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**BETWEEN THIRD AND FOURTH DIMENSIONS: SCULPTURAL
FORMS IN EASTERN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CHURCH ART**

Abstract: Sculptural art is one of the least explored traditional expressions of Eastern Orthodox Christian spirituality. Artistic creativity in the field of carving and sculpting is an aesthetic response to particular confessional needs, and a creativity developing along discussions on church canonical and liturgical propriety of three-dimensional forms having in mind their fourth dimension as well. Sculptural church art relies on specific approaches to reflect on reality, express ideas, face religious needs, and therefore depict divine personages and sacred plots. Church blesses many forms of creation of beautiful forms representing piety, portraying saints by imagination from oral or textual descriptions, paintings or photographs, and depicting holiness even by anthropological restoration from relics. Eastern Orthodox Christian church does not fully appreciate whole aesthetical value and meditational role of sculptured artworks to represent sacred notions as history and invisible supernatural reality by means of decorations of high semantic quality. Therefore sculpture nowadays is incomparable with practices of other Christian religious traditions that promote artistic beauty and secular stylistics, or abolish visual material images at all. The very architectural design as church art transforms space by visual hierotopy and the whole liturgical life in its performative scenic aspects implies mysticism represented as well in third and fourth dimensions really and not only symbolically, as cannons require from church art. Sculptural form is traditional part of appropriate temple decoration since Old-Testament times and visual antithesis to creation of idols that had been destroyed by Church through centuries. Nevertheless sculpture would not attain central or dominating role in interior decoration of Eastern Orthodox Christian Church, although its material substance and technology are more sustainable and rich in symbolics. Archaeological excavations and findings prove aesthetic importance of imported eastern traditions of monumental stone carving and ceramics from early Bulgarian state and ecclesiastical history, and wood-carving is considered traditional Balkan church art from late medieval period on. Adoption of Western influences in Eastern Orthodox Christian art has contributed to overcoming of aesthetical religious stereotypes by appearance of various local creative practices that reapprove the potential of sculpture as religious phenomenon.

Keywords: sculpture; aesthetics; visual arts; decorative-monumental art; sacred arts; hierotopy; Eastern Orthodox Christian Church; Byzantine tradition; church iconography; theology of image; fine art; applied art; church objects; creative process; style, art perception; three-dimensional modelling; fourth dimension; installation; kitsch.

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Лиана Гълъбова – Между третото и четвъртото измерение: скулптурните форми в православното църковно изкуство

Резюме: Елемент от процесите на християнизация, зафиксирани в църковните правила, разбирането за благочестиво извайване и съзвучание на иконична художествена скулптурна форма е една от най-слабо осветлените теми в теорията и практиката на сакралните изкуства и до днес, когато информацията за артистичните религиозни традиции по-лесно може да се изучава. Проблемите на естетическото и религиозното присъствие и постоянно преосмисляне на триизмерните форми, представящи или допълващи идеите и реалиите на свръхестественото и недоловимото в контекста на сакрализиране на пространства и етос, не намират изказа си в контекста на цялостното еkleктично въздействие на образността в източноправославното богословие и вероизповедание. Остротата на дебатите за относителността на двуизмерността като считано за ефективно средство за историческото и практическо духовно преодоляване на идололатрията и привързаността към материални блага лишава от развитие богословското тълкуване на традиционното реалистично триизмерно ваятелство, чиято легитимност като сакрално изкуство често се премълчава. Скулптирането чрез свободно или матрично оформяне на художествения материал чрез прибавяне или отнемане: изрязване, дялане, гравирание, издълбаване, както и изграждането на произведения чрез формоване, леене, шамповане и други техники и технологии, специфични за съответните материали, дава възможност за постигане на естетичен резултат чрез максимално конкретизиран обем и осезаема триизмерна форма, в най-голяма степен улесняваща непосредственото възприемане или достигането до вложените сакрални или профанни съдържания. Богатите възможности на жанра надвишават познатите до момента изяви на релефа и кръглата пластика, миниатюрата, резбата, каменоделството и още множество материали и подходи към тях, на кинетичните структури и инсталациите, пърформанса и дигиталните изкуства. Тъй като въпросите на връзката между мемориалната и молитвената функция на изразено триизмерната скулптирана форма в православното изкуство все още се проблематизират в диалектичен дискурс, решаването им е оставено на практиката и традицията, а дискусиата следва принципното затишие по отношение на академичните църковни творби чрез стереотипите за „картини“ и „статуи“, които почти не се прилагат при възпоменателни, патронни и патриотични изображения, където и естетическите съображения често са условни. Въпреки че днес традиционното православно църковно изкуство продължава рутинно да създава интересни, стилни, иконични и приложими в богослужението и бита творби на скулптурата в разнообразни материали и техники, форми и сюжети, функции и предназначения, все още не се обръща достатъчно внимание на сакрализацията на изначалната символика на глината, камъка, дървото и други материали, от които се създават, вече и роботизирано, естетични триизмерни форми за целите на църковната култура. Поради необосновано в традицията търсене на религиозно противоречие на триизмерно и двуизмерно моделираната

пластична форма с иконната и иконианата в смисъл на емблематична и според художествените представи за плакатна и плоскостна трактовка на форми и пространства, не се експлоатира оптимално и вече доказаният и в модерното църковно изкуство потенциал на стъклото, бетона, полимерите и съвременните високотехнологични материали и пространства да изразяват свещените идеи или поне да загатват нетленността и безтелесността в търсения православен аскетичен курс, където има сходство с модерното и идеологичното изкуство и изразителното може и да не е красиво. Публичното изкуство принципно фокусира обществени дебати, а безпристрастността при избора на творци и жанрове за църковна прослава и благолепие на храмовите пространства, което се наблюдава в практиките на други национални и деноминационни традиции и нови общности, понякога също съвсем не безрезервно приемано и в техните кръгове, е аналогично на културната ситуация на взаимодействие на други изкуства и религии. Експерименталните и проектни подходи и съзнанието за опазване на наследство, общочовешки ценности и права са ориентир при не едно ново решение, включващо скулптурни елементи в обективната естетизация на свещените пространства в интерес на определени целеви групи и обществения климат като цяло.

