*Wladimir Weidlé*

# ON BYZANTINE PAINTING

Except for scholarly works dealing with well-defined problems, writings on Byzantine art rarely fail to arouse in the reader some disquiet, some perplexity, regarding the aggregate of this art—its distinctive characteristics and essential values. The following remarks, confined to painting, are designed solely to clarify the foregoing statement, to indicate why it is justifiable, and to retrace, if possible, the genesis of such a state of affairs.

## I. KNOWLEDGE AND EVALUATION

The progress of Byzantine studies is more than evident; it is spectacular. However, where art is concerned, knowledge is not enough, and what needs to be added to the scientific knowledge no longer stems from science and cannot be obtained by its methods.

The study of Byzantine art is special in the sense that it is not historically rooted in a spontaneous, prescientific love of Byzantine form. Science as such has nothing to contribute here. Many historians of art, to say nothing of historians generally, are convinced that a penchant for a particular art, perhaps merely the attention paid to the quality of a work, can only mar the scrupulous objectivity of scientific investiga-

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tion. Actually, however, the history of art, like that of literature or music, cannot become a rigidly objective discipline that eschews all value judgments, for the very scope of such a history is determined on the basis of value judgments. Hence interpretation is hardly possible without constant recourse to them. In fact, the only possible result of a refusal to judge is to substitute the existing opinions of others for one's own. Here the historian may choose one of three alternatives: first, he can content himself with the opinion of his contemporaries (if it is available); second, he can accept the traditional view (which is usually based upon the opinions of contemporaries but is seldom accurately transmitted); or, third, he might prefer the judgment of historians or critics of a not-too-distant past who, either in fact or in principle, challenge the demand for scientific objectivity. Should he exercise such a preference (this, after all, is the most common practice), he would be consenting to live off of capital acquired in a way which he himself considers fraudulent. If, on the other hand, he selects either of the first two alternatives, his principles would compel him to ratify evaluations which very likely were made hastily, superficially, or reiterated through sheer habit. The traditional appraisal of a work, or of an entire art, can be of the greatest value to us, but only if we are allowed to examine it freely, to accept or reject it as we wish. First of all, however, it has to exist, and its development, its roots, must be sufficiently familiar to us.

The foundations of an evaluation of ancient art had been established by a tradition that originated in antiquity itself; it was renewed by the Renaissance and investigated and enriched by Winckelmann and the enthusiastic classicism of his epoch. An appreciation of Italian art was provided by Vasari and by Ghiberti before him, but even more by the triumph and the European prestige of Italy's classical art. Thus, from the outset, a study of both these arts might be based not only on a certain number of acquired judgments but also on a living and creative acceptance of the whole. Actually, many evaluations have been revised, many enthusiasms redirected, but Phidias retains his place, and, despite increasing regard for the primitives, for Caravaggio and the mannerists, no one challenges the central position of the great Italian works of the beginning of the sixteenth century. In both these cases historical investigation has never lost contact with spontaneous feeling for artistic values. As for the medieval art of the West, particularly Gothic art, in spite of all that it may owe to Du Cange or Montfaucon, it, too, really flourished only after the German and English romantics "discovered"



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it. They were the founders of a tradition that in some way supplemented one which we lacked, that is to say, one which extends as far back as the Middle Ages itself. Here again scientific exploration is grafted onto a direct intuition of values—something that escapes science and that science regards with suspicion.

