkable frescoes of Perivleptos, which constitute the best examples of the Palaiologan epoch, have influenced the Byzantine Greek painters of the following generation to a significant extent. It is also not unlikely that some of these painters of the following generation have influenced or even worked together with the painters who painted at the monastery of Kalenić in Serbia, between 1418 and 1427. Notwithstanding the variety of influences which was justly observed in the frescoes of Kalenić, where the main painter was most likely a certain Serbian called Radoslav, the warm and particularly atmospheric light of the painted compositions but also the fine plasticity of forms at Kalenić are phenomena which reveal an obvious aesthetic relationship with the analogous phenomena observed in the frescoes at Perivleptos of Mistra.[23]

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[21] Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005), 80.

[22] Steven Runciman, *Μυστράς* (Καρδαμίτσα, 2003), 123.

[23] See: "Perivleptos and Kalenić: Sisters in Hesychasm" in: Uroš T. Todorović (Ouresis Todorovich), *Byzantine Painting through Contemporary Eyes: Hermeneutics of Spiritual Vision* (Sebastian Press, 2023), 145–150.

This has particular significance as it possibly reveals the likely influence of the frescoes of Perivleptos in the wider Balkans. In this context, it is noteworthy that in 1414 the Byzantine princess Irene Kantakouzene (?–1457) from the lineage of the Kantakouzenos rulers of Mistra, married a Serbian Despot Djuradj Branković, a nephew of Despot Stefan Lazarević with whom the founding of the Monastery of Kalenić (between 1418 and 1427) is closely related. Like in previous historical instances, here it may also likely be the case that the commission of Greek painters in Serbia was largely made possible because the wife of the Serbian ruler was from the royal Byzantine lineage. More importantly, irrespective of this historical context and irrespective of the question of the exact relationship of painters who painted at Kalenić to those associated to frescoes at Perivleptos in Mistra, the previously noted aesthetic relationship between these two groups of frescoes cannot be overlooked.

Euangelistria

Euangelistria is a church of a small size which approximately dates to the end of the 14th or more probably the beginning of the 15th century. This church does not retain any elements which would inform us about its founders. There are very few preserved segments of frescoes inside the church in which one can discern fragmentarily the graceful movements of forms. The iconographical arrangement of compositions in Euangelistria probably follows the basic principles of the analogous iconographical arrangements in St Sophia and Perivleptos of Mistra.

Pantanassa

The church of Pantanassa is the last large church to be built in mediaeval Mistra, most probably in 1428. Its original decoration dates to 1430 and is well preserved in comparison to most other churches in Mistra and the churches of its period. Its interior also contains some frescoes from the 17th and 18th centuries (inside the basilica and in the narthex) which most likely repeat the original scenes from the 15th century. As Runciman observes, the frescoes in Pantanassa represent the last significant artistic achievement of the free mediaeval Greek world.[24]

The aesthetics of the frescoes in Pantanassa is in part most likely influenced by the teachings of the philosopher Georgios Gemistos – also known as Plethon, who was born in Constantinople after 1360.[25] Plethon was sent from Constantinople to Mistra in 1410

[24] Steven Runciman, *Μυστράς* (Καρδαμίτσα, 2003), 124.

[25] Plethon is the archaic version of the word Gemistos – meaning fulfilled and intently alluding to the name of the ancient philosopher Plato.

by Manuel II Palaiologos. In Mistra, Plethon was engaged in both writing and teaching of the ideals of ancient Greece with a special emphasis on the teachings of Plato. However, as stated by Runciman, his Platonism was based more on the teachings of Neoplatonists than on those of Plato.[26] Aside from a single year spent in Italy (1438–39), Plethon spent the rest of his life in Mistra, where he died in 1452.[27] He was inclined towards the polytheism of Ancient Greece, and in his "Book of Laws" (Νόμων συγγραφή) he attempted to establish an ethical and philosophical basis for his largely dysfunctional political ideas which ultimately were never seriously considered, neither by the emperor of Byzantium nor by the despot of Morea.[28]

In Italy, Plethon taught ancient Greek philosophy, and it is from him that Italian humanists learned how to study and enquire into Plato's philosophy. Although Italian intellectuals accepted Plethon as the main propagator of Plato's teachings, the introduction of these teachings into the Italian academies is owed more to Plethon's students, such as Vasilios Bessarion and Ioannis Argiropoulos.[29] However, the core of Plato's thought was essentially misconstrued both by Plethon and his students, and their distorted teaching was then accepted by Italian humanists as authentic and valid. Aristotle's syllogisms were generally much closer to the rationality of Western theologians than Plato's works, and thus it could be argued that Western thinkers of the period could understand Plato only in Aristotelian terms. Due to the influence of Plethon, such Aristotelian understanding of Plato could possibly have exercised an influence on the frescoes at Pantanassa.

The iconographic program in Pantanassa adheres to that in Hodigitria, and the painters of the original decoration in Pantanassa were influenced by the aesthetics of frescoes in both Hodigitria and Perivleptos. One observes in Pantanassa an eclectic influence of the generations of Mistra painters from the previous century, and in this sense, we can regard the style in Pantanassa as most representative of the collective history of fresco painting in Mistra.

For example, as observed by Chatzidakis, in Pantanassa, the influence of the frescoes of Hodigitria is evident in the tendency towards the rendering of voluminous, cylindrical bodies, imposing physiognomies and mountainous landscape.[30] The same cannot be said in respect to the colour treatment, which in Hodigitria is characterised by an overall

[26] Steven Runciman, *Μυστράς* (Καρδαμίτσα, 2003), 131.
[27] Ibid., 128.
[28] Ibid., 130.
[29] Ibid., 135.
[30] Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005), 102.

impression of the unison of all colours.[31] The influence from Perivleptos in the frescoes of Pantanassa is evident in the graphic attention to detail and in the familiarity of the scenes where groups of figures are rendered in motion,[32]and to an extent in the colour treatment, where, in spite of complementary schemes, each colour retains its autonomy.

Such eclectic borrowing from the painting of the previous century allowed for a number of distinct aesthetic differences among the depicted themes in Pantanassa, but we cannot be certain whether these compositions have been painted by different artists; Chatzidakis also hesitates to make such a claim.[33] Although the frescoes in Pantanassa manifest the historically accumulated experience of painters from the previous century, this does not mean that these frescoes are of a finer aesthetic quality than those painted before them in Mistra. For example, the depictions of apostles in Pantanassa (in the gallery), being morphologically most related to those in Hodigitria, lack the simplicity of form, the softness of the rhythmic movement expressed through contours, and the simple harmony among colour tones – all of which characterise the earlier frescoes in Hodigitria.[34]

The main novelty of the frescoes at Panatanassa is the somewhat forced attention to individual details. Although these frescoes are immaculate in terms of technique, their authors break the unity of the composition as well as the perception of space, and therein diminish the numinous quality of the depicted themes. The colour-palette is far less earthy than in frescoes of other churches at Mistra. The painters here adhered to particularly intense tones, which contributed to the negative effect of the overcrowded scenes, such as the scene of *Nativity*, shown in *image 24*. In view of these outcomes, which are mainly caused by the routine-kind of attention to detail, we also observe that the emphasis on the technique and the particularly design-like stylisation of form dominate the more expressive qualities of painting. In this, the possibility of the influence of the Neo-Platonist teachings of Georgios Gemistos Plethon may be evident. As observed by David Talbot-Rice, in the frescoes of Pantanassa, one can perceive the desire that art should be sympathetic, clear, and logical.[35]

[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid., 103–106.
[35] David Talbot-Rice, *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 177.

Part II

Modernism of the Frescoes of Mistra

Modernism of the Frescoes of Mistra

The Byzantine Reality of Seeing versus the Notion of Seeing Reality

In order to begin understanding the relationship of frescoes at Mistra to 20th century abstract painting, we must firstly clarify the multifaceted relationship of the so called 'inverse perspective' (also known as 'reverse perspective') in Byzantine painting to the question of realism.[36] In this task, while there will inevitably be overlapping aspects with the classic explanation of reverse perspective offered by Pavel Florensky in his essay *Reverse Perspective*,[37] our topic at hand entails a novel approach, which presupposes that the phenomenon of the inverse perspective in Late Byzantine painting pertains to a very specific kind of *reality of seeing*, as distinct from, to use Florensky's words, "a special system for the representation and perception of reality as it is represented in icons."[38] This has hitherto not been sufficiently explained, especially in relation to the most representative examples of Late Byzantine painting. The non-realistic perspective is of course an early phenomenon in Byzantine art but the overtly rendered inverse perspective is a phenomenon which became a common place in Late Byzantine painting. Of course, these and other similar terms, such as relative perspective, were not used by the Byzantines themselves and they are useful only as our own reference to a particular aesthetic phenomenon.

