

The Category of Light in Ukrainian Art. From Byzantium to Baroque

Liudmila Miliaeva*
Oleksandra Shevliuga*

Abstract: *The article is dedicated to the concept of divine light, which has always been a matter of particular attention in the Orthodox religion. Since the earliest monuments of the 11th century, it has been clearly remarked in Ukrainian art, both in mosaics and certain icons. Over the centuries, the artistic language has changed and the light acquired a different manner of realisation. It became particularly evident in the monuments of sacral art of mature baroque, which was also connected with the development of theological and scholastic scholarship in Kyiv. Then, icon painters have found some new ways of depicting divine light, rendered by applying different artistic means.*

Keywords: *divine light, Tabor Light, Hesychasm, mosaic, icon.*

For a Byzantine citizen, gold was the image of light as truth and glory, and thus - the image of divine energies running in substance.

Sergey Averintsev

Sergey Averintsev has paid a lot of attention to studying the meaning of the idea of divine light communicated by Byzantine theologians . Thus, we have used his concluding phrase as a sort of epigraph for our article.

After the iconoclasm had been defeated, the idea of visual realisation of divine light inside a church became important both for architects and artists. For instance, the new dome placed onto the Church of Hagia Sophia (994 AD) is sublime . It looks as if it has covered the whole church with itself

* Full Professor, Department of Art History and Theory at National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture, Kyiv, Ukraine, Email: ladamilyaeva@gmail.com

* Ph. D. in Art History Lecturer, Department of Art History and Theory at National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture, Kyiv, Ukraine
Senior Research Officer, Department of Ancient Art, National Art Museum of Ukraine, Kyiv, Email: oshevliuga@gmail.com

(31 m in diameter) . However, it feels like it does not have physical weight as if it is hovering over the church. The architects managed to achieve this feeling due to the dome drum being cut through with 40 windows, shining with light, and elevated the dome thereby “binding” it with the sky. The dome became something like an antenna, transmitting movement of a layman’s prayer, which was said in the church, up to the Most High.

In the architecture of a church having a Greek-cross plan, however, the dome is displaced to the east and located above the transept. Therefore, some new artistic means appeared to render divine light. Among them was a mosaic in the first place. Otto Demus used to emphasize the fact that such techniques as golden-smalt mosaics have the best effect on a spherical surface . It is also worth noting that light twinkling occurs due to the tesserae being laid at an angle to one another. We shall add hereto that the artists have even foreseen such a delicate aspect as “picturesqueness” of gold, since gold has its own range of colours depending on its fineness . Despite the fact that Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv (1037 AD) has been the subject of many monographs , there have been few researchers who had the opportunity, like us, to observe the church’s mosaics in different seasons and time of day without artificial electric lighting, which accompanies every visitor of this museum church. The image of Christ Pantocrator in the central dome is enclosed into a medallion of a skouphos (Fig. 1). This Pantocrator image in the dome is always illuminated. Due to the sphere, the twinkling of the golden background becomes dynamic, depending on natural lighting from the drum windows. It constantly changes the effects of light and shade, and it seems as if its shining proceeds from the Pantocrator himself, whose himation is covered with big gold hatching. G. Logvin’s tactile studying of the haloes in the mosaics of Saint Sophia Cathedral has shown that all of them are sunk and appear to be a sort of a lens reflecting light, even during twilight. It is hard to tell how the archangels surrounding the Pantocrator used to look like originally (there is only one left, dressed in a blue attire), and the apostles have not remained intact either, except for Paul. On the other hand, the central apse with images of the Virgin Mary Orant, the Eucharist and the Church Fathers (upper parts of the figures have endured) is in an excellent condition. The Virgin Mary Orant, occupying the entire conch of the apse (Fig. 2), is not only on a spherical surface, but she also has three embossed waves in the background , which enhance the picturesqueness of the golden background in various places. The image of the Virgin Mary Orant itself changes right before our eyes at different times of day. She dominates with her firmness, with her full volume, skilfully modelled by means of the pleats of the maphorion and stola, which synthesize her shape, with the spread sides of the maphorion merging with the background, and with emphasized straight golden lines. Sometimes, the Virgin Mary Orant begins looking flat and is perceived as a clear silhouette, which at the same

time is changing its colour. Instead of the purple colour, the maphorion acquires a violet shade. So does the tunic, which is light-blue at one time and navy blue at another. Occasionally, an illusory source of light appears behind the right shoulder of the Virgin Mary Orant for a short time, especially in the morning.