There is nothing like this, or almost nothing, in the genesis of studies on Byzantine art. No tradition exists, either ancient or recent, that can contribute to an understanding of its proper values. Moreover, those who have studied it during the last century and until recently were not even aware of this lack because, in the great majority of cases, they were scarcely preoccupied with these values. They were scholars and historians, often first-rate ones; but a work of art interested them from every possible point of view save that of art. For example, N. P. Kondakov was a great scholar. His writings on the subject of icons represent a milestone in that field, but in his opinion the icon was but a document of religious or general history. Its attributes as a work of art escaped him or, in any case, were a matter of indifference to him. If today the attitude of Russian historians of Byzantine art (or of the medieval art of Russia) is no longer the same, this is due, first of all, to the salutary shock produced by the discovery, between 1908 and 1914, of what these ancient icons truly represented from the standpoint of artistic quality. When one came to understand the real value of Roubliov's "Trinity" and, a little later, of Vladimir's "Virgin"—that sublime Greek icon of the twelfth century—then, first, the painting of icons and later all Byzantine painting or all painting in the Byzantine tradition became infused with the light of a new day. And if the worthiest history of Byzantine painting, the most balanced, and the one that gives the best description of the values of art proper to Byzantium is the survey by V. N. Lazarev published ten years ago in Moscow, this is largely due to the direct impact of a few great works, which, until the beginning of this century, had remained unknown or disregarded.

It is true that the author's training and intellectual equipment, which are those of a historian of art rather than of a Byzantinist, likewise explain the excellence of his work. But historians of art are not all capable of immediately perceiving artistic values, nor are they even inclined to do so, particularly in view of the absence of any evaluative tradition. It was not solely Otto Demus' training at the Vienna school that enabled him to distinguish for the first time between the Saint Mark mosaics in Venice and the authentically Byzantine ones of Greece,



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although the difference is striking. He, too, it was who explained the aesthetic rules that governed the mural decorations of Byzantine churches of the great epoch, an aspect which had been entirely neglected. Several generations of scholars, historians as well as art critics, simply had not been able to see what he saw; unanimously, they introduced the Saint Mark mosaics as a perfect example of the purely Byzantine style. However, the dissemination of Demus' study and of Lazarev's work (not, as yet, translated) has so far remained very limited, even among specialists. Evaluation scarcely coincides with or supports the outcome of investigation, and this renders it incomplete and sometimes falsifies the results. The history of Byzantine art is a magnificent field. But we should start to think about clearing it out a little in order to have an unimpeded view of the ground upon which the future edifice will be built.

## II. TWO PREJUDICES

Without evaluation, there can be no choice, but, without choice, there can be no history. This is why, wholly confusedly and even unwittingly, there have always been both evaluation and choice. The tradition that was lacking was replaced by two others—those which regulated the evaluation of ancient and modern art—or rather by criteria that were deduced from their mélange and that had fallen, so to speak, into the public domain. A certain figurative resemblance, a certain "precision" in design, combined with some brilliance of color plus attitudes and motifs resembling, however little, "the ancient"—these constitute the entire arsenal of ideas that has been pressed into service in order to achieve an understanding and appraisal of Byzantine form. The description (quite meritorious in other respects) of the Greek manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale which Gustave-Frédéric Waagen published in 1839 should be read if one wishes to assess, not the time gone by since then, but the slowness with which academico-realist prejudice disappears in this domain—a phenomenon which the author illustrates with such disarming artlessness. In 1943 the late Philipp Schweinfurth, a well-known historian of Byzantine painting, not only unreservedly approved Waagen's opinions but became such an ardent admirer of them that he dedicated to Waagen's memory a work aptly entitled *Die byzantinische Form*. As if this form could be deduced from the antiquated virtuosities which the former director of the Berlin Museum, and so many other scholars after him, have pointed out,



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always with the same satisfaction, in the illuminated manuscripts of the *Psautier de Paris* and of *The Homilies* by Saint Gregory of Nazianzus!