Traditional hierotopy of three-dimensional forms of sculptural Eastern Orthodox Christian Church art generally includes rare iconic statues, figurines, and reliefs in architecture, applied arts and crafts. Monumental and decorative, art of sculpture (Marazov 2006: 31–32) is related to church ethos by inspiration, tradition, aesthetics, stylistics, and even with its raw materials, artistic methods, techniques and technologies that had become part of figurative language as in sacred rhetoric and music. Between solid, voluminous, and sometimes polychrome and precious decoration and its rich and profound theological semantics as image, there could emerge independent work of fine art that would be socialised and utilised as artefact of high aesthetic and religious value.

Impossibility to predict or prescribe development of sculptural form into material of three-dimensional church icon, and expect that artistic result would belong to live heritage of fourth dimension as well, depends on variety of aesthetic and theological backgrounds and attitudes of sculptors and recipients. Traditional sculpture preserved in church and museum space¹, as well as contemporary artworks created on liturgical purpose or acquiring religious legitimation as civic memorials or other kind of visual and scenic art including sacral elements, do not completely relate to comprehensive theory or history of three-dimensional artistic expression or identity of particular denomination. Preference of one denomination to artistic models and aesthetic views traditional to its central sacred sites

¹ Sculptural icons, iconostases and other three-dimensional liturgical elements, especially archaic, authentic, and achromatic or monochromatic, correspond better to churches museified as archaeological sites, and provide more stylish aesthetic environment for exposition of restored icons and murals and optimal decoration.

and spaces of domination had not necessarily meant that cultural exchanges were endangering confessional identities, especially concerning decoration.

Affinity with the challenges of various materials, techniques, technologies, genres, themes, and motifs nurtures artistic creativity and transfers of one idea or image in as many perspectives as necessary to transmit their aesthetic message in as many visual languages and levels as possible. General artistic interests sometimes focus on sacred topics, religious inspiration, church subsidising, commissioning or exposition, while artworks belong to stylistic characteristics of an author, time, place, or ensemble. Therefore even high and independent contemporary art could devaluate into regulated, normative or too popular forms. Sculpture is not an exception also from art practices involving both church and secular topics, and at the same time keeping authors clearly recognisable by their best way how they can embody an idea into image, and by the way they had chosen and achieved to model a form from raw material and project it into surface or volume, and in the optimal way recipients would be able, inclined and prepared to perceive the represented subject.

Misbalance of such aesthetic cooperation from one of the perspectives on artistic communication as receptive aesthetics (Angelov 2014: 162–167) comes from difficulty of spectators whose religious ethos does not quite or yet belong to clear aesthetical type of church spirituality (Skobtsova 2006). Without enough background, experience, believers barely understand and decode well author's or commissioner's or even Church's message. Undergoing regular way of problematic art perception, they are supposed to turn contemplation into everyday level search of banal equivalence with material reality (Angelov 2014: 162). Instead of the risk to imagine unattainable invisible spiritual reality, clergy and people start seeking any correspondence with nature, reflection of canonical mental or verbal images to relevant theological texts and narratives as explanation to visual elements of sacred tradition.

Moreover, search of style as archaic or historical formation than actual and live interpretation not having reached yet consistency, being disputed, yet under formation, still in risk of stylisation, eclectic, or too chaotic (Vlassov 1998: 527) disregards proactive participation in creative artistic processes in which artist is to be a step ahead and educate mass taste, for example, to distinguish between manufactured grave art and patriotic monuments (Boshev 2007: 140–142). To accomplish both civic and religious quality and effect in art, awareness of such adequacy would better attract and inspire artists in their creativity, rather than regulate artistic processes and perception of artworks through church commissioning and exposition. Variety of church artistic decisions from famous inter-confessional pilgrimage space of Resurrection church with nicely sculptured and newly restored Kuvukliya chapel of Holy Sepulchre to Resurrection of Christ military monument temple – Main cathedral of the Russian Armed forces recently built in Moscow and decorated with emblematic sculptures show that three-dimensional forms are more than welcome in Eastern Orthodox Christian ethos.



Work on sacred topics and representing any perspective of past or live church ethos, even in secular context and manner², does not prevent faithful recognition of a given work of art as an object that could attract church veneration and focus prayers. Sculpture as part of rich local craft and art traditions from stone crosses and reliefs on buildings and fountains, wooden crosses, home diptych altars, and iconostases (Obretenov 1980: 277–279), to communist patriotic monuments and memorials (Obretenov 1987: 287–305, Vukov 2017), and park sculpture (Obretenov 1987: 323–325)³ is also central part of Bulgarian and Balkan church heritage recognised by communities and believers as representation of Eastern Orthodox Christian Church ethos and culture. Therefore even academic

and modernist works of art like monuments are regarded as best, or at least acceptable public representation of religious veneration of a saint, and not only clergy participates in laying of wreaths ceremonies on official civic occasions, but they sacralise memorial sites and sculpture and organise litanies according to liturgical calendar. In the same popular or natural way sculptured forms, once having been created on church purposes and utilised at sacred sites, in future could occasionally lose their impact as soon as initial idea of their existence would be lost in time and culture. Incidental or ideological circumstances of creation and socialisation of monumental art from the past result even in demonstrative or pragmatic demolition without regard of the value of sculpture and actual anthropological perspective of its existence in present as a reason for socialist heritage preservation and presentation (Voukov 2017). Initial role, place, and meaning of sculptural works sometimes completely change and they can gradually

² Patron sculpture (probably from 1930s) of Saint Patriarch Euthimios of Tarnovo placed at a school façade near the schoolyard; that school is one of the few in Bulgaria with new chapel. Photo: L. Galabova, 8 June 2015.

