

## LUX INCORPORATA

### The Theme of Light and Its Ancient Sources in the Imagery of Christian Art

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**Abstract:** *This study attempts to identify the theme of light in the imagery of ancient Greco-Roman and Christian art through a comparative analysis of the context and evolution of artistic language before and after the Christianization of the Roman Empire. An essential criterion in understanding the new aesthetic paradigm and highlighting the means of artistic expression characteristic to the two periods temporally delimited by the event of the Incarnation, is the way in which artistic consciousness relates to divinity. The acceptance or not of the Revelation, the reflection in religious art of the fact that God became Man and He has a Face, as opposed to other philosophical quests and religious systems that dress up the idea of divinity and its attributes in the face of the gods, personifying it or imagining it symbolically, – makes the difference. God communicates Himself to man through light, light being the common denominator of any epistemology, without placing in competition or in opposition the knowledge that comes to us through Revelation with that acquired by man through scientific experiments. Paradox is a mark of light. Science has proven it with the wave-particle dualism of quantum mechanics and theology fully confirms it. Light is a Person who says of Himself that He is: ‘The Light of the World’. (John 8, 12). The theme of light has multiple meanings in biblical exegesis; from the metaphorical image that runs through the Book of Revelation to that of the incorporated Light (Lux incorporata), an interpretation that refers to the Mystery of the Incarnation, to the world transfigured by grace, to the uncreated light communicated to people by the heavenly hierarchies through the Church in the form of the Holy Mysteries. In the world of late Roman antiquity, and later in the Byzantine world, there was a belief that the veining or luminous veins of colored marble, gemstones or translucent stones were embedded rays of light, an intervention of divine light in the rock. The uniqueness of these ‘graphic accidents’ was interpreted as signs of God in the creation that suggests the unseen, the unusual, the ineffable, in short, the paradox of the Christian world summed up in this confession: that God is both One and Three, that Christ is both Man and God, and that Mary is both the Mother of God and the Virgin. The art of mosaics and stained glass, as well as the entire decorative complex of precious stones, gems and polychrome marbles adorning objects of worship and liturgical furnishings, is built on a long tradition that aesthetically and theologically values the motif of light. Dogmatic notions such as hypostatic union and*

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*perichoresis* are symbolically translated into visually striking plastic expressions – provided by the natural textures of the cut and polished rocks – with the sole purpose of suggesting the dogmatic ‘contradictions’ of the Kingdom of Light which, as they say, ‘already exists, but not yet’.

**Keywords:** light, Christianity, antiquity, art, church, icon, symbol

‘Now the Virgin returns, the reign of Saturn returns,  
Now from high heaven a new generation comes down.  
You, the child who’s born, under whom the first race  
of iron shall end, and a golden rise up throughout the  
world...’<sup>1</sup>

In 325, at the opening session of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, Emperor Constantine quoted this excerpt from the work of the poet Publius Vergilius Maro (70-19 BC)<sup>2</sup>. The messianic character and the prophetic imagery captured in the great poet’s verses justifies why they echoed in the highest Christian forum, and why, like the Sibyls, Virgil will be placed by some Christian exegetes among the poet-prophets of antiquity. Creator of a founding myth through his epic *Aeneid*, the work of a Latin-speaking Homer, he educated and influenced generations of Romans until the institutionalization of Christianity and long afterwards. The Sparks of Revelation as manifestations of the Pre-Christian Logos<sup>3</sup> inspired the poet to depict admirable prophetic images that mirror the face of the Unknown God (Acts of the Apostles 17, 23), with a poetic art unparalleled in the Greco-Roman literature<sup>4</sup>.

The space of Virgil’s creations is dominated by the figure of Orpheus<sup>5</sup>, whose failure, – a reflection of the powerlessness of the Pantheon

<sup>1</sup> Publius Vergilius Maro, *Works: Bucolica. Georgica*, verses from the Bucolics, 4th Eclogue, Institutul European publishing house, translated by Nicolae Ionel, 1997, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of God: a Theological Aesthetic, IV: In the Space of Metaphysics: Antiquity*, translated by Maria Magdalena Anghelescu, Galaxia Gutemberg publishing house, Târgu-Lăpuș, 2019, p. 236, note 148.

<sup>3</sup> Bartolomeu Valeriu Anania, *Eastern Mysteries and Christianity*, Eikon și Renașterea publishing house, Cluj-Napoca, 2013, pp. 197; 200. The enlightenment of which ancient philosophy was capable finds its basis in the divine iconomy, manifested through the Logos. ‘The pre-Christian Logos is the living light of the divine mind that has been active in the world since its creation, through the intelligence and moral beauty of the most chosen among men’. St. Justin stated that all some philosophers, such as Socrates and Heraclitus, said well, they did by discovering and contemplating a certain part of the Logos, but since they did not know the whole Logos, Who is Christ, they often contradicted themselves. And he added: ‘those who lived according to the Logos are Christians, even if they were called pagans’.