These two famous manuscripts (Gr. 139 and Gr. 510) are not quite of the same date, nor are they similar in every way. However, they do have two common characteristics: a total lack of style and some real "beauty," which, to be sure, is disunited and belongs to an outmoded aesthetics—incompatible, one might say, with what Byzantine art was soon to become. Nothing has retarded the understanding of authentically Byzantine artistic values so much as the spell cast upon historians by such figures as the "Night" or the "Melody" of the *Psautier,* or Jacob drowsing at the foot of his ladder in *The Homilies.* Waagen (applauded by Schweinfurth) commented that Jacob's posture was "so noble, true and free" that he preferred it to "Raphael's famous figure" in the Vatican loggias. There is, of course, this difference between Waagen and the modern historians: Waagen believed that Byzantine art was devoid of any value—he prized only the suggestions of antiquity which he delighted to find in it—whereas modern historians hold that Byzantine art itself had recovered some prestige, thanks to its apparent resemblances to ancient art. Both these positions are equally fallacious. When Schweinfurth compares the mosaics of Daphnis with the "Attic bas-reliefs of the great period," when André Grabar (in his *Peinture byzantine*) alludes to them as the "lesson of classical art," neither is wrong (particularly if Grabar is really thinking, as is Schweinfurth, of Greek art, not Greco-Roman art). But very few historians seem to realize that the Byzantine style would never have reached maturity, would never have achieved its classical phase, had it not previously rejected all the retrospective virtuosity, all the derivative beauty, that abounds in the *Psautier* and, to a lesser degree, in Paris's "Gregory."

To judge Byzantine art on the basis of these two manuscripts would be like judging the great Latin poetry of the Middle Ages in terms of the Carolingian centos of those of the lower Empire. "Precious" and "splendid" indeed they are (these adjectives are from the excellent exposition catalogue, *Byzance et la France médiévale,* which the Bibliothèque Nationale is offering us this year); a verse in a cento of Vergil's is quite as Vergilian as one in the *Aeneid.* However, both of these errant manuscripts or collections of documents, worthy as they are of the most thorough investigation, should not deter us from making two



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distinctions that are absolutely mandatory if we are to understand an art for which, in a certain sense, they surely pave the way but to which they do not yet belong. First, one must single out more rigidly than is generally done the spontaneous survivals of Hellenistic painting as they are manifested up to the eighth century, in the West as well as in the East, the "reversions to ancient art" which, here and there, in the course of the ensuing centuries, have stimulated the production of copies and imitations. An eminent historian of the art of the late Middle Ages, Géza de Francovich, recently stressed this distinction with his usual vigor in connection with the Castelseprio frescoes, discovered in 1944. Kurt Weitzmann, followed by other scholars, places these frescoes in too close a relationship to the manuscripts we have been discussing, in the interest of attributing the frescoes as well as the manuscripts to the Macedonian "renaissance." Actually, the laborious virtuosity (yet not lacking in "dead" spots) of the *Psautier* miniaturists has nothing in common with the freedom, the ease of touch and composition which are the principal characteristics of the master of Castelseprio. But the second distinction is no less important. It differentiates between Byzantine art (or its style), properly speaking, and everything that precedes or even foreshadows it. It contrasts the classical phase of an essentially medieval style with the still living art of vanishing antiquity (Hellenistic, Romanized, Christianized) as well as with all the reversions to this art, manifestly deliberate and artificial.

It is only when confronted with the great works of the eleventh and twelfth centuries that one realizes what Byzantine art really is—when, for example, one sees the mosaics of Santa Sophia (but not those that date from before the year 1000), or the "Crucifixion" and "Anastasius" of Daphnis, the apsis of Cephalus, the frescoes of Nerezi and Vladimir, the few icons of that period preserved in Russia or in the Mount Sinai monastery (these have recently been published by Mr. and Mrs. G. Sotiriou), or, of course, certain illuminated manuscripts, such as the Gospels of this same Sinai monastery (204) and those of Parma (Palat. 5) or of Paris (Gr. 64 and Gr. 74).