That said, the inverse perspective in the painting compositions of the Late Byzantine period opens a visual and notional space which is notably different from the one we ob-

[36] We have elaborated on inverse (reverse) perspective in the first chapter of our related book, whereas our reference to it in this chapter has a different scope. See: "From El Greco to his Byzantine Predecessors" in: Uroš T. Todorović (Ouresis Todorovich), *Byzantine Painting through Contemporary Eyes: Hermeneutics of Spiritual Vision* (Sebastian Press, 2023), 47.

[37] Although this essay was written in 1919 it was first published (in Russian) in 1967. For the English translation of *Reverse Perspective* see: Pavel Florensky, "Reverse Perspective" in *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. Nicoletta Misler (London: Reaktion, 2002).

[38] Pavel Florensky, "Reverse Perspective" in *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. Nicoletta Misler (London: Reaktion, 2002), 202.

serve around us in nature. However, this space opened by the inverse perspective is not entirely contradictory to the space observed in nature. The three-dimensional space in nature is endless with countless points of reference upon which it simultaneously both commences and ends. In nature, every point of reference is relative and relationship-based in a sense that it can be conceived of only in relation to the collective system of references to which other similar points belong.

In Byzantine compositions, especially of the late period, there is a different kind of *relativity*, wherein the first point of reference is the viewer himself/herself, towards whom the lines of the so-called inverse perspective close in (as demonstrated in *image 9*). More precisely, the viewer is considered and understood as a point from which the vision is projected towards infinity and it is because of this concept that when the viewer is in front of a composition of Late Byzantine painting the lines of the inverse perspective essentially begin to implicitly open up and expand from the viewer's eye lens towards the infinity of the background depth of the painted composition (*image 9*). The second and equally important *point* of reference which is aesthetically implied in the Byzantine composition is the space of transcendental infinity, which is implied in the overall background of the composition in that its perspective expands in the distance rather than closes in towards the distance.

In this way, as seen in *image 10* each depicted theme is essentially 'placed' between the infinity which continuously expands in the background of the composition and the smallest point of reference being the eye of the observer. Therefore, the viewer is absorbed by the depicted theme into a tangibly different dimension which alludes to a different and more substantial reality than the one we are accustomed to call 'nature.' In this higher reality of the Byzantine painting experience one can observe a light which, theologically speaking, precedes the created world and therefore dynamically exists within all its elements.

But before we consider further the question of light, it is quite noteworthy that the so-called inverse perspective in Byzantine painting reveals an extraordinary relationship to the humanity's gaze and orientation towards the Universe. To understand this, we must firstly imagine two adjacent perfectly straight lines drawn from the surface of our planet at a right angle towards the outer Universe. The drawing shown in *image 11* is deliberately exaggerated for the sake of clarity. As seen in *image 11*, because the surface of the Earth is not flat but spherical, in other words, because these two lines start from a spherical convex surface, they gradually separate from one another rather than remain parallel to one another. Much like how vision generally expands from our eyeballs rather than keeping a straight linear direction, our two hypothetical lines expand towards

the infinity. This means that, although objects do seem smaller in the distance, the reality of the human vision is such that it expands into the distance rather than closes at a point in the distance. It is not coincidental that this is practically realised when humanity's gaze towards the Universe is considered, as opposed to considering the gaze towards a landscape or within an interior.

In other words, the fact that our vision, projected both from our eyes and from our planet naturally expands towards the Universe, is alluding to a more substantial, higher reality which we are called to understand precisely through the act of our seeing. In this sense, philosophically speaking, the so-called inverse perspective in Byzantine painting is in fact closer to what might be called *the reality of seeing* than the regular naturalistic (linear) perspective taught in the discipline of realistic painting.

The point of this is to show that, despite its stylistic inconsistencies observed in a broader variety of examples, through its methods such as the inverse perspective, Byzantine painting not only did not try to move away from reality and realism, but it indeed tried to infiltrate deep into the essence of reality. Certain 20th century Modernists, such as Kazimir Malevich, were concerned with precisely the same problem, of infiltrating into a deeper reality of existence beyond that which is apparent.[39] Therefore, it is understandable that for different reasons the Byzantine artists and the Modern artists of the 20th century grappled with similar kind of notions pertaining to the *real*, notions which in both cases were not similar to the Renaissance kind of realism.

As demonstrated in *image 10*, it could be said that in Late Byzantine painting the vision of the viewer expands as invisible light towards the depicted World/Universe, thereby producing the effect of the so-called inverse perspective. Similar to the contemporary practices of Cosmology and Astronomy, the way of Byzantine seeing is projecting vision as light towards the depths of the Cosmos. It is noteworthy that the slightly curved lines of the Byzantine inverse perspective (*image 9*) also correspond to the fact that, as a phenomenon, an entirely straight line does not exist in nature and is a purely human invention.

Philosophically speaking, looking at *images 9* and *10* we could take the logic of the inverse perspective to its extreme and, as it were, see what these curved lines that open towards infinity *do* once they are well beyond what we could see in front of us. Because they are curved, eventually, they come around behind the viewer, encompassing him/her within a much broader composition of the entire Universe – and not just the depicted theme. In this way, the eye depicted in *image 10* eventually becomes much more than an

[39] We have extensively discussed the parallels between Late Byzantine painting and Malevich's abstract painting in a separate chapter. See: "Visualising the 'Byzantine Malevich'" in: Uroš T. Todorović (Ouresis Todorovich), *Byzantine Painting through Contemporary Eyes: Hermeneutics of Spiritual Vision* (Sebastian Press, 2023), 249–298.

eye: we may imagine this 'new eye' to be an invisible sphere which itself is in its entirety the pupil of the eye, a seemingly empty space, one that sees in all directions at once while being aware that it is the integral part of the ever-expanding composition. Yet, this is a topic for a separate discussion. The point here was to demonstrate what the intuition of the Byzantine painting tradition entails: the viewer (as well as the painter) literally expands towards the infinity, towards God, which is not some kind of a 'difficult bodiless experience' but an experience which is primarily theological.

From the Byzantine Frescoes of Mistra to the 20th Century Abstract Painting

In Byzantine compositions the light is embodied within the forms, first and foremost because the colour is perceived as a carrier of light and not as a reflection of it. Secondly, not only the human figure, but also other features in Byzantine compositions are rendered as forms that dynamically embody light within them. Rooted in a centuries-long artistic tradition and simultaneously rooted in the experience of Byzantine theology, the characteristic aesthetic concept of light embodied within the form in Byzantine painting does not constitute merely a canon of symbolic meaning. Also, neither the concept of the embodied light nor the tendency towards abstraction in Byzantine painting could sufficiently be explained as merely technical or merely painterly means for encouraging the viewer to engage in an aesthetic interaction with the image.

For a Byzantine painter, during the process of rendering of each composition, this embodied light constitutes both the point of commencement and the objective of the simultaneous theological contemplation and aesthetic conception of the visual theme. In most representative examples of the Byzantine painting tradition, the theological contemplation and the aesthetic conception constitute a unified experience rather than two distinctive experiences. For example, in some of the best examples of Late Byzantine painting, we can find details of the robes of the depicted figures to resemble swirling galaxies that embody and carry light in rhythmic, cosmic kind of motion. With his/her paintbrush the painter renders the drapery folds in a musical manner, which effortlessly radiates with rhythm and harmony. The *galaxy analogy* and the *music analogy* are only two of many that could be made but the basic point of such notional departures from what is being depicted is precisely the fact that tendency towards abstraction in Byzantine painting is very much associated with a transcendental experience rooted in the overall Byzantine artistic tradition, or more generally rooted in the overall worldview of the Byzantine civilisation.