³ Studied in various perspectives as archaeological, architectural, folklore, regional, and church heritage in grave, votive, fountain, military, patriotic, socialist, and post-socialist artefacts, monuments, memorials, parks, etc., and particularly by N. Shmirgela, A. Vassiliev, T. Silyanovska-Novikova, N. Trufeshev, I. Liybenova, P. Petrov, J. Maglovski, etc., and recently by V. Angelov, M. Koeva, V. Vassilchina, S. Levcheva, I. Gergova and the cited literature, by V. Moutafov, V. Markov, D. Dabkova, Zh. Nazarska, O. Petrova, E. Koleva, E. Popova, N. Manolova-Nikolova, I. Vassilchin, S. Valcheva, P. Yotov, S. Dimitrova, D. Tsankova-Gancheva, N. Noeva, Y. Alexiev, N. Voukov, N. Boshev, K. Todorova, M. Petkova, P. Zheleva, O. Ivanov, I. Mechkov, I. Kanchev, D. Gancheva, T. Todorova, T. Tsvetkova, B. Alexandrov, S. Nedkov, D. Dimitrov, M. Miteva, V. Voskresenski, etc., classified in registers, represented in editions and projects, visible in settlements, sacred spaces, and other landscapes, exhibited in galleries, media, sculptural parks, etc.

disappear and reappear in public spaces, according to their reception as artworks and symbols.

Gradual devaluation of creation of original church artefacts along their manufacturing and mass production and consumption, their multiplication and unification among different local church practices and spaces follow same processes of decay of genuine art and folklore, with little regard of their previous levels of quality, richness, and popularity that sometimes remain explored only by researchers, and reappears out of its original context. Value of sacral artefacts is represented and documented in other forms of church art, as for example by public festal services on special occasions, when famous religious leaders appear dressed in costly replicas of authentic clerical vestments kept in museum for centuries, or in simplest stylish apparel among their minors, or in old garments having belonged to their predecessors. Architectonical nature and essence of many church artworks, including textile, implies numerous symbols of cave, temple, house, ladder, vessel, star, and live creatures that inhabit those constructions as representation of Eden, eternal celestial kingdom or Jerusalem and world above or beyond visible by simple artistic means as geometrical stylisation, reverse perspective, and clear iconography. In historical perspective reintroduction of voluminous elements in late Byzantine art is explained by western artistic influence (Bozhkov 1995: 28–30), special nature of hierotopy of sacred space and landscape (Bogdanović 2017) and concern icon outlook and placement, framework and decoration, covers and votive details, as well as architectural, geometrical, floral, zoomorphic, and anthropomorphic decorations, most often with their own theological meaning. Reliefs and sculptures as part of global church heritage (Bogdanović 2008, Vachkova 2008) still can be observed on altar tables and canopies, iconostases and ambos, thrones and sarcophaguses, columns and pilasters, domes and balconies, apses (absides) and lunettes, chandeliers and lanterns, crosses and candle holders, gates and windows, lamps and censers, fountains and bells, reliquaries and communion vessels, church furniture, utensils and books, gonfalons and rhips, church vestments and jewellery (insignia), on belfries (bell towers) and in church yards and parks.

Sculpture as a creative artistic method from miniature to monuments, more as decoration and not as personification, is also common between Christian churches, monotheist and other religions, that often exchange artists and artefacts on high purpose of building temples perfectly. Church art had accepted artistic models from distinguished masters providing well-known ways of expression with a new meaning and content. Linked denominational communities gradually developed specific iconographic approaches of representation of Christian divine persons, saints and realms by actual visual language of the art in every époque, sometimes relying on archaic artistic heritage.

Artistic sculptural form as regular or exceptional element of sacral and profane, church and secular or shared landscapes is socialised as part, focal point or just a background of local memorial object, practice, or public ceremonial space. In countries with Eastern Orthodox Christian belonging of the majority of popu-



lation sacral sculpture is less popular, but as traditional as bells, carved iconostases and other phenomena of cultural import as stone and ceramic crafts and other earlier art practices. Nowadays sculptures built in patriotic monuments of saints as public figures and national heroes⁴, created later in larger scale, huge ensembles, and stylised forms as socialist art, different post-socialist statues in human size and ground level⁵, or again monumental or too monumental works of art, become part of civic ceremonies with church elements and keep playing social roles.

Aesthetic and theological discussions on the interpretation of cultural practices face a number of church or ideological stereotypes that do not correspond to actual liturgical or social phenomena in religious art, life and ethos. Works of high or popular art would be evaluated as spiritually appropriate or pious from variety of perspectives, including artistic unawareness or incompetence, arrangement of sacred spaces as expositions or also temporal scenography, or even placing of communicational or infrastructural elements in symbolic elements as the crown of a huge statue of Christ.

Still insufficient research exploration on rich local heritage represented in more or less three-dimensional artistic forms (Gergova 2017: 277) results in traditional problematisation of public sculpture used as a tool of legitimation or propaganda. Aesthetical compromises often related to grave and military memorials and their multiplication apply also to souvenirs, urban sculptures, and land art installations, involving various kinetic, water, plant, structural or decorative elements that can belong to the same art. Therefore aesthetic educational role of artists or commissioners is that of the responsibility of clergy and believers to place in sacred spaces appropriate artefacts.

If a huge religious statue would have been built as a millenary emblem of a town, naturally it would still seem stylistically new or unusual, unlike many votive monumental crosses over the country. A work of art could be easily perceived as a goddess, while its dominating scale may actually come from the priority of replacement of local emblematic Communist monument, instead of ini-

⁴ Often as reconsidered post-communist heritage shared and contested among neighbour countries and regions of same denomination, supposedly because of mental legacy of dialectical materialism.