<sup>4</sup> H. U. von Balthasar, *The Glory of God...*, pp. 203-204.

<sup>5</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, Institutul European publishing house, introduction and translation by Nicolae Ionel, 1999, p. 17.

– signifies the impossibility of salvation through art. One of the most brilliant insights of the culture and mythology of Greco-Roman antiquity is that artistic genius does not save souls. Neither his own nor others'. Neither does it hinder the one committed to the path of spiritual perfection. Being providential, Virgil's genius manifested itself at the temporal boundary of two intersecting eras, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ glimpsed by the poet being the milestone between the two worlds, for some a 'stumbling block', for others 'the cornerstone'<sup>6</sup>. After the genesis of the world, the Birth of Christ, a prophesied and long-awaited event, becomes the central chiasmic point of history and time.



Fig. 1

<sup>6</sup> H. U. von Balthasar, *The Glory of God...*, p. 236, note 148. Although many have disputed that the reference to a Redeemer and to humanity's 'golden age' was to Emperor Octavian Augustus, among others, Christianity has interpreted Virgil's love for the Saviour and the Divine Child as love for the One who came into the world a decade after the poet's death. From the perspective of the Divine Providence, nothing is coincidental.

Roman mosaic, 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Sousse, Tunisia. Bardo National Museum of Archaeology, Tunis. The scene shows the poet Virgil accompanied by Clio (the Muse of History) and Melpomene (the Muse of Tragedy). Virgil is holding a rotulus of the Aeneid, his work, open at Song I; 8, where it is written: "Musa, mihi causas memora, quo numine laeso..." (Muse, tell me the causes, what god was offended...?).

The theophany of the divine Incarnation, marked by the light of a star that surpassed in brilliance the power of the sun, guides the fearless Magi, providentially mandated as once the pillar of cloud in the wilderness the chosen people, or Aeneas, the pious servant of the god of light, imagined with anticipation by Virgil to guide the Trojans to the promised land. The destination of the journey of the wise Magi turned out to be the Incarnate Light Itself<sup>7</sup>, the Divine Logos, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the One who called Himself the Light of the world. Being astrologers, God revealed Himself to the Magi through what was most accessible to their understanding, approaching them in their own territory of competence, showing them a celestial body that was special in its size, its motion and its brilliance<sup>8</sup>. The divine iconomy, says St. John Chrysostom, surprised the Magi by the light of a star which manifested itself as a power endowed with reason, but this optical experience would have been in itself only a spectacle, if it had not awakened in their souls the light of a different kind of knowledge<sup>9</sup>. Saint John distinguishes between physical light and a different kind of light, which is relevant to the soul, the spirit, the intellect. God is present in and through symbols, as visible mirrors of the invisible<sup>10</sup>, the physical light through which we perceive the sensible world being a symbol of the uncreated light in which the transfigured matter of the world of the age to come will be bathed.

The guiding star – a celestial star for some exegetes, an angel for others – is the sign by which God proclaims the mystery of His Incarnation as well to those who 'by nature do the things of the Law'. For many people the Nativity of the Lord went unnoticed for centuries even in the Greco-Roman world where Christianity was preached and born, but paradoxically,

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 203.

<sup>8</sup> The Jewish sages' confirmation of the information available to the magi with what the Torah also documented suggests, through the narrative of Evangelist Matthew, that natural and supernatural revelation support each other, and that if there is honesty on the part of one who can read the signs in nature, he eventually comes to know God. The scientific research of the last hundred years fully proves it.

<sup>9</sup> Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, translated by Rev. D. Fecioru, EIBMBOR, Bucharest, 1994, p. 80.

<sup>10</sup> Archim. Maximos Constas, *The Art of Seeing – Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography*, Doxologia publishing house, 2017, pp. 313; 318.

even today there are populated regions for which the Incarnation, if it does not mean anything, it is not more than mere information.