As the viewer engages with a Byzantine composition, the features of the robes as well as other elements often allude to abstract notions and introspective experiences. It would

be hard to imagine that such or similar contemplative processes were not also part of the experience of Byzantine painters. This is even more obvious when we consider that certain Modernists of the 20th century delved into the contemplative experience of Byzantine painters and found inspiration precisely in some of the transcendental aspects of the aesthetics of Byzantine art. This relationship between the tendency towards abstraction in Byzantine painting and the 20th century abstract painting constitutes an important realisation which significantly informs our contemporary reception of Byzantine painting: Byzantine painting is diachronic not least because aspects of its contemplative, visionary experience were relived through Modernism.

Contrary to the opinion according to which the tendency towards abstraction in Byzantine painting is not related to the analogous tendencies of 20th century Modern painting,[40] in recent years studies have shown in a systematic manner the significant manifold relationship between the Modern abstract painting of the 20th century and the Byzantine painting tradition.[41] The following aesthetic comparisons, as well as the visual demonstrations, go a significant step further as they practically demonstrate how this relationship may in fact be visually appreciated.

As shown in *image 13*, when we take out the human figures from the Byzantine composition of *Transfiguration*, that which remains is simply a vision of the uncreated light with which Christ shone on Mount Tabor. Moreover, we observe that the result of our experiment is peculiarly reminiscent of the abstract paintings of Kandinsky, such as that shown in *image 14*. This is neither a one-off nor an accidental instance, as many more analogous comparisons between Byzantine and 20th century abstract painting could be made. For example, as shown in *image 16*, while deliberately keeping the depiction of the curtain and the architectural motifs, we have extracted the human figures from the com-

[40] For example, in the conclusion of his book entitled *The Character and the Reason of the Abstraction in Byzantine Painting*, George Kordis argues that: "The observed abstract mood (in Byzantine painting) does not seem to relate to the analogous tendencies of Modern painting, where the attrition of the natural form serves by rule the expressionistic inquiries and expresses beyond the form some spiritual, ideological or emotional content." Our translation. The original excerpt in Greek reads as follows: «Ἡ παρατηρούμενη ἀφαιρετική διάθεση δὲ φαίνεται νὰ ἔχει σχέση μὲ ἀνάλογες τάσεις τῆς μοντέρνας ζωγραφικῆς, ὅπου ἡ φθορὰ τῆς φυσικῆς μορφῆς ὑπηρετεῖ, κατὰ κανόνα, ἐξπρεσσιονιστικές ἀναζητήσεις καὶ ἐκφράζει κάποιο ἐπέκεινα τῆς μορφῆς πνευματικό, ἰδεολογικό ἢ συναισθηματικὸ περιεχόμενο.» See: Γιώργος Κόρδης, *Ὁ Χαρακτῆρας καὶ ὁ Λόγος τῶν Ἀφαιρετικῶν Τάσεων τῆς Βυζαντινῆς Ζωγραφικῆς* (Ἐκδόσεις Ἁρμός, 2007), 76. Kordis' relevant observations are also discussed in "Byzantine Influences in the Abstract Painting of Vasily Kandinsky" in: Uroš T. Todorović (Ouresis Todorovich), *Byzantine Painting through Contemporary Eyes: Hermeneutics of Spiritual Vision* (Sebastian Press, 2023), 213–214.

[41] Γιάννης Ζιώγας, *Ο Βυζαντινός Μάλεβιτς* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Στάχυ, 2000). Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition* (Lund Humphries, 2008). Uroš T. Todorović, "The Diachronic Character of Late Byzantine Painting: The Hermeneutics of Vision from Mistra to New York" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2012). Uroš T. Todorović (Ouresis Todorovich), *Byzantine Painting through Contemporary Eyes: Hermeneutics of Spiritual Vision* (Sebastian Press, 2023).

position of *The Numbering at Bethlehem* in Kalenić, and arrived at a result which is unassumingly reminiscent of Rothko's paintings, such as those shown in *image 17*.

Accordingly, when we compare the theme of *Transfiguration* without human figures (*image 13*) to the theme of *The Numbering at Bethlehem* without human figures (*image 16*), we observe that by excluding the human forms depicted within these compositions, we arrive at a visual result which strikingly reminds us of the prime examples of 20th century abstract painting. Of course, the outcome of our demonstration does not in itself constitute a proof that Kandinsky and Rothko necessarily had Byzantium in mind when they rendered their earlier mentioned works. Rather, this demonstration primarily implies that these two significant painters of the 20th century attempted, through their abstract contemplations, to reconstruct the human presence and they have therein arrived at a result which is reminiscent of a Byzantine-like absolute treatment of colour. That said, our visual demonstration indicates that the Byzantine influences which these Modern painters have in fact noted regarding their work, were deeply rooted in their artistic experience, which is why it was plausible for these influences to appear in a creative manner in their abstract painting.

The Byzantine phenomenon of 'embodied light,' constitutes one of the main characteristics of the abstract painting of Rothko. Although he grew up and lived in the United States of America, Rothko was born in Russia and was of Jewish background.

Rothko's knowledge of both the characteristics of Byzantine painting and its history seems to have an obvious relationship with the fact that his mature works, while being without depictions of human form (*image 17*) manifest a Byzantine-like aesthetic base. For example, this can be detected in the following small segment of Rothko's text entitled *Art as a Natural Biological Function* which is a part of his book entitled *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*:

"In Byzantium, for a period of one hundred and eighteen years, the exercise of plastic realisations was forbidden by Christian law, and the destruction of – that is, vandalism against – the great artistic productions of that era, as well as the destruction of the Hellenistic sculptures which previous emperors had revered and enshrined, was considered an act in the service of God. The Turks, from another quarter, whitewashed the beautiful frescoes and pulled down the mosaics in the great church of Sophia."[42]

In the beginning of the cited segment Rothko is referring to the period of Iconoclasm, during which the depiction of Christ and the saints was forbidden. Given that in the

[42] This text can be found in Rothko's posthumously published book: Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, edited by Christopher Rothko (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 7.

Jewish tradition the representational art is forbidden, it was not hard for Rothko to employ his Byzantine influences within a purely abstract visual language.[43]

Kandinsky's knowledge and appreciation of Byzantine and Russian iconography is very well known. Also, in 1931 Kandinsky visited Egypt, Turkey, Greece, and Italy,[44] where he had an opportunity to see many representative examples of Byzantine art. Given this, one cannot dismiss the likelihood that such possible experiences have significantly contributed to Kandinsky's already existent Russian-Byzantine experience transubstantiating and becoming one of the key aesthetic idioms in the abstract language of his painting. We do not know whether Kandinsky visited Mistra during his stay in Greece. Nevertheless, we shall visually demonstrate how one of the last of Kandinsky's works aesthetically relates to the tendency towards abstraction observed in a 14th century fresco in Mistra. The comparison at hand aims at exemplifying how that which Kandinsky inherited specifically from the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting and embodied within his abstract style, is precisely the inner desire to transcend the merely material realm of existence.

Among Kandinsky's scientific and artistic interests were studies of microorganisms.

The biomorphic forms depicted in his painting *Sky Blue* (*image 19*) appear to be floating on the surface of the canvas; there is no comprehensible perspective, nor a sense of gravity. These forms are decorative not because Kandinsky aspired to simply decorate the blue background, but rather, their decorative character is only one of the externally most obvious aesthetic results of his pictorial contemplation. Importantly, these forms discreetly recall the real but do not narrate about it. In fact, here, there is no narrative whatsoever, and what is kept in the memory of an apperceptive spectator after observing this composition, is the otherworldly atmosphere alone.

We shall now compare the above observed phenomena to the two segments extracted from the fresco of *Baptism* at Perivleptos in Mistra, shown in *images 18* and *20*. In these two segments we observe the simplified and notably decorative renderings of naked people and fish. Similar to the forms in *Sky Blue*, these features, irrespective of what they externally represent, as if floating on the actual surface of the fresco, appear to be weightless and seem to radiate an otherworldly kind of provenance. This comparison exemplifies a very particular phenomenon: if our perception is not captive solely by the formal aspects and the narrative character of a Late Byzantine composition, its otherworldly

[43] Byzantine influences in Rothko's work are discussed thoroughly in the last chapter of our book entitled *Byzantine Painting through Contemporary Eyes: Hermeneutics of Spiritual Vision.* See: "Mark Rothko and the Late Byzantine Experience" in: Uroš T. Todorović (Ouresis Todorovich), *Byzantine Painting through Contemporary Eyes: Hermeneutics of Spiritual Vision* (Sebastian Press, 2023), 301–364.