⁵ Portrait of His Beatitude Exarch Joseph I of Bulgaria, by Cyril Todorov (1902–1987), created probably in 1940s, placed at Saint Nicholas church in Smolyan and later at the southern wall of Saint Nedelya Cathedral Church near exarch's grave with a stone cross, on his birthday – 5 May 2015, on the occasion of 100th anniversary of his repose and 175th year from his birth, by church historian and his researcher prof. Christo Temelsky, and opened after memorial liturgy and service on 13 June 2015. Photo: L. Galabova 30 October 2015.

tial destination of the project to the quite higher position of the pillar with renovated lighted and moving red pentagram in Sofia. An enormous figure of Madonna can be placed on the top of thematically devoted patron chapel (not yet being constructed as a hollow figure with small temple inside), and become part of sculptural-architectural ensemble near an excavated basilica, but if it does not quite satisfy traditional demands of believers, also an enormous church-shaped belfry can be built nearby later to correct and precise Eastern Orthodox Christian church perception and reception, as in Haskovo. Perfected reality of depiction of saints in three-dimensional shapes can result even in appearance of whole real-size human figure dressed in precious textile liturgical costume, with polychromatic face as wax sculptures with eye inlay. It is natural for artists to do their best to find, document and explore specific personal identities, expressions, even hidden almost all the time (Boshev 2007: 133), and use in their work human models different from themselves, and already embodying states or moods that can represent religious life. Church art has also the option to use eye incrustation, instead of eyelets usually depicting pupils in sculptural works and thus affecting even best illusion of vividness or artistic perfection. Aesthetic choices to depict historical saint with closed eyes, or looking downwards to his writings is as strange as the effect of some source of light shining through the eyes of statue in the dark as in a famous precedental case.

Answers about Sculpture in Eastern Orthodox Christianity from Cultural Practice and Church Ethos

Comparison of recent Bulgarian practices of creating monuments, reliefs, iconostases, and wooden statues with state of art in neighbour and other denominationally or culturally similar spaces, and especially with spectacular ideologised nationalist theological discourses of recent monumental art in Northern Macedonia and Russian Federation including many high-level representations of sacred personages is hardly explained artistically or aesthetically. Among few experts discussing difficult topic as Easter Orthodox Christian sculpture (Yazyikova 2012: 1, Gould et al. 2020), being involved or not in real creative experience, contemporary Russian theoreticians of church art prefer religious statuettes in art expositions and home decoration, not specifying if their idea of church sculpture is influenced by fascinating festive figurines of angels and mangers or other popular souvenirs, and children or scenic arts. Portable sculptures seem more independent compared to monumental sculptures of saints outside sacred spaces where they do not belong, as public art having to be adequate to place and time, and as church art expected to reveal reality larger than their own (Yazyikova 2012: 7). Monument sacralisation service that had been refused to first Russian monuments of saint in the past, recently also would not contribute to quality and function of statues as canonical patriotic works of Vyacheslav Klyikov (Yazyikova; 2012: 5). Like architectural sculpture decorating some Russian churches in last centuries, well-documented contemporary saints appear naturally in sculptural portraits or 3D icons by excellent sculptors as Nikolay Shmatko who managed to depict canonically the difficult and relevantly new iconography

of Theotokos as Abbess of Holly Mount Athos in 2004, even better than a painting would allow and on the high level of his fine artworks among which the Crucifix seems too realistic to be an icon.

Every sculptural material and technique could be understood through biblical ideas as creation and giving soul to the human moulded from earth, recovery by Christ's healing of the blind one, Pauline explanations of spirit-soul-body relation and many examples from works and lives of saints throughout live holly church tradition. Monumentality or fragility⁶, symbolic meaning of white or gold colour of sculptures, internal light and lighting⁷ could be also a good direction of Eastern Orthodox Christian Church thoughts to a perspective providing grounds for adequate discussion and evaluation of sculptural art. Round but flat and polychromatic stylised and almost iconic statues of Saint George, Saint Nicholas, and saint Paraskeve by Master Ermolyn, like wooden sculptures from foreign art collection of the National Art Gallery in Sofia do not demonstrate real transition from high relief, that can be more sculptural with its undercuts, although they actually stand without supports, and are created in 3D.

Among photographs documenting the life of Soviet Saint Luke of Crimea there is an episode demonstrating that there was no church theological problem for him to be a live model to a distinguished sculptor for a portrait from nature. When archbishop was gradually glorified and venerated, still increasing variety of images on icons⁸, portraits and sculptures appeared there, some of them memorialising his image as protector of healthcare. Local state and church authorities would not have needed any anthropological restorations from incorruptible relics, although in his life this saint had been a doctor, a surgeon, and a renowned specialist in anatomic topography, having illustrated his medical studies as an artist. Even if he had a self-portrait, its religious value would be unconditional.

Scientific restoration of the face of Saint Nicholas according to visual 3D data from his relics generally reappraised his identity visible in icons through centuries. Similar approach to a righteous saint– the Russian imperial admiral Theodore Ushakov, who had lived in 18th and 19th centuries, and was glorified in 2005 resulted in anatomically sculptured face that did not quite match his artistic official portraits painted from nature and later used for stylisation into icons. Naval monument of the saint admiral at the Black sea cape Kaliakra near Kavarna in Bulgaria continued the role of a memorial plate at a historical battle site. Architectural project included bells representing the boats from Ushakov's fleet and

⁶ As surrealist works of Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti that could also embody the idea of incorporeality, compared to monumental and miniature works of Georgi Chapkanov, and human-size metal sculptures of saints of Krum Damyanov and monumental metal angels of Krassimir Dzhidrov that express power, unity, and live presence and patronage as sitting figure of Serbian patriarch Pavle and monuments of two popes in Bulgaria.