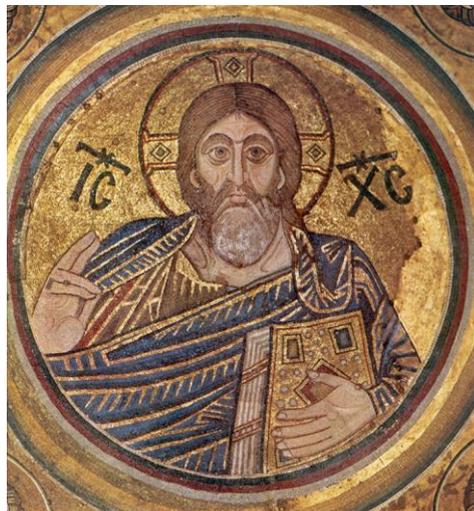


Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.

Yu. Korneliuk has shared his observation with us. Using the framing scaffolds, constructed by restorers, he placed four candles at the level of the Mother of God's face (as if imitating a church chandelier). What he saw afterwards surpassed all his expectations. It is well-known that all parts of the body in the mosaics are made from cubes of marble, limestone and sandstone, whereas faces, hands and legs are only laid with smalti tesserae. In the candlelight the latter ones started phosphorescing! Therefore, even all our observations without artificial lighting cannot reproduce completely those mystic experiences encountered by a person during even a single liturgy. Many "surprises" await us when we consider the Eucharist located in the apse under the Virgin Mary Orant. G. Logvin draws our attention to the fact that the two identical figures of Christ from the Eucharist, dressed in identical blue himations (Fig. 3), acquire a different colour at different angles - on the right and on the left of the communion table. This colour changes along with one's movement within the church. The constantly shining haloes over the heads of the apostles, who are walking in golden space, remind us of their sanctity and weightlessness (despite the reduced proportions). Thus, the idea of divine light in Saint Sophia Cathedral acquired the most unexpected and sometimes unpredictable effects due to experience, perfect taste and ingenuity of Byzantine masters.

The interior space of the cathedral is almost always shaded because of twelve massive cross pillars. However, what is particularly interesting to observe in summer is that the light beams penetrate through the drum windows and, moving in the course of time, illuminate both walls and pillars as if exhibiting alternately the assemblies of saints who are depicted on them. One part of the interior is being overshadowed, while another one is contrariwise being illuminated. This effect of moving light space can rarely be observed in other structures having cross-dome plans.

Fighting religion, the Soviet government used to destroy churches ruthlessly across the whole territory of Soviet Ukraine. In Kyiv, they destroyed everything - from churches of the dawn of the 12th century to the ones erected at the beginning of the 20th century. St. Michael Golden-Domed Cathedral (1108-1114 AD) fell under the atheist sword of Damocles as well. The cynicism of the Soviet government was expressed by the fact that consent to such demolition had to be given by experts. M. Makarenko, who was the member of the committee, has paid with his life for refusing to sign a corresponding certificate. Understanding the fact that there was no way to save the church, Igor Grabar managed to ensure a resolution under which the remaining mosaics and wall paintings discovered by that time were to be removed prior to demolition. The restorers headed by V. Frolov have performed an actual exploit by removing a part of the mosaics and wall paintings onto prepared walls in the galleries of Saint Sophia Cathedral, in Kyiv. The Eucharist mosaic and the Annunciation wall paintings were placed

there. Once, during their visit to the cathedral, L. Miliaieva, along with the artist T. Silvashi, encountered an extraordinary phenomenon. While they were examining the Eucharist mosaic from St. Michael Golden-Domed Cathedral (Fig. 4), a beam of sunlight fell onto the image of Christ on the left of the communion table. And the image seemed to disappear right in front of their eyes, for it started shining and sparkling in the bright sunbeam. Christ's himation from St. Michael Cathedral mosaics, unlike the ones from St. Sophia Cathedral, is coated with quite broad golden streaks, which cover a significant part of his attire. (It should be noted that in this Eucharist all the apostles have no haloes, unlike the ones in the Eucharist of Saint Sophia Cathedral). We were not able to observe this effect again. It is hard to tell if it was only designed for St. Michael Golden-Domed Cathedral in situ.