These works are neither imitative nor classical in spirit. They are classical by the same token and in the same sense as are Greek works between the archaic and the Hellenistic epochs, as those of central Italy between the *quattrocento* and mannerism, or as the creations of the image and the glassmakers of the Île de France at the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth. As for spiritual content,



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Byzantine creative art draws closer to French Gothic art at a time when the latter, too, reached its classical stage (which is why the Byzantine influence was so favorable to it at that moment). But the spontaneous symmetry which is proper to Byzantine art and which is so harmonious with the natural organicity of the human form reveals its more hidden affinity to Greek art, that is to say, to the major factors constantly at work in this art which never for a moment isolated itself from its history. Only a patient stylistic analysis of these works, of how they differ from their predecessors, together with a general survey of the entire subsequent development of Byzantine painting and Byzantine art, can lead to a proper understanding. But this task has scarcely been begun; in order to see it through, one must at the very outset rid one's self of a second prejudice, more recent in origin than the first but quite as harmful and tenacious. Since it is the exact counterpart of the first, we might call it the antirealist or anti-academic prejudice.

A great Byzantine scholar, Grabar, writes in his book, *Byzantine Painting:* "Byzantine works have only been aesthetically appreciated for the last fifty years. The *avant-garde* artists of modern Europe felt the need to shatter by means of their own works the prevailing faith in the exclusivity of traditional aesthetics, which, through its Renaissance versions, went back to ancient Greece. They wished to open the eyes of their contemporaries to the aesthetic value of Roman and Byzantine works." All this is true, but only in part. The fact is that anti-traditional aesthetics leads to prejudices that are no less irrational than those it opposes, taking the opposite point of view far too exclusively and absolutely. Without sufficient discernment, it finds praiseworthy everything that has been devaluated, and, in the same summary fashion, it rejects everything that seems to be in conformity with the values it negates. Formerly, the art of early antiquity was condemned as a whole; today there is a tendency to praise it to the skies—again as a whole. Earlier, Byzantine art of the two great centuries was denounced as graceless and uncouth; today it appears insipid and academic. Peirce and Tyler in their *Art byzantin* (only two volumes have been published, however, and these do not go beyond the seventh century) seem to employ, as their sole criterion of selection and approval, non-conformity to the canons of ancient art; the more striking this is, the more novel does the work seem to them—"Byzantine," valid, and interesting. As for the mosaics of Daphnis, already Mouratoff had not dared to praise them because he considered them "academic" (probably because



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Gabriel Millet had formerly lauded them somewhat on those very grounds), and again, in Grabar's words (pp. 115 and 117 of his book): "The Daphnis 'Nativity' marks one of the high points of Byzantine style, a style which might be termed academic; . . . All the Daphnis mosaics possess identical traits of the Byzantine academicism of that period, with the exception of the central portrait of the Pantocrator in the cupola." Actually, there is nothing in Daphnis that is academic, although everything is classical, including the Pantocrator (a style is not defined by the softness or severity of a facial expression). A "style" is never academic. The classical phase of a style is something quite different from the academicism that employs it as a model. The mural paintings of Athos, which date from an epoch when the Byzantine style was defunct, are academic. But the mosaics of Daphnis, or the "Deisis" of Santa Sophia a century later, are as unacademic as Raphael's "Stanze," the Parthenon's "Metopes," the "Visitation," or the "Queen of Sheba" at Rheims. Nothing is more true than that our present era is hardly able to appreciate the classical values of any style. So much the worse for us; but that is no reason for historians to confuse what is classical in this sense with academicism (or even with classicism).

Influenced by these two contradictory prejudices, which are often combined in a curious fashion even though one belongs to the nineteenth century and the other to the twentieth, the classical phase of Byzantine art (as well as the final phase, which also produced more than one work of art) is generally presented by historians—unless they are a Demus or a Lazarev—in such a way that we can readily understand the reactions of the great Italian critic Roberto Longhi. In an essay written in 1939, to which a supplement was added in 1947, he reduces all Byzantine art to zero, refusing to acknowledge the slightest value in anything that was produced in the Eastern Empire and in the Orthodox world since the era of the Iconoclasts. One soon realizes in reading his essay that he never went to see it with his own eyes (because he lumps together Nerezi and Sopocani, Daphnis and Saint Luke of Phocidia, André Roubliov and Andrea de Candia). What really irritates him is not so much Byzantine art but what he has read about it. And he is not altogether wrong when he waxes ironic over the conventional praise lavished upon works in which the "delicacy" of the technique or the sumptuousness of the material is extolled. If he treats the excellent and the mediocre with the same contempt, it is because the labor of sorting out these works in terms of their quality has