⁷ As in the works of Ivan Russev and his project on stone cave city in Art centre Ilin-dentsy that could remind of many religious ideas and represent various artistic concepts, without presupposition an dominant or central one.

⁸ Icon of the saint as artwork depicting him in whole figure came out not alike his photographs, and the painter was going to adjust the image to the prototype, when miraculous events occurred in response to his veneration in Greece.

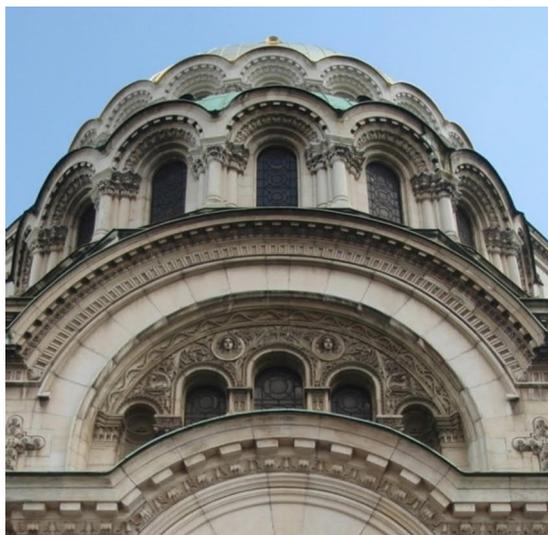
visually followed the improvised design of bell, stand at Alexander Nevsky Memorial Church of Ascension Monastery at Bakadzika in Yambol in the same clerical district.

Near the monastery there is a spring cave chapel of Samaritan woman (Saint Photinya, or Svetlana) with exemplary primitive three-dimensionally sculptured figures and relief commemorative wall decorations by foreign author, related to miraculous finding of water by historical Russian white émigré monastery and church community in Varna and its member Photinya (Bukassova-Bogoslova 2011: 77). Rebuilt and recently restored as quite a primitive polychrome sculpture, this unusual for Bulgaria work of folk sacred art and recent tourist attraction for pilgrims is a model for monochrome stone chiselled chapel-like drinking fountain (*cheshma*, *cheshmichka*) representing Christ and Samaritan Woman at Saint Petka⁹ convent in Klisura Convent near Bankya and Sofia. Expression or commemoration of shared Russian Eastern Orthodox Christian Church heritage with considerable impact on Bulgarian spiritual soil, such a work of art commemorates abbess Drosyda-Maria who renewed the sacred site in the middle of the 20th century.

Later on the convent was decorated with ornate church graffiti as visual alternative to the white sculpture enclosed in the structure of two huge stone blocks, without any inscription or description, except a printed label preventing from drinking the water. Placed in the middle of the yard as an usual drinking fountain, at a ground level just at the path in the grass between the lanes, this interesting sculptural composition is unrecognisable as artistic interpretation of a sacred scene, and its key iconographic elements representing divine and saint personages are quite alike functional points of a wash basin. On the other hand, such sculpted architectonic fountain-close local tradition may have inspired the sculpture of Theotokos and Christ carved on a round stone (*morena*) at the church well near Saints Joachim and Anne convent at Bistritsa in Sofia, where also lived Russian eldress popular in the past.

In processes of reconsidering socialist memorial spaces and landscapes, and invention of new monumentality religious sacralisation had been related to church split and supposedly double aesthetic standards, therefore contemporary art was suppressed by refusal to bless clerically inappropriate memorials. Hence future sculptures were supplied with chapels, crosses, and belfries, memorial artistic chapels, some of which with post-communist devotion to new martyrs, remained opened for individual prayers, others were reshaped or not approved and fully consecrated, but hosted some religious services and gatherings on public occasions, and hardly any old monument was replaced by a new clerical one. Monument of church charitable beggar Dobry who became live inspiration for many works of art was supplied by authors – teacher and students from stone carving school, with donation box. Even in his sculptural portrait, depicted stand-

⁹ Local chapels at holly wells or drinking fountains are sometimes devoted to Saint Petka or Paraskeve, and unlike Ukrainian local tradition of chapel pools (*kupalnya*) devoted to various saints, they are usually smaller.



ing or sitting, that emblematic old man dressed in traditional clothes was to keep collecting donations for churches.

Example of acceptance of old sculpture as icon in Eastern Orthodox Christian Church is a 3D throne marble figure of Theotokos (*Sokolichka*) with Christ as Child at Sokolitsa Convent near Kosovska Mitrovitsa, related also to local cultural situation. Placed by migrants in early 14th century at the main portal of Ban'ska monastery built by Saint King Stephen Miloutin, this sculpture

was attached to architectural structure and had flat stone nimbuses preserved nowadays only partially as the still visible traces of canonical colouring of the figures. The folds of the garments are engraved in almost graphical or glyptic manner, although the whole artwork is voluminous. Nowadays this sculpture is travelling even overseas for exhibitions in museums, and is usually placed and venerated as miracle-working patron icon in the first register of bright mural paintings of church nave in a niche with a golden apse.