Even before the human embodiment of Christ, the news of His Incarnation was partially revealed to the nations through myths and cosmogonies, ancient documents attesting that the Incarnation of the Lord was also revealed to the ‘unbaptized Christianity’ of ancient Asia. Chinese Confucianism, the successor of an ancient monotheism comparable to the biblical one of Abrahamic descent, records in the corpus of canonical books called the *Classics* the revelation of the coming of a Saviour<sup>11</sup>. One of the recurring themes in the *Classics* is the wondrous conception of a child, Fu Xi, conceived by the virgin Jiang Yuan stepping into the footprint left in the sand by the giant foot of the divinity. Considered the father of Chinese civilisation, Fu Xi is the inventor of writing. ‘The Holy One will come from the West; His presence and parable will be enough for good and peace to rule over people and reconcile them all. His completeness cannot be described in words’<sup>12</sup>. The ancient Chinese writings tell us that: ‘Before the birth of the Holy One, His beneficent law shone in Heaven and on Earth like a mysterious mirror, as if written by divine hand with mystic slovos for contemplation by the wise’<sup>13</sup>. The topos of the expectation of the Saint’s birth is combined here with that of the mirror, a metaphor we find in a Pauline epistle<sup>14</sup> and in Virgil’s Aeneid.

Beyond the obvious association with the Incarnation of the Divine Logos at the Annunciation, this episode in Chinese mythology can be interpreted as a theophany expressed through the construction of a paradoxical ‘hieroglyph’, a palimpsestic pictogram obtained by overlapping the graphic sign of the human footprint with the divine one. The result is the representation of an oxymoron, a metaphor of a grapheme, of an archaic writing or pictographic ‘imprinting’, which attempts to capture and express the mystery<sup>15</sup>. There is approximation between the sacred belief in the iconic

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<sup>11</sup> Andrei Dârlău, *China of grace: China’s religions and Christianity: a cross-cultural, historical and hermeneutical incursion*, Fundația ‘Anastasia’ publishing house, Bucharest, 2018, p. 451. In the ideograms of the Chinese *Classics* it is spoken of ‘the Son of the Virgin, who conceived him from the Heavenly Spirit. (He) is the Son of God, who from the beginning was one with the Holy Spirit and is therefore called the Son of Heaven (Tian Zi) or the Son of God’. The main theme of *Zhong Yong* (one of the Chinese *Classics*) is the ‘perfected man’, noble or holy, seen as the mediator between heaven and earth. He is called the Beautiful Man, God-Man or Spirit-Man.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. XLI. The story of the birth of Hou Ji (the Sorghum God) is similar. The myth of Shang Di’s (or Tian’s) footprint imprinted on the ground is a quintessentially ‘semiotic’ myth; the divinity ‘does not speak, does not hide, but signals. He sets up a semiosis – a process or system of signification’.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 452.

<sup>14</sup> (I Cor. 13, 12), ‘I now know partially’, (...) ‘for we see now as through a mirror, in divination’.

<sup>15</sup> Andrei Dârlău, *op. cit.*, p. XLI.

power of codified writing, which is characteristic of archaic Chinese monotheism, and the iconic dimension of mysticism and theology on which Christian monotheism relies<sup>16</sup>. The present study attempts an identification of the theme of light through a comparative analysis of the context.

The lack of documents and the few archaeological testimonies make the period of transition from the antiquity of the worship of the gods to the antiquity of the Christian world one of the most difficult moments in the history of iconographic art to evaluate. The present study attempts to identify the theme of light in the imagery of Greco-Roman and Christian art through a comparative analysis of the context and evolution of artistic language before and after the Christianization of the Roman Empire. An essential criterion in identifying and evaluating the new aesthetic paradigm and highlighting the means of artistic expression, characteristic of the two periods temporally delimited by the event of the Incarnation, is the way in which artistic consciousness relates to divinity. The manner of worship, – the acceptance or non-acceptance of Revelation, the reflection in cultic art of the fact that God became Man and has a Face, as opposed to other philosophical quests and religious systems which dress up the idea of the divinity and its attributes in the face of the gods, personifying it or imagining it symbolically, – make the difference. The conceptions on the origin of the world reflected in the perception of space and time, specific to each theology, philosophy or mythology, and the kind of relationship existing between the concept of beauty and divinity, particularise the tendency, style and vision through which the image plastically describes the doctrinal background of a cult or a religious tradition.

One of the most ancient forms of knowledge in all the world's cultures is knowledge through myths, and what these traditions have in common is the organic connection between the human being and the cosmos. Art, as one of the highest expressions of this connection, is necessarily<sup>17</sup> the dynamic and ineffable interface through which the human being dialogues with the sublime, a sublime in which the aesthetic and the divine are both found. The necessity of dialogue with the godhead has imposed the necessity of the face as a plastic mediating presence. Humans have felt the need to give a face to some phenomenon of nature and to attribute or describe qualities of the gods, using allegorical images, personifications, metaphors or symbols. If we observe the frequency with which, in all the cultures of the world, certain themes, subjects or plastic representations appear illustrated more often than

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. XIX.