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just been initiated. Often they are not even reproduced adequately enough for this quality to emerge. The famous "Lamentation" ("Pietà") of Nerezi has just been printed in its entirety. In *The Beginnings of Christian Art* by David Talbot Rice, it appears in all the fulness of its striking composition; until then, it had always been shown in truncated form (even in UNESCO's great edition of Jugoslav frescoes). The entire right side of the work, less well preserved than the rest but absolutely essential to an understanding of the whole, had never before been reproduced.

### III. CENTER AND PERIPHERY

If old and new prejudices are forgotten, if we are convinced that Byzantine art—its classical as well as its final phase—possesses its own distinctive features and value, then we must study it separately; we must not continue to submerge it in what precedes, surrounds, and follows it. It is to Lazarev's great credit that in his *Histoire de la peinture byzantine* he not only rigorously contrasts the art of the capital, the environment in which the style was created and evolved, with those of the provinces that adapted this art to their own tastes, altering or transforming it, but at the same time compares medieval Byzantine art to the art of the pre-Iconoclastic period, which certainly foreshadows its advent but does not yet possess its essential characteristics.

Historians of art can but follow Lazarev's example if they wish to avoid the pitfalls that have prevailed too long in this domain. The term "Byzantine art" should be employed in a narrower sense. Nothing is more erroneous than to locate the beginning of the history of this art in the fourth century. Even if one begins with the sixth century, there arises the danger of confusing an entirely established style, such as confronts us four hundred years later, with an art that is often magnificent, even at times incomparable (Santa Sophia!) but of which we can only say either that it has not yet developed a style or that its style is quite different from that of medieval Byzantine art. This difference is often minimized, even denied, because we are dealing on both sides with transcendental art, with non-naturalist aesthetics. But transcendental arts can be diverse, and we know a goodly number of aesthetics any of which is no more naturalist than the others. No real continuity of evolution exists that can connect eleventh-century painting with that of the sixth century in the same way that fourteenth-century painting is associated with that of the eleventh century. The preclassical phase



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of Byzantine art is clearly perceptible in certain works of the ninth and tenth centuries but not in those of the Justinian epoch. It is quite true that Byzantine art, in the strict sense of the word, presupposes the existence of the art of the Christian Empire; but this is so in the same way that Brunelleschi presupposes the existence of San Miniato or of the Baptistery and not in the way that Bramante presupposes Brunelleschi. Pre-Iconoclastic art paves the way for a new style, but it is not a link in the self-same chain of developments that leads to this style.

When the center becomes disencumbered in time and space and the periphery is reduced to a suitable role and significance, when Byzantine art of the best epoch is esteemed for all its purity and intrinsic value—then history will acquire both a precise meaning and its natural place in the history of art of the Christian Era. A few recent works, which we have mentioned earlier, lead us to hope that this time is near. They give us an understanding of an art that we knew rather than comprehended. But there are many other works that leave us dissatisfied. One such book, in spite of the author's diligence and his undeniable gifts of workmanship, is especially disconcerting to me: *Histoire de la peinture d'icones byzantine* by the Austrian scholar Walter Felicetti-Liebenfels.