At the beginning of 20th century Neobyzantine heritage stylisation as most traditional Neoromantic modern art and social movement before secession innovation (Vlassov 1998: 376–380; Angelov 2014; Angelov 2016) invented several Russian projects in Bulgaria accomplished by international teams. As earlier in Russian imperial art, in Bulgaria there were patterns of type architectural projects that defined particular models for building Eastern Orthodox Christian Churches in order to limit high valuable Western stylistic and personal participation in the sector by aesthetic and patriotic arguments¹⁰. Building and decorating of Saint Alexander Nevsky Bulgarian Patriarchal Cathedral¹¹, did not include woodcarved elements that had become traditional in Postbyzantine church art influenced by Baroque, neither implied anthropomorphic decoration that was considered non-canonical from Eastern Orthodox Christian Church perspective (Obretenov 1980:

¹⁰ Distinguished public figure, artist and researcher of folk devotional and grave crosses Ivan Enchev-Vidiy was among initiators of architectural imitation limiting for several decades any competition and creativity in modern Bulgarian church architecture of his time to patriotic following of set of archaic models of sacral building that had to be extrapolated, without regard of actual appreciation of contemporary arts by high clergy, elite, and people.

¹¹ Triforium of the Southern façade of Saint Alexander Church, probably designed by architects as almost the whole ensemble, and sculptured by William Gross and Kiselinchev brothers. Photo: L. Galabova, 7 July 2011.

21–23)¹², but relied on geometrical floral and zoomorphic motifs and sculptural artworks in stone and some metal elements.

Built in restoration manner of Neo-Yaroslav school (Vlassov 1998: 620–622), Saint Nicholas Russian Church in Sofia combined wood with ceramic iconostasis, while Nativity of Christ church of the Russian Monastery in Shipka, relied on gilded wood and metal in later Russian artistic style, and included relief cherubim. Fine marble interior and exterior sculptural elements and decorations of Saint Alexander Nevsky Church, having pretended to represent best Eastern Orthodox Christian traditions achieved by its time (Radkova 1999: 70–71), as its other contemporary Bulgarian religious building¹³, was actually international work of art, especially in regard of architecture, decoration, and sculpture (Radkova 1999: 45–47). Therefore sculpture was part of theological design and included angel faces under the two domes of the narthex, representing Saint Mathew among the symbols of evangelists from the envision of Prophet Ezekiel (1: 4–28), and also two medallions with cherubim faces in triforiums of lateral façades. Placing symbols of evangelist saints at the outer sides of narthex devoted to Russian and Bulgarian saints and their Christianisation history, architects came closer to Western practice to crown churches with sacred sculpture.

Decisions of Religious and Theological Aesthetic Problems by Best Developments of Sculptural Arts

Church developed sacred art and inspired artists to work on religious topics with pious intention to praise God with all available means in continuation of initial biblical ideas of development of spirituality varying from higher culture of pagan peoples and powerful to attract them to new approach to eternal supernatural reality. Church art of sculpture implies sacralisation of valuable materials as gold and silver, marble and precious stones, bright natural pigments and glass, not just to demonstrate church prosperity and power. Church architecture and landscape are to represent unimaginable and incorruptible beauty of the world beyond and also the value of inner ascetic life of spiritual fragrance as reflection and expectation of salvation as it is expressed by the richer decoration of church interiors.

Sculpture had been excluded from church art processes only partially, and occasionally, although there were sculptures of cherubim from gilded olive wood on the Ark of the Covenant, as well as in Holy of Holies at Salomon temple, where all building and yard were decorated with floral, zoomorphic, and angelic motifs, and sculpted forms were well represented, which is documented in books Exodus and Kings. There were sculptures in early Christian and Byzantine tradi-

¹² Nowadays the interior of patriarchal temple-monument includes woodcarved icon stand (*proskinitarion*) decorated in the best Balkan traditions to hold the replica of It is Truly Meet icon called *Dostoyno Est* in Slavonic, and *Axion Estin* in Greek, celebrated in relation to a miracle story of a church hymn, and emblematic for Hagiorite Slavic presence, heritage, and festal life of Mount Athos.

¹³ Patron architectural reliefs from early 1930s, representative for academic modernisation of local church art, and followed by even more contemporary depiction of saints by the same sculptors. Photo: L. Galabova, 28 December 2017.

tions of complying with the background of neophytes that were aware of sculptural artistic expression and cultural phenomenon and could distinguish craft from function of artefacts as polytheist idolatry and emperor cult. Discussions on church art through centuries focused on regulating the link of church aesthetics and ascetics, on the model demonstrated by the apparel of Christ dressed in vestments thoroughly made by Theotokos in the best tradition of the craft of priests' garments, and besides the ascetic life of Holy family in poverty, humility and charity.

Religious sculpture is more than just a portrait of a saint, depiction of divine person, illustration of sacred history, decoration of church space and personification or symbolic representation of faith by piety. Understood as a live embodiment or liturgical tool, nowadays church art is to be the same combination of contemporary opportunities and traditional roles. Church arts in general are part of religious missions, including technological and informational opportunities, virtual and augmented realities up to ideas of hologram or robotised liturgical participation and keep its theological sense¹⁴. In particular, extreme artistic objec-



tivity of informational aesthetics (Angelov 2014: 83-85) combined with modernist ignorance of issue of truth and authenticity¹⁵ would completely live aside the question “what” (Angelov 2014: 141) together with dialectic materialism or idealism as cause of uncreative return to history of aesthetic ideas and ground to interpret even church art in post-socialist and postmodern culture (Angelov 2014: 85-86) close to actual aesthetic interplay

and celebration (Angelov 2014: 141–146) that is also theologically related with church hierotopy.

One of the best practical reasons to place stone or metal engraving¹⁶ or relief, mosaics, ceramics, majolica or polymer, instead of fresco, woodcarved, painted, paper, glass or plastic icon at the patron niche above the church gates and on Western and Northern parts of temple exterior is sustainability. Stone relief only

¹⁴ Like the installation “My Mind”, art thesis by Jakub Hadrava from 2012 in old abandoned Czech Saint George Church in Lukova, depicting former parishioners by hollow plaster figures in veils sitting on church benches like ghost having been partly rematerialised from invisible world not just to attract tourists.

¹⁵ Notion hardly related to decorative arts and crafts (Angelov 2014: 85–86) and hence to icon painting defined according to its utilization, and any church art qualified as applied, without option to create fine works.