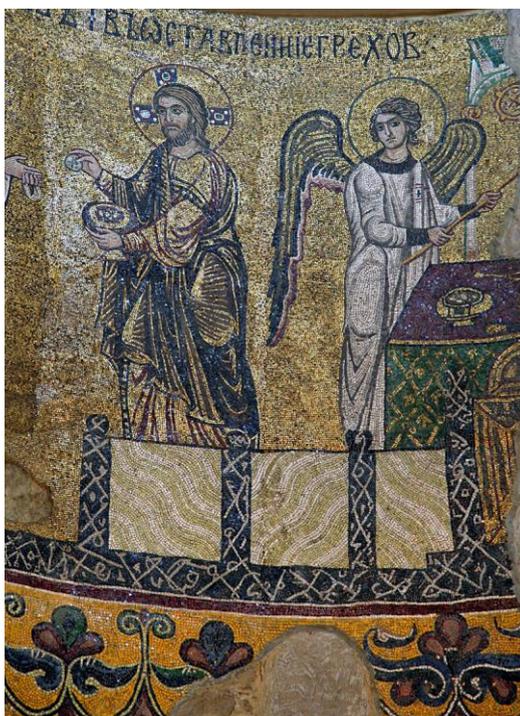


Fig. 4.

Since Antiquity, Byzantine artists have inherited the usage of combinations of white and gold in their art. In mosaics, however, this combination has further acquired a special meaning, as both gold and white in Byzantine fine art represented mystic and divine light. The mosaicists who have worked in Saint Sophia Cathedral had a special and delicate sense of light. It was undoubtedly based on high dedication to the idea of Hesychastic and divine light, with which God, the Mother of God and beings of higher rank are endowed. In order to enhance this heavenly illumination, the artists

skilfully used the white colour, which has a remarkably powerful light effect when combined with gold. A golden mosaic skilfully laid by Byzantine masters demonstrates quite pronounced twinkling, imitating the higher heavenly world. However, all this did not suffice for the masters of Saint Sophia Cathedral. They strived to enhance this stream of light. This could be accomplished through highlighting the colourful outlines of the golden haloes with a thin line of white tesserae. That was the technique which allowed, so to say, tearing a shining golden halo off the golden background. This is how the haloes of the Virgin Mary Orant in the apse conch (Fig. 2), the Mother of God on the pillar from the Annunciation, the apostles and angels in the Eucharist (Fig. 3), and the archangel in the dome are depicted. Christ Pantocrator in the dome has a bright, multi-coloured mandorla medallion (Fig. 1), but here white light is used as well. It is found in the outline of the medallion three times and, which is quite peculiar, right beside gold: the white colour fringes the medallion on both sides, and there is also a white streak inside, situated next to the golden one.



Fig. 5

One of the icons of the pre-Mongolian time, which is most saturated with light, is The Virgin Platytera (Great Panagia), the so-called “The Orants of Yaroslavl” (Fig. 5). The image of the Mother of God of Incarnation type has the same maphorion, spread in the background, with vertical golden streaks as the one on the Virgin Mary Orant in Saint Sophia Cathedral (Fig. 2), although stylistically it is from a different time period. However, it is noticeable that in the golden background of the icon all the haloes are white. From an aesthetic perspective, this chryselephantine technique is impeccable. Taking into account the experience of the Saint Sophia Cathedral mosaic masters, who undoubtedly left their mark on the Kyiv artistic environment of the 11th century, it is justified to assume the development of this artistic technique of rendering light. Moreover, it is justified to assume that this icon is the pinnacle of rendering divine shining in the Byzantine-Kyivan art.

In the times of Hesychasm of the 14th century, the nature of Tabor Light became the focus of attention . It was specifically reflected in the artistic monuments of that era. In the Kyiv Psalter of 1937, numerous marginal miniatures were illuminated with golden divine light. Thin gold hatching enhances the sublimity and solemnity of the colourful tiny figures, raising them to a more subtle and mystic level. However, this shining marginal images probably seemed insufficient to the creators and requester of the manuscript, since the text itself, written in solemn semi-uncial script, is illuminated with gold: nearly each parchment page contains golden lines and separate letters, which fill all the pages of the Psalter with twinkling. It is this saturation of the manuscript text and marginal miniatures with golden light that produces the feeling of “extensive” shining and indicates the fact that the masters who created this outstanding work of art came from the Kyiv community of artists. They were familiar with the extensive shining of the golden mosaics of Kyiv cathedrals, for Kyiv was the only city across the entire Rus’ wherein the churches had been decorated with mosaics since the end of the 10th century, and no other artistic school of Rus’ had such long-lasting visual experience.