[44] Ulrike Becks-Malorny, *Kandinsky* (Taschen, 2007), 195–196.

aura, which stems from the distinct tendency towards abstraction, excels to a level of hypertextual meaning, and as such, becomes the more exalted, theological content of the depicted theme.

The painters who worked at Perivleptos understood very well that the painting decoration as a whole was more important than the separate details. As *image 21* shows, even when we look at the mutually bordering themes of *Nativity* and *Baptism* collectively, from a deliberately 'wrong' angle, there is the same if not even a more pronounced sense of transcendence of the dimension of the sensory world. Even though the authors of the frescoes at Perivleptos would certainly not have used terms such as 'abstract mood' to describe their work, it is undoubtable that they did understand that a deeper reason for this tendency towards abstraction of their expression is to be found in the theological worldview of the collective Byzantine culture to which they belonged.

Having said that, it is not a coincidence that before proceeding gradually to abstract visual language, in 1896 at an exhibition of French art in Moscow, Kandinsky was impressed by the fact that in one of the paintings of Monet he could not entirely discern the depicted theme. Consequently, it did not matter which side of the painting was up and which side was down or whether the painting was in fact turned upside down. Much later, when his style was already entirely abstract, he recalled this liberating experience as something which was very significant on his journey towards what he would call the 'spiritual in art.'[45]

Of course, from a historical point of view, the phenomenon of the transcendental artistic experience is not limited to only one style of painting or one kind of art. We gradually start acknowledging and appreciating the diachronic character of Late Byzantine painting from the moment we observe that certain aesthetic characteristics of the transcendental experience of that painting also exist, to an extent, in other artistic traditions of various periods, both those before and those after the Byzantine era. In other words, the diachronic character of Late Byzantine painting exists to an extent to which in its aesthetic conception certain analogous experiences of other artistic traditions are embodied.

Accordingly, from the aesthetic point of view, besides the Byzantine *icon*, one could just as well perceive the theological truth or a transcendental content in Altamira prehistoric cave-paintings, shown in *image 23*, and for example, compare that content, which is beyond the form, to the 14th century Byzantine fresco of *Nativity* in Perivleptos,

[45] For an extensive examination of Byzantine influences in Kandinsky's painting, see: "Byzantine Influences in the Abstract Painting of Vasily Kandinsky" in: Uroš T. Todorović (Ouresis Todorovich), *Byzantine Painting through Contemporary Eyes: Hermeneutics of Spiritual Vision* (Sebastian Press, 2023), 199–245.

shown in *image 22*. The similarity between these two examples speaks for itself. In other words, in the category of what might be called *theological art*, it is the Truth that gives birth to a transcendental style and not the other way around. Truth can find ways to express itself, whether through a purely abstract or through a representational visual language, while iconographers, artists and theorists simply interpret the Truth throughout its historical manifestations.

The prehistoric cave-paintings in Altamira and the 14th century fresco of *Nativity* at Mistra should be understood as transcendental because the truthfulness of their visionary aura of otherworldliness transcends the mere depiction of their respective themes and elevates the observer from a visual to a spiritual, revelatory experience. To ignore the creative act of the authors of these two historically unrelated examples of painting and to say that this perceived transcendental effect was not their intention, would be as misleading as saying, for example, that with his symphonies and sonatas, Ludwig van Beethoven did not intend to influence his listeners in a profound and visionary way. As it can be observed, just like in the prehistoric cave-painting shown in *image 23*, the design of the narrative of *Nativity* in Perivleptos is so abstracted, that it can be read not only from left to right, but also from top to bottom, diagonally, and in all other directions – both are truly archetypal images with distinct musical qualities of both rhythm and harmony. The animals depicted in the prehistoric cave-painting are rendered with the child-like innocence and immediacy and yet their form is made sublime and ethereal to a point where one is not convinced that their authors were in fact primitive. Each animal-form is like a translucent 'stamp,' which like a galaxy is suspended in air among other stamps within a highly harmonious, luminous composition where the slow movement is implied through rather calm, almost static features.

That which is projected and which dominates is not the narrative which concerns the depicted animals, but a sense of unification of the individual features at the level of spiritual experience – such as for example the theological experience that the entire Universe was created by an unknown revelatory light and is in its entirety on its course towards that light. Of course, other analogous interpretations could also be offered. Judging by the overall transcendental effect, in a sense, the authors of this prehistoric painting surpass the achievements of the 20th century Modern painters, while at the same time the above-described characteristics of their work can indeed be compared to the fresco of *Nativity* in Perivleptos shown in *image 22*.

Evidently, in the composition of *Nativity*, through the abstract mood reminiscent of prehistoric cave-painting, the transcendental content dominates over the aspects of form

and colour, as well as over the narrative nature of the theme. In this regard, this fresco manifests analogies to the abstract painting of great 20th century painters who nurtured distinct theological and philosophical aspirations, such as Vasily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich and Mark Rothko.[46]

Concise Appraisal of the Contemporary Relevance of the Relationship between Modern Abstract Painting of the 20th Century and Frescoes of Mistra

Even if we were to ignore that certain Modernist painters were very much interested in Byzantine aesthetics, the aesthetic affinities observed between their work and frescoes at Mistra are quite striking and they seem to be vividly implying that Modernism could in fact be understood as a centuries-long phenomenon which is historically both discontinuing and continuing, under different circumstances. In this sense, purely from the point of view of aesthetics, we may look at the phenomenon of Modernism as something that we humans have broken into various historical timeframes and academic categories, which in themselves deceptively project a picture of a discontinued, fragmented experience. This seeming fragmentation of the notion of Modernism throughout history can effectively be surpassed by appreciating a fragment of a fresco at Mistra as part of an aesthetic experience which became replanted and re-emerged anew as transubstantiated in the ateliers of some of the major 20th century abstract painters.

The 20th century Modern painters mentioned in this chapter (as well as certain others) did not borrow Byzantine forms nor did they make some kind of creative versions of them. Yet, their work is deeply inspired by the transcendental content of Late Byzantine painting. Because of this, although their work does not constitute ecclesial art, the contribution of these 20th century abstract painters can even become useful in efforts towards innovation of ecclesial painting, an innovation which is undertaken in our time especially by contemporary Orthodox painters around the World.

In general, the theoretical basis of such contemporary efforts in the realm of Orthodox painting is entrapped in the Iconoclast-versus-Iconophile context of the well-known Byzantine literature on icons. Although the Iconophile Byzantine literature is obviously of immense significance for many reasons, it is essentially an extended answer to specific heretical views of the Iconoclasts and therefore it cannot serve beyond that context to provide an adequate interpretation of the deeper dimensions of the aesthetics of Byzan-

[46] In the last three chapters of our book, we exhaustively discuss the Byzantine influences in the works of Kandinsky, Malevich and Rothko, respectively. See: Uroš T. Todorović (Ouresis Todorovich), *Byzantine Painting through Contemporary Eyes: Hermeneutics of Spiritual Vision* (Sebastian Press, 2023).

tine iconography. This is especially the case given that the history of the Christian icon begins much earlier than the Iconoclast debate. More particularly, it begins in the apostolic period of the Church (c. 33–100 AD), whereas it continues for many centuries after Iconoclasm until our time.

Admittedly, in the period before Iconoclasm there was confusion regarding the functioning and meaning of the icon, whereas after Iconoclasm the Church established and defined the theory regarding the function and meaning of the icon. However, the Iconophile Church Fathers of the Iconoclast period never had an aim to proceed deeper into topics which relate to the purely artistic experience of Byzantine painters. They did not have such an aim simply because, that purely artistic experience, which relates to the possibilities of creative innovation within the tradition, was outside their strictly Iconoclasm-related topic.