<sup>17</sup> If plastic beauty expresses the Divine, then it is necessary, says Saint Patriarch Photios. In the same tone, Saints Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianz also speak of the necessity of art. Necessity is one of the most important reasons that determine human creation, art being a form of establishing new relationships between the world and man. See Mihail Diaconescu, *Lectures on Orthodox Aesthetics, I. Theology and Aesthetics*, Porto-Franco publishing house, Galați, 1996, pp.112; 334-335.

others, we cannot fail to notice that the most widespread of all is the image of the human body in all the complexity of its expressions<sup>18</sup>. The human figure is the universal standard by which heaven and earth are measured. Man and the cosmos, as subjects of the knowledge of the natural revelation, are structured according to our capacity for perception.

The knowledge of God is possible because there is, constitutively in man, the ability to perceive the order and the symmetry of the cosmos. The mission of the artist-priest who was aware that by creating a work of art he was setting a limit to chaos, being co-worker with God, is an idea that will be reaffirmed periodically throughout history in various forms. As a receptacle of the revealed Word translated into visual conventions, the creation of religious art is a process of knowledge through sight, by means of which man enriches his being and gains access to a visible manifestation, 'endowed with meaning'<sup>19</sup>. Meaning, as transcendental reason, can only be interrogated through a specific language, a poetic language through which art, whether in visual or sound forms, identifies with prayer. Art devoted to worship will always be the result of the iconomic adaptation of the providence in which divine revelation allows itself to be narrated, more or less accurately, by means of the inspired artistic act. Only in the icon will liturgical art find its full manifestation of meaning.

After the fall of the forefathers and the episode of the multiplication and mixing of the languages, the biblical reference tells us, reason perverted like a distorted mirror has distorted the perception and understanding of divinity, offering an illusory, speculative<sup>20</sup> and idolatrous image. Whether the image of divinity is idolatrously distorted in a crooked mirror or mirrors on its surface the iconically transfigured image of the Face of Christ, the mirror metaphor highlights comparatively the distinct perspectives on life in the two epochs bounded by the Incarnation event and shows us the interdependence relations between a religious cult and the means of expression characteristic of the artistic forms that theologically serve that cult.

As an interface to which we can relate the values of the two worlds, Virgil's work can also display, through an ingenious compositional device, the metaphorical mirrors of the Aeneid, surfaces in which the past and future of the protagonists are captured and reflected in a plastic and visionary way. Virgil's epic became, immediately after his death, the inspiration for a

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<sup>18</sup> Solomon Marcus, *Mathematical Poetics*, Academia Republicii Socialiste România publishing house, Bucharest, 1970, pp. 90-98. The frequent use of the metaphor of the human body since the dawn of humanity has given rise to expressions such as: geometric bodies, heavenly bodies, army bodies, etc.

<sup>19</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Gabriel Cerceles and Larisa Dumitru, Gabriel Kohn and Cătălin Petcan, Teora publishing house, Bucharest, 2001, pp. 82-83; 116-117.

<sup>20</sup> To speculate (*fr. speculer*), for the ancient astronomers, meant observing the stars in the sky through a mirror (*speculum*).



programme of imagery, to which high-ranking Roman dignitaries with education and wealth turned to decorate their residences with frescoes and mosaics. The Romans recognised in the 'Aeneid' a part of their recent history and wanted to identify with the founding myth that Virgil had conceived, modelled on Homer. The writing argues the Romans' descent from the gods and from the ancient Trojan people and justifies the inherence of their mission to found a new nation with Rome as its capital. In short, the message of the work, condensed and encapsulated in a few key moments of narrative composition, is illustrated and conveyed through scenes of symbolic and prophetic value. The poet describes events in anticipation and mirrors them, either in the metallic shine of a shield or in the scenes of mnemonic friezes carved and painted on the walls of a temple.

The main hero of the epic, Aeneas, receives as a gift, among other things, a miraculous shield<sup>21</sup>. On the front of the shield, created and gifted by the gods, bas-reliefs drawn and cast in precious metal reflect stories yet to be told, prophetic scenes of the birth and apotheosis of the Roman people. The scenes on the shield, connecting the past to the present, depict a future history of Rome, culminating in the victory of Emperor Octavian Augustus at Actium.



Fig. 2

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<sup>21</sup> Virgil uses Achilles' shield from the *Iliad* as a model.