In those cases when gold was not used in the Ukrainian fine art, most often the light was rendered through white, light-blue and blue colours, in accordance with the Byzantine tradition. Here we can point to the Transfiguration icon of the 14th century from Busovisko village , where the almond-shaped Christ’s mandorla with sharp needle-like beams is performed with thin white strokes on it. In the icon, Christ is dressed in a light-blue chiton and a dazzling white himation, which imitates the brightness of Tabor Light here.

Another technique used by Ukrainian artists of the 16th century for rendering divine light was probably borrowed from monumental art as well (the multi-coloured outline of Christ’s mandorla). This technique was well-known among both Byzantine and Ukrainian artists (Christ Pantocrator in the

dome of Saint Sophia Cathedral). Quite often we find monuments with similar shining of Christ's mandorla in the icon painting of the 16th century, such as the Transfiguration from Yabluniv village (Fig. 6) and a range of icons with the iconographic type of Christ in Glory, popular in the Ukrainian church (e.g. Szklary village, mid- 16th century (now in Poland) (Fig. 7).



Fig. 6

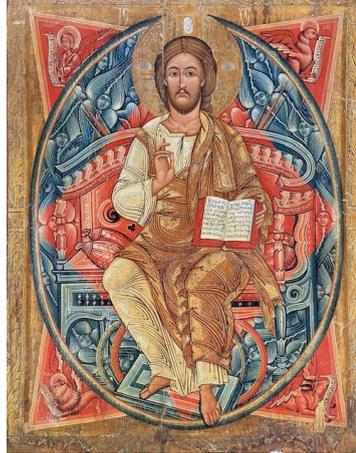


Fig. 7

Besides gold, this divine uncreated light used to be associated with silver as well. In the Annunciation icon of 1576 by master Fedusko from Sambir (Fig. 8), the Mother of God is dressed in a golden tunic and maphorion, while the archangel Gabriel has a silver attire (today the silver is blackened). Here, the icon painter used the opportunity of dressing the icon characters, considering the matter of divine light in its medieval meaning.

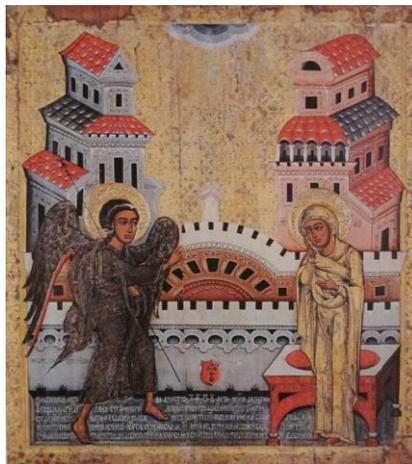


Fig. 8

Golden and silver relief icon backgrounds, which were popular in the Ukrainian icon painting and are found from the dawn of the 16th century to the 18th century, are more “picturesque” - effects of light and shade - compared with flat golden icon backgrounds that had been wide-spread in the countries of Byzantine area since ancient times. Their non-uniform surface brought about a feeling of changeable twinkling, vaguely resembling the changeable shining of golden mosaic backgrounds of churches, which enhanced the depth effect when lit candles and icon lamps were near the icons. Let us provide several examples of such icons: The Eleousa Virgin Mary by master Olexius of the second half of the 16th century, the Deesis tier from Nakonechny village of the 1570s (Fig. 9), icons painted by Ivan Rutkovych, Job Kondzelewicz , the great martyrs Barbara and Catherine of the 1740s and many others. In order to enhance the effect of divine shining, the artists depicted sun-like beams or flame tips on the haloes shining with gold or silver (for example, Michael - Fig. 10 - and Gabriel archangels , Holy Great Prince Volodymyr and Emperor Constantine in the icons of Ivan Rutkovych, apostles from the iconostasis of the Nativity of Christ Church in Zhovkva , the Dormition of the Mother of God from Lebedyn and many others).



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

The use of the light category in the middle of the 18th century is a unique phenomenon, even considering the fact that within those years theological literature had an advantage over secular literature. The school theatre was mainly governed by it. The tragicomedy “Volodymyr” by Theophan Prokopovych is rather an exception from this rule.