Accordingly, the fact that the two periods of Iconoclasm interrupted the Byzantine painting tradition for a period longer than a century (726–843), does not oblige any painter, either Byzantine or contemporary, to limit the aesthetic concept of their work by exclusively basing it on the theoretical teachings of the relevant Byzantine Iconophile literature, whose main aim was not to delve into the depths of the artistic experience but to address and terminate the specific challenges of Iconoclasm.[47]

The liberty and authenticity with which a Byzantine painter could render his or her work and even drastically test the boundaries of the tradition can be observed in the almost entirely abstract forms painted in Russia in the 14th century by a painter known as Theophanes the Greek.[48] In this sense, contemporary Orthodox painters, provided that they participate creatively in their tradition, should not hesitate to renew that tradition even more so than Theophanes the Greek.

The real 'battlefield' for further innovation in contemporary Orthodox painting is not the context of Byzantine Iconoclasm-related literature. It is elsewhere. A contemporary Byzantine iconographer that strives towards innovation, stands at a point of reception which is chronologically distant from the Byzantine era, therein receiving holistically everything that the historical experience entails and more. He/she is called to creatively

[47] It should also be noted that Byzantine theology of the Pre-iconoclastic period, as well as Byzantine theology after Iconoclasm have profoundly influenced the aesthetic development of Byzantine art. In this context see also: Uroš T. Todorović, "Transcendental Byzantine Body: Reading Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, Gregory of Nyssa and Plotinus in the Unfolded Marble Panels of Hagia Sophia," in *The Ways of Byzantine Philosophy*, ed. Mikonja Knežević (Alhambra, California: Sebastian Press, 2015), 197–226.

[48] We have discussed the work of Theophanes the Greek in our recently published book. See: "Theophanes the Greek" in: Uroš T. Todorović (Ouresis Todorovich), *Byzantine Painting through Contemporary Eyes: Hermeneutics of Spiritual Vision* (Sebastian Press, 2023), 59–62, 109–110.

continue the Byzantine tradition but in a contemporary context, not least bearing in mind the 20th century Modernist reception and creative reinvention of certain aspects of Byzantine aesthetics. At the dawn of the third millennium, in an epoch generally characterised by spiritual crises, it seems that the future of Contemporary Byzantine Painting[49] is in *Mistra* which so far has not been properly revealed.

Most importantly, the aesthetic connection between the achievement of the 20th century abstract painters and the frescoes at Mistra allows us to tangibly observe the timeless overarching unity of the human creative experience. Through his following words written in 1964, Odysseas Elytis, a major representative of Romantic Modernism, shows to the inheritors of the Byzantine tradition and to the entire world the mystagogical path towards an eschatological *Mistra*: "Each time I enter one of those small, half-ruined, and half-painted churches, which like rocks, remained embodied within the Greek countryside, and I get hit by the smell of the dampness of the walls, it seems that I come into immediate, almost skin contact with my kind, and it is as if I thus have the evidence that it leads back directly to Byzantium. And then, an entire world, with the mauve and gold of its decoration, is offered to me within the mystic communion. One should respect their senses greatly, and tremble in awareness of their sanctity, to arrive therein, from the opposites, to the very Christian outcome. But perhaps the same thing occurs in the opposite direction? Even the most secular painting – if it is exalted enough – partakes in sanctity. How else could it be, since after a certain point and thereof, in its own way, it too, by death tramples on death; since it contains a message from life, which was and which – when our vanity vanishes – will again become a sacrament."[50]

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[49] While it is understandable that the phrase 'Contemporary Byzantine Painting' is often used by contemporary iconographers and painters who strive towards innovation within the Byzantine tradition, we note that this particular field of artistic activity entails very diverse approaches which move in a variety of aesthetic directions.

[50] Our translation. The original excerpt in Greek reads as follows: «Κάθε φορά που μπαίνω σε μίαν από τις μισογκρεμισμένες και μισοζωγραφισμένες εκείνες μικρές εκκλησίες που απόμειναν ενσωματωμένες, ίδια βράχια, μέσα στο ελληνικό ύπαιθρο, και με χτυπήσει η μυρωδιά της υγρασίας των τοίχων, μου φαίνεται ότι έρχομαι σε άμεση, σε δερματική σχεδόν επαφή με το σόι μου, λες και έχω αποδείξεις ότι αυτό κρατάει ολόισα από το Βυζάντιο. Και ένας κόσμος ολόκληρος τότε, με τα μωβ και τα χρυσά του διακόσμου του, μου προσφέρεται σε κοινωνία μυστική. Πρέπει να σέβεται κανείς πολύ τις αισθήσεις, να τρέμει στη συνείδηση της αγιότητάς τους, για να μπορεί να φτάνει έτσι, από τους αντίποδες, στο ίδιο χριστιανικό αποτέλεσμα. Αλλά μήπως και από τον αντίστροφο δρόμο δεν συμβαίνει ακριβώς το ίδιο; Ακόμη κι η πιο κοσμική ζωγραφική – αν είναι αρκετά υψηλή – μετέχει στην ιερότητα. Πώς αλλιώς αφού, από ένα σημείο και πέρα, με τον τρόπο της κι εκείνη πατεί τον θάνατο θανάτω. Κι αφού συγκρατεί ένα μήνυμα από τη ζωή που ήταν και που θα ξαναγίνει – όταν η ματαιοδοξία μας φυλλοροήσει – μυστήριο». See: Οδυσσέας Ελύτης, «Γιάννης Τσαρούχης», στο *Γιάννης Τσαρούχης: ὡς στρουθίον μονάζον ἐπὶ δώματος*. Επιμέλεια έκδοσης: Θανάσης Θ. Νιάρχος (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Καστανιώτη, 1987), 212.

1. The view of the Mistra hill and its mediaeval castle.
Photograph: Uroš T. Todorović (2014)

2. Paul Klee, *Dwarf Fairy Tale*, 1925, watercolour on primed cardboard, 43.4 x 35.4 cm. Private Collection, Switzerland.

3. *The Preparation of the Throne*, 1272–1288, fresco in the diaconicon of the church of St Demetrius (Mitropoli) at Mistra, Greece. Photograph source: Μυρτάλη Αχειμάστου-Ποταμιάνου, *Μυστράς: Ιστορικός και Αρχαιολογικός Οδηγός* (Αθήνα: Έσπερος / Κλειώ, 2003), 23.

4. *Christ's Miracles in Galilee*, 1291/2–1315, fresco in the church of St Demetrius at Mistra, Greece.
Photograph source: Μυρτάλη Αχειμάστου-Ποταμιάνου,
Μυστράς: Ιστορικός και Αρχαιολογικός Οδηγός (Αθήνα: Έσπερος / Κλειώ, 2003), 26.