Fig. 3

In order to highlight the glory of Rome, the author uses a novel procedure: he reverses the perspective of time and shifts the poet's point of view, which makes the present recede into a legendary future<sup>22</sup>. The prophetic image depicted on the shield of Aeneas, through a change of perspective, could be perceived as a provisional exit from mythical, circular time and an anticipation of the future, foreshadowing in a shadowy way a vision similar to that which the Christian icon preaches, that of the age to come. In Christianity, man and cosmos together have an irreversible orientation towards the future, they advance linearly in a true history, towards an ultimate goal<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> H. U. von Balthasar, *The Glory of God...*, p. 236. Thus, the Battle of Actium appears sublimated, from its natural plane into a mirifical golden world, as an ambience of glory, designed to give the great event a hieratic aura. See also Vergilius, *Aeneid*, translated by Eugen Lovinescu, preface by Edgar Papu, Editura pentru Literatură, 1964, p. 281-286.

<sup>23</sup> Arhim. Maximos Constas, *The art of seeing...*, pp. 124-125.

We find the same reverse perspective<sup>24</sup>, prefigured without any obvious intention on the shield of Aeneas, in Byzantine iconography, which, by superimposing temporal planes, elaborates the visual image of the object not as a snapshot but as a synthesis of different successive images of it. In order to express unseen reality and divine ubiquity, the icon abolishes linear perspective by convention, creating spaces with several points of perspective. The volumes that populate these spaces arise from the 'great simultaneity'<sup>25</sup> of perspective, as Paul Klee would say, being seen from several angles of view at once, as if the viewer of the objects were surrounding them and sequentially recording their images<sup>26</sup>. Surprisingly or not, the polyvalent perspective and the superimposition of several episodes in the same compositional frame<sup>27</sup> is not just a distinctive feature of the icon or a discovery of modernity, it is present in countless works of antiquity.

Another moment of symbolic value described in the 'Aeneid' and emphasised by the author is the remembrance of the feats of bravery of the Greeks and Trojans, reflected sculpturally in the bas-reliefs of the friezes of a temple. Only a few years had passed since the fall of Troy and the deeds of this war were already legend sung and illustrated on the walls of Carthage. Looking at these friezes, Aeneas recognises his face in the carved images of the siege of Troy alongside his comrades<sup>28</sup>. He finds himself visualising glimpses of his own life, being confirmed to him, through subtle divine pedagogy, that he is on the right path and that his choice is also the will of the gods, in which, if he continues to believe, he will fulfil his destiny. In the faith and perfect obedience to the divine instance of the hero of the 'Aeneid' we can glimpse some of the most important demands of Christian teaching: 'These were the wonders which Aeneas admired on the shield of Vulcan, given to him by his mother, and, though he did not understand them, he willingly placed on his shoulder the sign of glory and of the fate of his

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<sup>24</sup> Very reductionistically, the so-called reverse perspective in iconography is in fact a complex, atypical, often random perspective, with several vanishing points towards the viewer, sometimes a combination of reverse, axonometric and central perspective.

<sup>25</sup> Carola Giedion-Welcker, *Paul Klee*, Meridiane publishing house, Bucharest, 1972, p. 70.

<sup>26</sup> Marin Gherasim, *The fourth dimension*, Paralela 45 publishing house, Bucharest, 2003, p. 175. The procedure is used by cubist painters by breaking the image down into its constituent parts and bringing them into a single plane, recomposing them through a process of simultaneity. Cubism tries to suggest the idea of a total space, striving for an integral vision of objects, represented not from a single point of view but from several points simultaneously.

<sup>27</sup> In the icon, the overlapping of episodes and the coexistence of several scenes in the same compositional frame is nothing more than an attempt to achieve visually through plastic means that 'concordia discors' of the synoptic gospels, whose contents complement each other to describe the same event. See Dionisie Stamatoiu, *The Four Holy Gospels*, Universitaria publishing house, Craiova, 2000, p. 611.

<sup>28</sup> Virgil places Aeneas among the heroes 'canonized' during his lifetime, like those virtuous Christians whose sanctity is recognized by contemporaries before their official validation by the Church.

descendants'<sup>29</sup>. Listening and waiting for the fulfilment of God's promises is the foundational condition of all faith<sup>30</sup>. Similar to the scenes depicted on the shield, the unfolding of the friezes carved in stone mirrors a world in which the prophetic act dominates the aesthetic act from the message point of view, prefiguring the kerygmatic function of iconographic art. We can see in the fate of the nomadic Trojans an analogy with the exodus of the Jewish people in expectation of the 'fullness of time' (Galatians 4:4)<sup>31</sup>. For the Trojans, the time of fulfilment is only achievable under the auspices of the lord of time, the god Aion<sup>32</sup> or *Chronos*, alongside whom their main protector Apollo, god of the Sun and the Arts, is invoked. Wandering the seas, with hope and faith in the promises of the Olympians, the Trojans finally reach the promised land.