This history is, first of all, not a history. It is a copious collection of finely illustrated documents which will be useful for reference purposes. But from the point of view of what in German is called *die Bewältigung des Stoffes,* in other words, critical and historical thought, it represents a marked step backward compared to *Denkmäler der Ikonenmalerei,* published in 1925 by Wulff and Alpatov. The author presents one icon after another, putting them, in a way, all on the same level. His comments on them are a bizarre mixture of technical information and iconographic and stylistic observations that are generally secondhand and lacking any connection with each other. In his opinion, iconography remains a complete stranger to style; his remarks about style constitute, for the most part, a few ineffectual adjectives. The monuments, as presented by the author, do not follow one another in a clearly intelligible succession. Has he the eyes to perceive their quality or at least their individual particularity? One would not think so. His is an inventory; why should he look at them any more attentively than he does? This inventory, which is not complete, could have been had he stopped at the fourteenth century. But he goes far beyond it and introduces us to a large number of artisan-like icons as if they were



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masterpieces and possessed real historical significance. The weakest chapter of the book is that which deals with Italian painting of Byzantinian tendencies, done in the *maniera greca*—the kind of painting that requires the greatest discernment. Here confusion reaches its peak; the author either fails to differentiate between values, styles, and tendencies or does so at random. The crucifix at the Pisa museum that is the quintessence of the Byzantine is not cited; but the extremely Italian ones, those attributed to Cappo and Cimabue, are reproduced. Taking Schweinfurth's word for it, Felicetti-Liebenfels classifies the "Virgin of Tolga" among the Italian works. He is not familiar with the literature on the subject, except for the outmoded works of Sirén and Van Marle, and is even less familiar with the subject matter itself. Above all, he does not seem to be aware of the real problems that a subject such as this raises or implies: the fusion and differentiation of styles, the transformation of the icon to a picture, the birth of Italian painting.

In a certain sense, all Byzantine painting is the painting of icons. More than that, the Byzantine church, a sequestered and decorated space, is an icon. The idea of the icon is central to Byzantine art, taken as a whole. That is why a history of the icon should be a history of Byzantine art, comprehending all that is most essential to it. Felicetti-Liebenfels will probably never write such a book, even should he give us in the future, as I am sure he will, better books than the one we have just discussed. Be that as it may, such a book still remains to be written.

## BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTES

V. N. Lazarev's work, *Istoria vizantiiskoï jivopisi,* Vol. I, text, and Vol. II, plates, was published in Moscow in 1947 and 1948 in the "State Editions," but apparently it was not available for sale until 1950.

Otto Demus' two books to which we have alluded are *Byzantine Mosaic Decorations* (London: Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1948) and *Die Mosaiken von S. Marco in Venedig* (Baden near Vienna: Rohrer, 1935).

G. F. Waagen speaks of the Greek manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale in the third volume of his book, *Kunstwerke und Künstler in England und Paris* (Berlin: Nicolaischen, 1839).

Ph. Schweinfurth's book, *Die byzantinische Form* was published in Berlin by F. Kupferberg in 1943.

*La Peinture byzantine* by André Grabar, magnificently illustrated, was published at Geneva in 1953 by Skira as part of a series entitled "Les grands siècles de la peinture," English ed., *Byzantine Painting,* translated by Stuart Gilbert.

G. de Francovich's book, *Problemi della pittura e della scultura preromanica* is part of a collection, "I Problemi dell'Europa post-carolinga," published in 1955 at



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*Les Icones du Mont Sinaï* by G. and M. Sotirious (Athens, 1956) represents Vol. C of the "Collection de l'Institut français d'Athènes." The volume of this text has not yet been published.

Roberto Longhi's essay, "Giudizio sul Duecento," written in 1939 and 1947, appeared in *Proporzioni*, Vol. II (Florence, 1948).

D. Talbot Rice's book, *The Beginnings of Christian Art,* was published in 1957 (London: Hodder & Stoughton).

W. Felicetti-Liebenfels' *Geschichte der byzantinischen Ikonenmalerei* appeared in 1956 (Olten and Lausanne: Kurs-Graf Verlag).

I shall have to content myself with merely noting the very beautiful publication, *Ancient Icons of Russia* ("Collection UNESCO de l'art mondial") which arrived too late to be included in this review. The two introductory texts, written by Lazarev and Demus, contain valuable insights not only for Russian iconography but for iconography in general and, because of that, for the whole field of Byzantine art and for all the arts which are related to it.



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