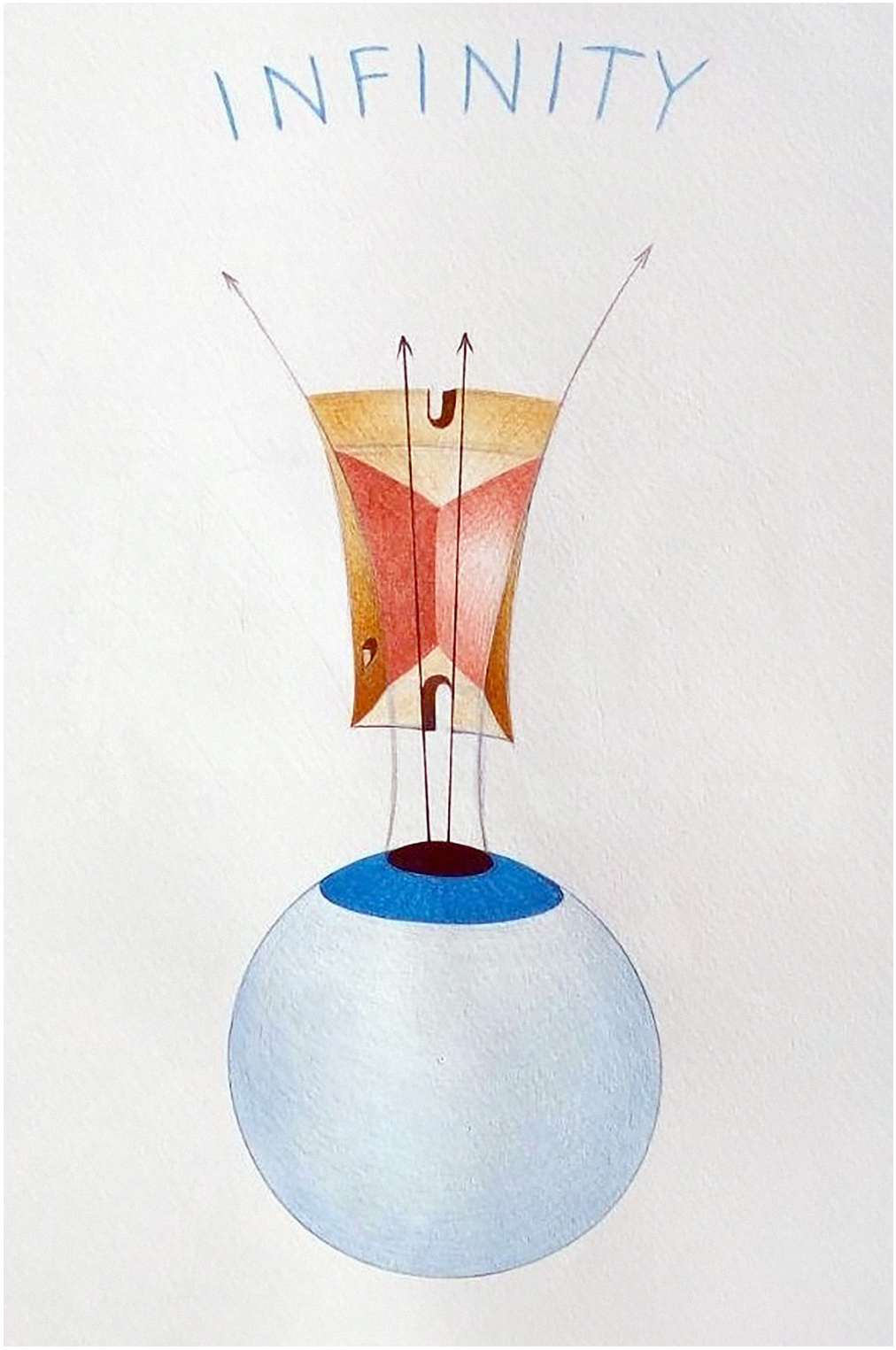
5. *The Second Coming* (detail: *the tormented*), 1291/2–1315, fresco in the church of St Demetrius at Mistra, Greece. Photograph source: Μυρτάλη Αχειμάστου-Ποταμιάνου, *Μυστράς: Ιστορικός και Αρχαιολογικός Οδηγός* (Αθήνα: Έσπερος / Κλειώ, 2003), 27.

6. *The Healing of the Blind* and *The Healing of Peter's Mother-in-law*, 1312/13–1322, fresco in the church of Hodigitria (Afentiko) at Mistra, Greece. Photograph source: Μυρτάλη Αχειμάστου-Ποταμιάνου, *Μυστράς: Ιστορικός και Αρχαιολογικός Οδηγός* (Αθήνα: Έσπερος / Κλειώ, 2003), 51.

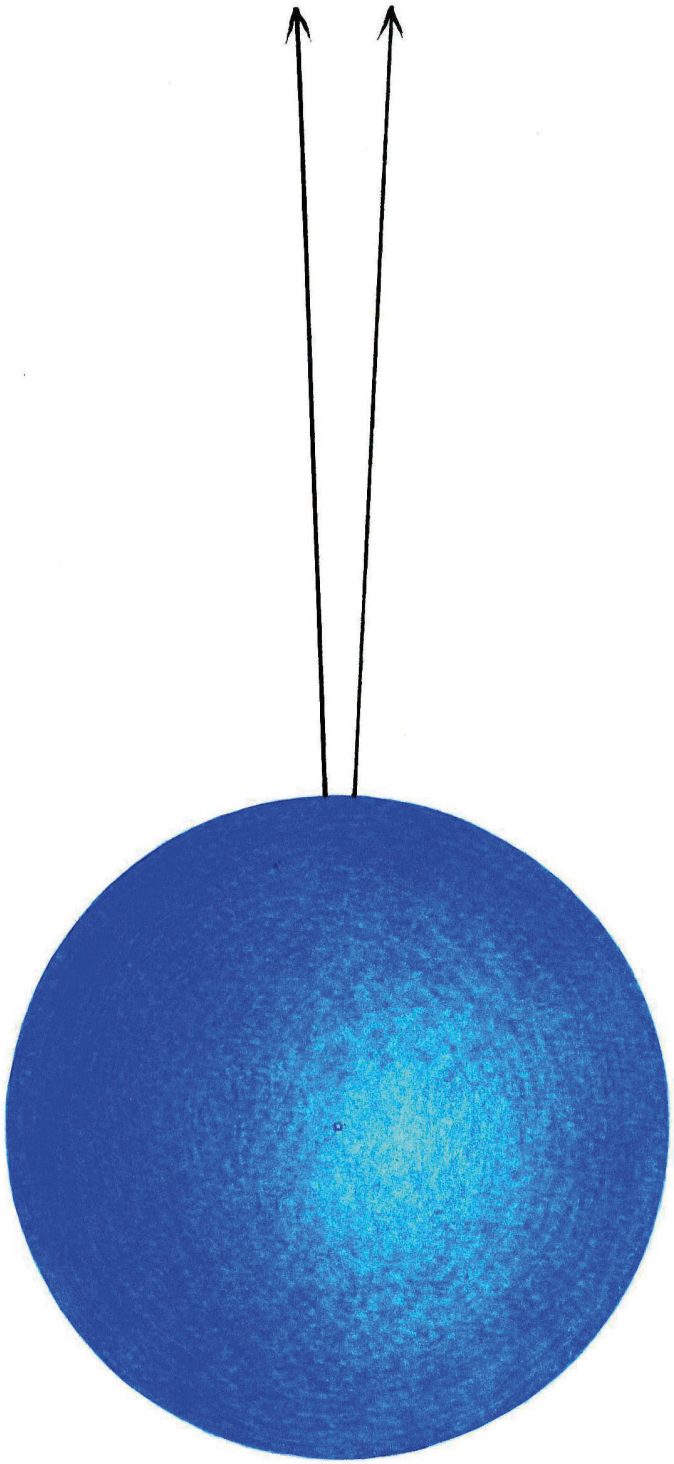
7. *The Healing of Peter's Mother-in-law* (detail), 1312/13–1322, fresco in the church of Hodigitria (Afentiko) at Mistra, Greece. Photograph source: Μυρτάλη Αχειμάστου-Ποταμιάνου, *Μυστράς: Ιστορικός και Αρχαιολογικός Οδηγός* (Αθήνα: Έσπερος / Κλειώ, 2003), 51.

8. Top: *The Birth of the Virgin*. Fresco in the southeast chapel of the church of Saint Sophia at Mistra. (Photograph: Uroš T. Todorović, 2014)

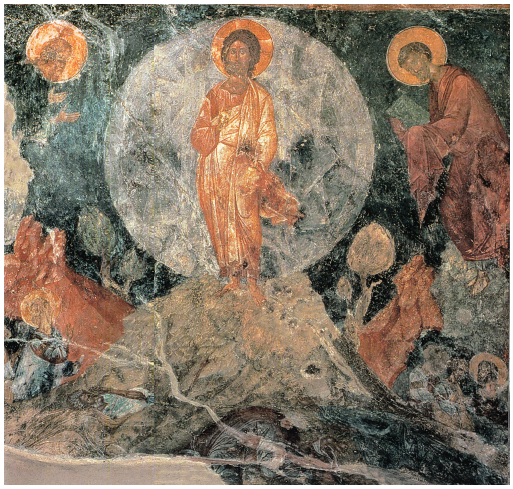
9. Bottom: *The Birth of the Virgin*. Fresco (with a drawing demonstration on top of the photograph) in the southeast chapel of the church of Saint Sophia at Mistra.
Author of the visual demonstration: Uroš T. Todorović.



10. Drawing demonstration related to the topic of inverse perspective.
Author: Uroš T. Todorović.



11. Drawing demonstration with a deliberate exaggeration for the sake of clarity; related to the topic of inverse perspective. Author: Uroš T. Todorović.



12. Left: *Transfiguration*, 1350–1375, fresco in the church of the Mother of God Perivleptos, Mistra, Greece.

13. Centre: Our visual demonstration: we have extracted the human figures from the 14th century composition (fresco) of *Transfiguration* at Perivleptos in Mistra, Greece. Author of the visual demonstration: Uroš T. Todorović.