According to the meaning of the expression: 'The New Testament lies hidden in the Old one' and 'The Old Testament is unveiled in the New' formulated by Blessed Augustine about the supernatural Revelation, we can affirm that certain works and artistic manifestations of antiquity, whether or not they are plastic expressions of a religious cult, but whose content fragmentarily anticipates values of Christian moral and ethics, can be included among the testimonies of the natural revelation. Christians related to these peaks of universal culture and science by, on the one hand, dressing Christian faith and morality in the adornments of ancient art<sup>33</sup>, and, on the other hand, attempting to reconcile the materialistic image of the world based on myths

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<sup>29</sup> Vergiliu, *Aeneid*, translated by Eugen Lovinescu, preface by Edgar Papu, Editura pentru Literatură, 1964, p. 286. Although it seems that what is happening among humans is only a reflection of the real drama that is being played in the Olympus, Aeneas is not just the instrument of higher forces. There is no absolute determinism in the *Aeneid*, man is given enough freedom to choose the means. See also H. U. von Balthasar, *The Glory of God...*, p. 236, note 148.

<sup>30</sup> Andrei Pleșu, *The parables of Jesus: truth as story*, Humanitas publishing house, Bucharest, 2012, p. 141. God is the absence that becomes presence through man's hopeful expectation. Through waiting, man becomes, in a certain sense, the creator of his Creator. See also H. U. von Balthasar, *The Glory of God...*, p. 226. This is, theologically speaking, the mystical privilege of the founder, just as Abraham sees in the stars on the sky the glory of his people, or St. Paul in the 'third heaven', the vision of his mission as a preacher of the Truth, a vision that raises hope to the level of certainty.

<sup>31</sup> It is possible that Virgil had access to some of the Old Testament books, for there was a rather important Jewish community in Rome to which the apostle Paul addressed at least one epistle a few decades later.

<sup>32</sup> Nicolae Achimescu, *History and Philosophy of Religion in Ancient Peoples*, Tehnopress publishing house, Iași, 2000, p. 241. The god Aion, known in Phoenicia and Syria as *Chronos*, is a personification of the notion of 'time' and 'eternity', and in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC was identified with the ancient Roman god *Janus*. He was the god of gates, doors, bridges, entrances and passages, symbolizing transition, but also beginning and end. *Janus* was depicted with two opposing faces: one looking forwards, the other backwards. Linked to this god also came the idea of Rome's eternal ruling, in a new *saeculum*, a new *aion*, a new era marked by peace, happiness, of which Virgil and Horace speak.

<sup>33</sup> Saint Gregory of Nazians, apud Mihail Diaconescu, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

with the absolute exigency that came from the certainty of the Revelation. In any artistic representation, whether musical, plastic or choreographic, the mark of transcendence, of man's relationship with divinity, is revealed, more or less clearly, even if these manifestations do not become explicitly visual and sound expressions that are doctrinally affiliated to a religious cult. According to the characteristics of these artistic manifestations we can distinguish and interpret the particularities of an artist's work or we can analyse from an aesthetic and dogmatic point of view the specificity of one cult in relation to another. Just as there is an iconographic programme of Byzantine painting - which has at its centre the face, life and teachings of Christ surrounded by His saints - so we can deduct from the repetition of certain themes, compositional schemes and attitudes of the characters, an unwritten erminie, an imagistic programme of the art of Greco-Roman antiquity, which indicates how the faces and events in the lives of gods and heroes had to be illustrated. The Greco-Roman pantheon, essentialised in emblematic scenes inspired by the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Aeneid, together with the most popular characters of Indo-European mythology, formed the imaginary background to the iconography of the artistic representations that visually accompanied the rituals of worship and adorned homes and public buildings throughout the Roman Empire. They were made in fresco, mosaic, stone, ceramic or metal and decorated temples, altars, public squares and private houses. Most orders were requested from artists working in funerary art, portraits of dignitaries and imperial propaganda, but many works have survived depicting decorative ensembles, domestic, historical or hunting scenes, and portraits of some poets and philosophers.

If Virgil is cited with reverence in an Ecumenical Council, Plutarch, a Greek writer and philosopher of Roman nationality, has the honour of featuring in the iconographic programme of Christian churches, being painted alongside prophets, sibyls and other philosophers on the walls of several places of worship. Priest of the temple of Apollo at Delphi, Plutarch affirms the existence of a single divinity: 'There is one Sun and one Sky over all nations and one Deity with many names'<sup>34</sup>. One of the names of the god of the sun and light was Mithra or *Sol invictus*, considered the creator and saviour of the world, and his cult was widespread among Roman soldiers<sup>35</sup>. The 25th of December, the founding day of the Roman Temple of the Sun (*Phoebus-Apollo*), became the birthday of *Sol Invictus*, and later, in early Christianity, the date of celebration of the Nativity of Lord Jesus Christ.