¹⁶ Recent graphic and metal interpretations of a portrait painted by Peter Milev after a photograph of Saint Seraphim Sobolev, and having functioned as an icon at the same place. Photo: L. Galabova, 25 February 2016.

needs a protective cover if it had not initially been built in the architecture, and if birds used to nest contaminate the place, which is also good reason to close the windows of belfry. More or less flat low or high relief “in any suitable material”, as cannons prescribe, can be a strict 3D replica of popular or high art graphic or colour image with its well-known iconography in a shape of durable artefact that could be easily obtained and cleaned.

Sculptural icon can also be used as a model for 2D images¹⁷, and 3D copies, depending on its original value, as for example wooden sculptures and reliefs¹⁸ from Ochrid, as any detail from old Balkan stone iconostases with colourful in-tarsia and early chiselled church sculptures, and with late woodcarved decoration including many figurines, sometimes gilded and painted, and running over or hanging from architectonic structures. Well preserved and restored pieces of art are reproduction not only as church gifts, new decoration, souvenirs, brands, etc. In liturgical practice it is also well as in art studio, to keep the documentation, project, and even 3D forms as models and moulds of artworks in order to be able to revitalise some details that are usually worn out from touching, footsteps, kissing, holding, or wholly displaced and melted reliefs or sculptures¹⁹.

Historical clerical persons celebrated in Bulgaria even in communist years were well-represented in academic art all through 20th century. Even when their sculptures increased in



number, varied in style, differed in iconography, became part of huge memorials, and did not look adequately to their church image, relation to their personalities deserved respect in sacred and civic public spaces, at their graves, in institutions named after them, in settlements and communities of their memorialisation and patronage. During the last three decades of social changes along reinvention of

¹⁷ Function explored in tourist and pilgrim souvenir production, also good for artistic education and inspiration, suitable for documental replicas of church artefacts kept in museums, and in cases of risk of improper restoration, resocialisation, relocation, and maintenance, or commercialisation by inclusion of traditional folk and art motifs in new cultural practices without any ontological grounds or references.

¹⁸ Patron woodcarved icon at the Southern door of village church, with a more voluminous Cherubim framing its arch (as well as front door, where wings differ and head is stone sculptured), and beneath external murals of life scene, altogether placed at the part of the building that faces the road. Photo: L. Galabova, 27 September 2017.

¹⁹ As in the case of memorial drinking fountain in the park of Saint Sofia Church in Sofia by Mina Ivanov.

church practices many hidden or lost sculptural works of disregarded clerical leaders, artist, and church topics were found, restored, studied, and socialised. There emerged rustic exterior wooden statues, chainsaw deadwood carving or trunk art developed to depiction of general saints in monastery yards. New monuments and reliefs of saints appeared in stone, metal, and wood, while at the same time their scale was gradually being reduced for close-up perception.

Authentic practice of sculpture as contemporary art, including religious motives, reception or socialisation is to correspond adequately to recent time as part of artistic reality that only in future could be defined as a style as soon as it would not be disputable and would stand perpetual consumer reconsidering and devaluation by eclectic of old and new methods (Vlassov 1998: 527–530). Sculpture is recovering after a period of socialist realism that would hardly be defined as style, because of artificial withdrawal from stylistics, loss of interest in artistic form, and imitative processes related to creative indifference, centralised, over-subsidised, controlled, planned and regulated cultural sector (Vlassov 1998: 531–533). Socialist heritage preservation intensified the exploration of old church art on a number of civic purposes, providing medieval studies with direct access to internal principles of traditional crafts including its theology, while egalitarian cultural policies implied opportunities to overcome aesthetic deficits by socialisation.

Shorter and smaller in scale than Soviet period of socialist art, Bulgarian second half of 20th century included reorganisation of artistic life that took longer and did not affect church ethos or result in development of church sculpture. Among old school sculptors as teachers, school founders (Boshev 2011), and model of several contemporary generations²⁰, Ivan Lazarov (Boshev 2007) was famous as pioneer of ceramic sculpture



²⁰ Rich heritage of contemporary local sculptors, woodcarvers and ceramics as Dalchev, Gondov, Terziev, Donchev, Damyanov, Minekovs, Koychev, Starchev, Russev, Danchev, Tsanevs, Manollov, Dzhidrov, Konzova, Donevs, Atanasov, Bonev, etc., and works of new generation include more or less recognizable and presupposed by creative process religious, biblical and church themes and motives as Pieta, Adam and Eve, Motherhood or Theotokos, Angels, Shepherds, Nativity, Holly family, Cross, Saints: apostles,



(Vassilchina 1990). As one of inventors of Neoromantic revival of Old Bulgarian style, he worked on church topics, and portrayed praying people, monks in their everyday life, saints and episodes of their life in reliefs, figurines, statues, and monuments in various materials from marble to majolica. As every sculptor he had to consider the risk of representing venerable saints kneeling, barefooted, and without their obligatory monastic veil, nimbus or inscriptions, and also face the challenge to represent them in round figures not attached to architecture or any surface, and hence with visible backside (Genova 1990: 32) that could hardly find theological interpretation. Compared to his colleagues²¹ who had only one or several religious works, mainly monumental, Lazarov vastly explored the same opportunities that Western academic art had given to many Eastern Orthodox Christian countries through guest sculptors and foreign education of Bulgarians.