14. Right: Vasily Kandinsky, *Several Circles*, 1926, oil on canvas, 140.3 x 140.7 cm, New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

15. Top: *The Numbering at Bethlehem*, 1418–1427, fresco, south wall inside the church of the Monastery of Kalenić, Serbia. (Photograph: Uroš T. Todorović)

16. Middle: Our visual demonstration: while deliberately keeping the depiction of the curtain and of the architectural features, we have extracted the human figures from the 15th century composition (fresco) of *The Numbering at Bethlehem* in Kalenić, Serbia. Author of the visual demonstration: Uroš T. Todorović.

17. Bottom: The Rothko Room, Phillips Collection, Washington, DC. Photograph source: Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Rothko* (Taschen, 2003).



18. Left: Detail 1 of the composition (fresco) of *Baptism* at Perivleptos in Mistra, Greece; second half of the 14th century. Photograph source: Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005), 82.

19. Middle: Vasily Kandinsky, *Sky Blue*, 1940, oil on canvas, 100 x 73 cm, Paris, Musée National d' Art Moderne. Photograph source: Ulrike Becks-Malorny, *Kandinsky* (Taschen, 2007).

20. Right: Detail 2 of the composition (fresco) of *Baptism* at Perivleptos in Mistra, Greece; second half of the 14th century. Photograph source: Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005), 82.

21. Fresco compositions of *Nativity* (left) and *Baptism* (right) in the church of the Mother of God Perivleptos (1350–1370), Mistra, Greece. Photograph: Uroš T. Todorović.

22. Top: *Nativity*, 1350–1370, fresco in the church of the Mother of God Perivleptos, Mistra, Greece. Photograph: Uroš T. Todorović.

23. Bottom: Prehistoric cave-painting, 15000–10000 BC, the Cave of Altamira, Spain.

24. *Nativity*, 1430, fresco in the church of Pantanassa at Mistra, Greece.
Photograph source: Μυρτάλη Αχειμάστου-Ποταμιάνου, *Μυστράς: Ιστορικός και Αρχαιολογικός Οδηγός* (Αθήνα: Έσπερος / Κλειώ, 2003), 90.

APPENDIX

Concise Historical Overview of the Byzantine Fortress of Mistra

Located six kilometres northwest of the modern-day town of Sparta, Mistra is a hill which stands like a cut-off fragment of the Taygetos mountain range in south Peloponnesus. The height of the hill of Mistra reaches 621 metres. On its top there are still remnants of the mediaeval fortress, while beneath the fortress are the remnants of the Byzantine town.

Compared to other ancient cities of the Byzantine Empire, the history of Mistra commences rather late. After the Crusaders' conquest of Constantinople, in 1204, the Franks strived to conquer other strategically significant fortresses and territories of the Byzantine Empire. As historical evidence informs us, the Frankish invasion of Monemvasia, which was assisted by Venetians in 1248,[51] subsequently provided William II de Villehardouin, a prince of the Frankish Principate of Achaia, with the opportunity to expand his rule in Peloponnese. The Chronicle of Morea preserves the following description of how William II de Villehardouin searched and found in Peloponnese the appropriate place to affirm his conquests.

"He found a strange hill, a section of a mountain, about a kilometer away from Lakedaimonia. Because he liked to build *strong fortifications*, he gave instructions and on top of the hill they built one fortress, and they named it Myzithras, because that is how it (the hill) was called; he made a *shining and mighty fortress.*"[52]

The hill on which William de Villehardouin built the fortress was in ancient times known as Myzithras (Μυζηθράς), possibly because its shape reminded of a particular kind of local cheese, which had a conical form. Subsequently, the shortening of the name led to the name of Mystras, or Mistra.[53] Thus, in 1249, under the patronage of William de Villehardouin, the building of a fortress ("Oriokastro") was completed on top of the hill of Mistra and therein, the city of Mistra was founded.

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[51] For a more detailed explanation of these events see: Steven Runciman, *Μυστράς* (Καρδαμίτσα, 2003), 34.

[52] Our translation from: Χρονικόν του Μορέως, στ. 2990–2991. See: Χρονικόν του Μορέως, στ. 2990–2991. Θρησκευτικὴ καὶ ἠθικὴ ἐγκυκλοπαιδεία, 9ος τόμος. Εκδότης Αθ. Μαρτίνος, Αθήνα: 1966, σ. 242. The original text reads as follows: «ηὗρεν βουνὶν παράξενον, ἀπόκομμα εἰς ὄρος, ἀπάνω τῆς Λακεδαιμονίας κανένα μίλιν πλέον. Διατὶ τοῦ ἄρεσεν πολλά νὰ ποιήση δυναμάριν, ὥρισεν ἀπέξω στό βουνὶ καὶ ἔκτισαν ἕνα κάστρον, καὶ Μυζηθρὰν τ' ὠνόμασεν, διατὶ τὸ ἐκράζαν οὕτως, λαμπρὸν κάστρον τὸ ἔποικεν καὶ μέγα δυναμάριν».

[53] Steven Runciman, *Μυστράς* (Καρδαμίτσα, 2003), 35.

After its initial foundation, the city of Mistra underwent a turbulent succession of political changes, where firstly, at the battle of Pelagonia (1259) the Franks were defeated, and William de Villehardouin was captured by the Greek forces. The liberation of Constantinople, in 1261, by Mihail VIII Palaiologos (who was greatly helped by the army general Alexios Stratigopoulos), significantly improved the position of the Greeks in the events that followed. In exchange for the liberty of William de Villehardouin, in 1262, the Franks had to surrender, besides Mistra, the other two fortresses of Peloponnese, Monemvasia and Maini. Byzantine emperor Mihail VIII Palaiologos[54] sent his younger brother Constantine together with other higher army-officials to claim the city.

In the period that followed, the liberated regions of Peloponnese were governed from its capital Mistra by an administering army official, who was sent from Constantinople every year and from 1308, this role was assigned to a permanent governor. Upon its claim by the Greeks and thereafter, under the fortress of Mistra, a city was gradually expanding. The significant sections of additional walls,[55] as well as palaces and houses, are preserved to this day. Greeks who lived in Lakedaimonia (which is the Byzantine name for the town of Sparta) moved to Mistra, avoiding Frankish threats and intimidation.[56] The metropolitan church of Lakedaimonia was also transferred to Mistra, where approximately between 1263 and 1271, a metropolitan church of St Demetrius was built. The monastery of Vrontochi (Vrontochion) was built around 1290 – and within it the church of Saints Theodore, and later also the church of Hodigitria (c.1310), also known as Afentiko. Then, there is St Sophia and Perivleptos, both built during the reign of Despot Manuel Kantakouzenos (1348–1380). A small church of Euangelistria, probably dating to the early 15th century,[57] is the only church in Mistra without any evidence of its history, with only a few preserved sections of its fresco decoration. Finally, there is the Monastery of Pantanassa, founded in 1428 by Ioannis Frangopoulos – who held the presiding position in the Despotate of Morea (Peloponnese). There are also more than twenty smaller funerary chapels, in some of which sections of frescoes, mainly from the 14th century, are still preserved. The noteworthy church of St Nicholas dates to the 17th century.

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[54] Mihail VIII Palaiologos ruled between 1259 and 1282.

[55] Within the process of the expansion of the city, two additional walls were built in order to protect its inhabitants. See: Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005), 123–124.

[56] For example, Runciman points out that after the establishment of the Greek rule of Mistra in 1262, Greeks started to leave Lakedaimonia, where they were treated as the second class citizens. See: Steven Runciman, *Μυστράς* (Καρδαμίτσα, 2003), 43.

[57] Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005), 93.