The Transfiguration Church in Velyki Sorochyntsi village has a complex theological programme, interpreting the dedication of the church in its own iconological way . Since pre-Mongolian Rus' (since the 11th century) none of the churches has ever shown anything like it. Usually, the Transfiguration theme was realised in an icon of the local iconostasis register of a church (the most ancient Ukrainian icon from Busovisko has been known since the 14th century), and maybe in wall paintings and iconostasis that have not been preserved into the present day.



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

In the aforementioned church, the Tabor light theme dominates, starting from the facade, where pagan symbols were used for the first time (starting from the 17th century it was usually antique mythology). The portal is decorated with several types of rosacea: ordinary type, “Jupiter’s wheel” and six-pointed, which is the symbol of natural and divine light. The fact that they are not ornamental is attested by their single use above the windows, or on the vaults - in the interior, like on beams of peasant huts, up to the 19th century. We can agree with the hypothesis of P. Beletsky, who assumed the participation of archbishop Raphael Zaborovsky (Archbishop of Kyiv and Galych, since 1731), Metropolitan of Kyiv, Galych and Little Russia (since 1743) for the creation of the iconostasis, who came to Ukraine in 1731, reformed the Kyiv Theological Academy and paid great attention to education. It was he who could afford to change the idea of an iconostasis. In

Velyki Sorochyntsi village, the iconostasis is so to speak ternary: considering the cruciform plan of the church, it has a central part and the most solemn eastern part covering the central apse, whereas its southern and northern parts are at an angle from the centre to the lateral sides of the architectural cross, thereby forming side chapels. They are connected by two large icons dedicated to titular saints of the churchwardens - St. Uliana and Daniel the Prophet (the churchwarden of the church was Danylo Apostol - Hetman of Zaporizhian Host (1727-1734), Hetman of Left-Bank Ukraine).

Behind the icon of St. Uliana, there is a Mariolatrous side chapel dedicated to the Laudation of the Mother of God. Behind Daniel the Prophet, there is a Christological Trinity side chapel. Without dwelling on the unusual character of the icon composition, we will only point to one feature - the centre does not have a “Deesis”, which has been removed to the Trinity side chapel. The baroque central composition filled with pathos is not only notable for its sophisticated through-carved work, but also for its composition wherein the apostle tier is ascending at an angle, while above it there is Christ dressed in golden attire and sitting on his throne (Fig. 11). Behind him, there are archangels “holding mirrors” in the form of sparkling suns, i.e. there is a depiction of the Transfiguration of Our Lord in an unconventional iconography –“The Transfiguration Triumph”.

In order to make Christ and Mother of God (Fig. 12) shine in the local iconostasis register, the artist has painted their attire on gold foil pre-glued onto gesso instead of usual gold hatching, and that is how the shining-body effect was created.

In “The Trinity of the Old Testament” icon of the southern side chapel, there is a shining golden solar disk above the images of angels (Fig.13).



Fig. 13

One cannot find anywhere else such a solution regarding the iconostas. However, such a programme could have only been created by an authoritative person of the church, so that he could venture to do it. At the same time, we should keep in mind the craftsmanship of the artists, who were able to use the means that helped them implement new ideas.

The originality of theological programmes is also observed in high iconostases of the 17th century. In the aforementioned case, however, it is the unconventional character of the solution that amazes most.

Probably, this is the last (unexpected) surge of realisation of the Tabor Light category by means of art.

Thus, we have observed the original character of rendering divine light in the mosaics of Kyiv - in Saint Sophia Cathedral and Saint Michael Golden-Domed Cathedral, which has been done for the first time. Among sparse icons of the pre-Mongolian times in Ukrainian history, we have also managed to find original solutions for rendering light in the icon of the dawn of the 12th century – “The Great Panagia” (The Orants of Yaroslavl). To a large extent, the special understanding of the Uncreated Light in the 14th century is connected with the revival of the Tabor Light idea in Hesychasm. Naturally, it is observed in the Saviour Transfiguration icons. Within the following centuries, the rendering of this Uncreated Light lost a little of its mystic tension; nevertheless, it is still present in the symbolism of the mandorla around the image of Christ and in the silver and golden backgrounds of icons as well. During the baroque period, experiencing mystic divine shining reached its pinnacle in Ukrainian sacred art due to the new artistic means and techniques.

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