For most ancient civilisations, the harmony between man and the cosmos populated by deities was conditioned by the connection of human activity through a calendar ritual to an astral imaginary. The attempt to align oneself with the stars, to begin an ordinance based on a calendar, is the reason for the existence of so many architectural constructions intended for

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<sup>34</sup> Andrei Dărlău, *op. cit.*, p. 44, note 88.

<sup>35</sup> Nicolae Achimescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 174, 213-215.

worship, oriented in such a way that light, on certain dates, indicates the altar or the most sacred place of the temple. All ancient peoples worshipped light, identifying the sun, moon and stars with all kinds of divine entities. The emperor of the early Christian Empire himself was a member of a solar cult.

God, for some, or the Universe, for others, communicates itself to man through light, light being the common denominator of any epistemology, without placing in competition or in opposition the knowledge that comes to us through Revelation with that acquired by man through scientific experiments. Whether we speak of physical light or its symbolism, or we approach the subject metaphorically, scientifically or theologically, the paradoxical nature and the diversity of perspectives from which light can be defined do not provide an answer that at least partially explores the mysteries it conceals. Paradox is a hallmark of light. Science has proven it with the wave-particle dualism of quantum mechanics, and theology fully confirms it. The Light is a Person who says of Himself that He is 'the Light of the world' (John 8:12). The divine Logos, says St. Gregory of Nazianz, is the incarnate Light, the supreme, ineffable 'Archetypal Light' which is found through uncreated energies 'in a certain outpouring' and in man<sup>36</sup>.

In the Neoplatonic tradition, *Arché*, the unique principle of existence or 'one', has no name, being identified with 'the supreme good' and 'the beautiful'<sup>37</sup>. The supra-physical good communicates itself to all like the sun which spreads its rays of light to all things. This idea<sup>38</sup> is also found in Christianity and is one of the reasons why Plato is also painted among the saints on the walls of churches.

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<sup>36</sup> Saint Gregory of Nazians, apud Mihail Diaconescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>37</sup> Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names*; *Mystical Theology*, translation, introduction, notes, glossary and bibliography by Marilena Vlad, Polirom publishing house, 2018, pp. 30-32. It is called 'beautiful' because it is beautiful in itself and always the same, being the source of all beauty and super-beauty. Dionysius shows that every movement, of the intellect, the soul or the sensitive, is from the 'beautiful and good' and that every action of everything is motivated by love for the beautiful.

<sup>38</sup> Olivier Clément, *Transfiguring Time in the Light of Orthodox Tradition*, translated by Măriuca and Adrian Alexandrescu, Spandugino publishing house, 2021, p. 32. For Plato, man cannot free himself from evil without a transcendent helper, which is not the world of ideas, as it is often superficially schematized by the Platonic conception of the divine, but is God who also transcends the intelligible, 'the Beautiful that surpasses all possibility of expression' and 'the Good that is beyond being'. See also Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names*; *Mystical Theology*..., pp. 22, 23, note 1; 31. The similarities of the two traditions of thought show us that they are part of the same original thread, from the same revelation, they are nothing but steps and modes of the divine revelation. Without attempting to demonstrate revelation in terms of philosophy, St. Dionysius shows that revelation is already present in the terms of philosophy, which is a primary form of revelation; not an explicit one, but rather one in potential, one that had to be perfected in order to discover what is hidden in it. The Neoplatonic philosophers themselves consider philosophy to have divine origins, it being in fact a type of original revelation, then passed on by each of its exegetes.

Normative in Christianity, the vision of the theology of light that St. Dionysius the Areopagite describes is that of a 'scalar' universe, in which, similar to a cascade of light, the good is transmitted as a light that awakens the desire for light. We can recognise the pattern of the hierarchical order governing both the intelligible world (*kosmos noetos*) and the sensible world (*kosmos aisthetos*) in the sacramental worship of the Church, which is a visualisation of the unseen cosmic liturgy. God light (*phos*) communicates Himself to man through sight (*theoria*) and through inner knowledge (*episteme*). Uncreated light is communicated to people through the Church in the form of the Holy Mysteries by the heavenly hierarchies organized in triads<sup>39</sup>.

Although sight by faith is above ordinary sight (John 14:11-16), St. Dionysius says that man cannot attain non-material sight (contemplation) of the heavenly hierarchies unless he makes use of 'material lights as visible appearances of the gift of non-material light'<sup>40</sup>. The earthly liturgy is mediated by 'veils and symbols', with images having a sanctifying role as stepping stones from the sensible to the intelligible ones. Now viewed as 'through a mirror, in divination'<sup>41</sup>, these material symbols and veils, will become totally radiant, luminous and incorruptible in the life to come. The effort to gain access to the 'sight of the unseen' through 'holy vestments', understood as images defined by substance (*ousia*) and form (*morphê*), is common to many civilisations.