Portable church artefacts as old candle holders²² follow models from Zograf Athonite and Bachkovo Stavropegial monasteries, and their wooden equivalents at the Crypt icon collection in Sofia, as well as works from 19th century Kassly casting school of Ural (Vlassov, 1998: 271–272). Cherubim and lions are represented close to candles at children's level only occasionally and in parish conditions provide focusing of the interest of young church members along liturgical life. Angels at the doors, lions at the episcopal throne, eagles at the ambo, and doves at the iconostasis are clearer as church symbols, as Theophany, Theotokos Life-giving Source, Christ and Samaritan woman, or patron saints at the fountain, not necessarily instead of fishes, birds, flowers or vines²³.

teachers, George, Nicholas, John, Christian symbols, temples, and heterodox topics as: Ghandi, Vanga, Saint Sofia, Orpheus, etc.

²¹ Several generation sculptors having worked in Bulgaria in the first half of 20th century and their disciples as Vassilev, Shats, Spiridonov, Kisselinchevs, Gross, Shivarov, Pavlov, Zidarov, Nikolov, Todorov, Markov, Parashchuk, Dalchev, Peykov, Emanuilova, Georgieva, Ramadanov, Ivanov, Vladov, Iliev, Funev, etc., many of them working in several art genres and materials.

²² Work of applied art combining geometric, floral, zoomorphic, and anthropomorphic elements in expression also of Trinitarian concept, and elaborating aesthetically three dimensions. Photo: L. Galabova, 13 April 2014.

²³ Main fountain-phiale for blessing of water at the renovated Tsarnogorski Saints Kosma and Damian Monastery near Giginty combines sculptural forms of lions and birds on the standing spring under a spectacular dome depicting Theophany in many scenes of the episodes of the biblical event, painted by Krassimir Assenov. And there is also a recent relief sculptural image of deceased contemporary monk-donor portrayed in full profile and with glasses, to document his earthly role by placement of such memorial plate near church gates.



Miniature wooden carvings, as Raphael Cross from Rilla Stavropegial Monastery, represent iconography of whole temple as visual Gospel. Post-byzantine monastic craft of miniature relief followed medieval principles of Eastern Orthodox Church art even when its metal decoration provided by carvers to donators became baroque (Angelov 1999: 303). Traditional ascetical craft manner in church art implies veneration and piety all through the stages of any art project that often artists document or keep as artefacts

(Justiniano 2019), and in this way final result remains abstained from parody as legitimate attitude and expression from purely aesthetic perspective. Church miniatures are sometimes of such a high quality that they can be directly magnified to monumental scale, without clear aesthetic or theological borderline to limit the image in human pursuit of representation of endless nature of the divine, except ascetic humiliation expressed in a more sober approach to experiments in church art.

Spiritual and practical regulations of sacred artistic representation of fourth dimension by third and second ones are not written, but a matter of pastoral and iconographic improvisation²⁴ in the best actual interest of involved community. Mystical view on church art is based on a presupposition that live heritage represented in more or less valuable material movable and immovable objects is focused by perception of images, forms, and by choice of scopes in order to support or reveal liturgical prayer and sacramental communion by art and its creative processes. Negative aesthetic phenomena, which are not implicitly considered to be culturally improper in postmodern art (Angelov 2014: 142), as long as many such principles of old church art that had been neglected by academic approaches, as for example simultaneity (Angelov 2014: 179) have emerged to inspire contemporary art. In cyberspace that provides global access to live religious cultural heritage, church sculpture deserves focused theological discussion and visual communication (Facebook group ICONOPLASTICA. 2019). Exchange of views and experiences on new issues communicates also aesthetic attitudes, as for example in the cases of water gilded icon surfaces that reflect image of praying person, or granite graphic icons engraved on black polished surface that mir-

²⁴ Element of church gates (supposedly around 1990s) with main feasts dedicated to New Testament sacred events: Annunciation scene is depicted in quite an artistic manner, which testifies professional excellence. At the same time, there is no strong direct parallel to specific stylistic model that would allow church replicating of that particular composition in other materials and techniques. Photo: L. Galabova, 23 October 2017.

ror surrounding environment including it in the images as a landscape background of divine and saint personages and scenes.

Eastern Orthodox Christian church tradition acknowledges the high value of aesthetic opportunities of sculpture in its all variety of artistic means of expression, religious propriety and social-cultural potential. Live and material heritage of the art of sculpture provides architectural interiors and exteriors, as well as landscapes with focal points, emblematic elements, places of memory or structures of decoration of public space and therefore it deserves special care, sustainable transmission of its practice of creation and preservation, conservation and restoration of its artefacts, including presentation, documentation and research. Maintenance of sculptures as works of art and not as mere objects of everyday life implies professional insurance, optimal exposition, careful relocation, provided security, and valuable socialisation.



Veneration through sculpted images as representation of church personages and plots, as elements of decoration²⁵, sacralisation or ideologisation of public or private space, and as religious element of civic events and ceremonial spaces, is not as problematic as in the theological context of any idolatry or even strict iconolatry. Created by artists diverse in professional background, cultural belonging, personal choices, and social orientations, artefacts of three- and four-dimensional design are result of tradition of historical aesthetic outcomes and recent genre developments²⁶. Actualisation of art attitudes provides expression in various visual languages and codes and perception by intuition that could hardly be defined just as feeling of church art, grasping of religious topic, reflecting on denominational identity, responding to spiritual inspiration, representing of stylistic preference, or even as promoting of church affiliation. Instead of concern “if”, and responsibility to define “what”, competence in questions “how” and “why” acquire importance in the discussion of the place of art and craft of sculpting in contemporary church life, overcoming materiality by spirituality, as in the art of

²⁵ Sculptural ceramic relief image of Cherubim, represents a motive in church art that is angelic personage, but is often perceived as a symbolic decoration, and stylisation. Photo and artwork: L. Galabova, 27 January 2014.

²⁶ Sculpture from 1990s in the park near memorial chapel dedicated to Saint John of Rilla, combining the iconography of other historical local saints, but without a halo or cross. Photo: L. Galabova, 23 December 2015.

sculpture, where third dimension is simply a stage to understand and imagine the eternal fourth dimension.

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