In the 14th century, the constant threat from the Franks, Turkish raiders and a sense of uneasiness brought by internal conflicts among unsatisfied high officials of the region, led to a need for a reorganisation of political power.[58] Thus, in 1348, emperor Ioannis VI Kantakouzenos sent his son Manuel Kantakouzenos to Peloponnese with the title and an increased power of a Despot, and thereby Mistra became the capital of the Despotate of Morea, while retaining strong ties with Constantinople. These strong ties between Mistra and Constantinople have most likely encouraged the assignment of painters from Constantinople to projects in the churches of Mistra. Also, the Hesychast Debate (1341–1352), which coincided with this bright period of the Byzantine Mistra, subsequently exercised a tremendous influence on the authors of frescoes in the church of Perivleptos (1350–75) in Mistra, as well as on the authors of frescoes in the Monastery of Kalenić (completed between 1418 and 1427), in central Serbia. Further, besides being a centre of political significance, Mistra was a place which attracted intellectuals and philosophers, the most important of which was Georgios Gemistos Plethon (c.1360–1452).

Manuel Kantakouzenos' rule of Mistra and Peloponnese ended with his death in 1380. He was a stern but good-natured ruler, whose death was mourned by many.[59] The following despot of Morea was Manuel's brother, Matheos (1380–1383), who was briefly succeeded by his son Demetrius. Due to jealousy and thirst for power, Demetrius attempted, admittedly in vain, to cut all ties with Constantinople, where, after Ioannis VI Kantakouzenos was removed from the throne in 1354, the Palaiologan dynasty had re-established its rule. Demetrius Kantakouzenos was the last of the Kantakouzenos dynasty to rule Mistra. In 1383 Theodore I Palaiologos arrived in Morea and successfully took control of the province. From 1430 onwards, apart from a few coastal positions still ruled by Venetians, the entire region of Peloponnese was governed by the Palaiologans.

The last of the Byzantine emperors, Konstantinos Dragazis Palaiologos, was crowned in 1449, in the metropolitan church of St Demetrius in Mistra, and then made his way towards Constantinople. On the 29th of May 1453 after a fierce historic battle, in which Konstantinos Dragazis Palaiologos, and a multitude of Orthodox Christians perished, Constantinople was conquered by the Ottoman Empire. This event marked the end of the Byzantine Empire and a beginning of a long period of occupation for all Eastern Christendom (except for Russia). In 1460, Mistra was surrendered to the Ottomans by Konstantinos' brother, Demetrius Palaiologos, and by 1461 the Ottomans were ruling the entire Peloponnese.

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[58] Μυρτάλη Αχειμάστου-Ποταμιάνου, *Μυστράς: Ιστορικός και Αρχαιολογικός Οδηγός* (Αθήνα: Έσπερος / Κλειώ, 2003), 6.

[59] See: Steven Runciman, *Μυστράς* (Καρδαμίτσα, 2003), 65.

After the initial damage caused by the Ottomans to the frescoes of the churches of Mistra, the Venetians, in 1687, led by Francesco Morozini (who on the 26th of September of the same year bombed and severely damaged the Athens Parthenon) invaded Mistra and governed it until it was reclaimed by the Ottomans, in 1715. In 1770, with the help of Russia, Mistra was again freed for a brief period, until it was razed by Albanian raiders who set fire to most of the city and systematically damaged its churches.[60] In 1825, Egyptian forces, led by Ibrahim Pasha, whose atrocities in Peloponnese astounded all of Europe, had the city of Mistra burned yet again.[61] Although liberated during the Greek revolution (1821–1830), Mistra was abandoned by its last inhabitants soon after, after Othonas, a Greek king of Bavarian origin, founded the city of New Sparta nearby. Thus, most of the last population of Mistra moved to the new capital, Sparta, and the nearby village of New Mistra.

Notwithstanding their diversity in terms of the level of skill, and trends, the preserved frescoes of the churches of Mistra, especially those from the 14th century, which have puzzled scholars in the past, pertain primarily to the notion of the numinous, and the exalted. To arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the aesthetics of these frescoes, we must firstly consider the political and cultural circumstances within which they were created. This shall be the task of the following paragraphs.

The first time that the possible reunification of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church was seriously discussed since the Great Schism of 1054 was at the Synod of Lyons in 1274, during the reign of Mihail VIII Palaiologos, then unofficially in 1369, during the reign of Ioannis V Palaiologos, and then much more thoroughly at the Synod of Ferrara-Florence in 1438–1439, during the reign of Ioannis VIII Palaiologos (1425–1448).

Despite these dialogues being significantly instigated by the growing threat of the Ottoman Empire, and despite the Orthodox Church being in a geographically and strategically vulnerable position, it did not accept the union, as such acceptance always entailed intimidating conditions imposed by the Roman Catholic church. The course of this struggle of the Byzantine society has had both a political and a spiritual character, and Mistra, being the second most important cultural and artistic centre of Byzantium of the 14th and 15th centuries,[62] was the enduring stronghold of Orthodoxy.

[60] Ibid., 152–155.

[61] Ibid., 170.

[62] Prior to this, Thessaloniki was for centuries the second most important political and cultural centre.

For example, Nikiforos Moschopoulos, while renewing the church of St Demetrius (Mitropoli) in Mistra, attempted to erase the traces which confirm the identities of its original founders, being supporters of the union-friendly views of Mihail VIII Palaiologos. It is also probable that in the church of Perivleptos in Mistra, the same reason lies behind the damage caused to the evidence of the identities of its original founders, namely, despot Manuel Kantakouzenos and his French wife, princess Isabelle de Lusignan.[63]

In the question of union between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, there were frictions within the Orthodox Church itself. Therefore, in the 15th century the theological and cultural elite of Byzantium was divided into two opposing sides, and in this, Mistra indirectly played an important role. In particular, in Mistra, the anti-union faction was represented by Georgios Scholarios, later Gennadius II and first Patriarch of Constantinople after its fall, whereas the pro-union faction was represented by Vasilios Bessarion, who was later a Metropolitan of Nicaea, and who eventually became a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church.[64] The ecclesial, theological, and political frictions which existed in this period, have later influenced the cultural and artistic directions and tendencies in both East and West. For example, Bessarion's thinking formed the basis on which much of the philosophy of the Renaissance was to be built.[65] Thus, Bessarion played a major role in bringing ancient Greek philosophy, especially that of Plato, as well as a renewed idea of Hellenism, to Europe and the West.

Theodoros I Palaiologos, the son of Ioannis V Palaiologos and brother of later emperor Manuel II Palaiologos governed as the Despot of Morea (Peloponnese) from 1383 to 1407. He defended the region from continuous Ottoman attacks and fought diligently against the Navarrese mercenaries (the so-called Navarrese Company) who settled in Peloponnese towards the end of the 14th century.

During Theodoros' governorship most of Serbia fell to the Ottoman Empire, in 1389 following the Battle of Kosovo. This opened the rest of Europe to the Ottoman Empire and meant that the fall of Constantinople, being the ultimate goal for the Ottomans, was now inevitable. Shortly after the capital's fall, Mistra shared its destiny. Nevertheless, in the face of its gradually approaching political collapse, the civilisation of Byzantium gave birth to painting which is defined by a sense of ethereal space and imbued with profound notions of immateriality and eternity.

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[63] Μαίρη Άσπρα-Βαρδαβάκη & Μελίτα Εμμανουήλ, *Η Μονή της Παντάνασσας στον Μυστρά: Οι τοιχογραφίες του 15ου αιώνα* (Αθήνα: Εμπορική Τράπεζα της Ελλάδος, 2005), 20–21.

[64] Ibid., 21.

[65] David Talbot-Rice, *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 177.

Not long before the fall of Byzantium, there was however, a final glimmer of hope for the survival of its society, culture and art. Following the death of Theodoros I Palaiologos, his nephew, Theodoros II Palaiologos became Despot of Morea. To improve the governing of Morea, Manuel II Palaiologos, the father of Theodoros II and the emperor of Byzantium at the time, visited Mistra and stayed there between March 1415 and March 1416.

Through tactful diplomacy, Manuel II Palaiologos also managed to establish an agreement of peace and mutual respect with the new Ottoman sultan, Mehmed I, son of Bagiazit.[66] This brief period of peace in Mistra is marked by two significant architectural and artistic projects: the expansion of the palace and the founding of the church of Pantanassa (1428) – latter being commissioned by Ioannis Frangopoulos.

[66] Μαίρη Άσπρα-Βαρδαβάκη & Μελίτα Εμμανουήλ, *Η Μονή της Παντάνασσας στον Μυστρά: Οι τοιχογραφίες του 15ου αιώνα* (Αθήνα: Εμπορική Τράπεζα της Ελλάδος, 2005), 19.

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