Man, 'a moving image', can only understand the world through images. In the image he can see himself and his eternal origin at the same time: in the image of his self he contemplates the absolute divine Self<sup>42</sup>. As plasticised rationality the human body expresses the divine. Of spiritual essence, human beauty has its cause in God. The archetype of beauty, therefore, in the Orthodox doctrine of the face, the human beauty, before being an aesthetic matter, is a theological one. The vision of beauty as the saviour of the world<sup>43</sup> is not only limited to the aesthetic dimension, because such beauty can also overshadow holiness.

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<sup>39</sup> Egon Sendler, *The icon, image of the unseen – elements of theology, technique and aesthetics*, Translated by Ioana Caragiu and Florin Caragiu, nun Ilie Doiņa Teodosia, Sofia publishing house, Bucharest, 2005, p. 181.

<sup>40</sup> Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, *Complete Works and Scholias of Saint Maximus the Confessor*, translation, introduction and notes by Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Paideia publishing house, Bucharest, 1996, p. 16.

<sup>41</sup> I Corinteni 13, 12

<sup>42</sup> H. U. von Balthasar, *The Glory of God...*, p. 64.

<sup>43</sup> The one that Dostoyevsky talks about.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

From the perspective of Christian soteriology, the neutrality of the artistic approach can be corrupted or ennobled by the intentionality with which it does or does not tend towards Truth. Otherwise, the artistic creation itself can be received only aesthetically, sometimes even with the aura of a masterpiece, but without any moral or soteriological significance. In accordance with the perspective of Neoplatonic philosophy, which aspires through the contemplation of beauty to the unique principle of existence, Saint Basil the Great notes the ontological and cognitive, initiatory and mystagogical role of images. Emphasizing the heuristic character of plastic art, which always establishes a new form of knowledge and existence added to the old one<sup>44</sup>, he states that the iconic image is, at the same time, a means

<sup>44</sup> Mihail Diaconescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-112.



of ‘glorifying’ knowledge and recognizing the divine identity<sup>45</sup>. Although the Neoplatonists regarded matter as an inferior state of existence, they were the first to formulate a relational perspective of religious images as material symbols of some intelligible prototypes capable of elevating the human spirit towards them. Thus, in the early Christian centuries, the paradoxical situation arose where Platonic philosophers, whose metaphysics despised matter, defended the cult of images, while some Christians, whose faith was based on the Incarnation, opposed them<sup>46</sup>.

This fact is explainable, if we consider that the reflection of the Christian exegetes of that period about the image and the visible, did not yet operate so thoroughly with the terms of the theological vocabulary of the icon and the figure (eikôn), which became dogmatized especially after the iconoclastic controversy of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century. Another reason for the misunderstanding came from doubting the possibility of illustrating the divine chenosis of the Person of Christ beneath the image with the appearance of a slave. It was necessary to define the relationship between the human condition and the divine being of Christ, Who remains inseparable from the divine substance despite the emptying into the human appearance (form)<sup>47</sup>. The representation of the image of the divinity as a place where the difference, and also the similarity are revealed, becomes possible alongside the Incarnation, because what the believer sees at once in the iconic image is both the chenosis and the glory of the divinity.

As Marie-José Mondzain distinguishes very clearly, Incarnation is not materialization, and the icon as a memorial of the incarnational iconomy places in the work a body that is not matter. ‘Became flesh’ is not equivalent to ‘became matter’. The icon of Christ is empty of His bodily and real presence, thus radically different from the Eucharist. When the Word became incarnate, divinity was not filled with matter, just as matter was not filled with divinity. To become incarnate means to become empty or to become alike, but not identical to, one’s own image<sup>48</sup>. Stylistically, the dogmatic truth of the Incarnation is affirmed in the icon at the cost of the loss of natural reality. The result is a paradoxical ‘disembodied incarnation’<sup>49</sup>, characterised

<sup>45</sup> Anca Vasiliu, *On the diaphanous: the medium of light in ancient and medieval philosophy*, translated by de Irinel Antoniu, Polirom publishing house, 2010, p. 202.

<sup>46</sup> Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., *Saint Theodore the Studite, Jesus Christ: Prototype of his icon*, translation and introductory study Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis publishing house, Alba-Iulia, 1994, pp. 7-9.

<sup>47</sup> Anca Vasiliu, *op. cit.*, pp. 203; 317.

<sup>48</sup> Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, icon, iconomy: the Byzantine sources of the contemporary imaginary*, Sofia publishing house, Bucharest, 2009, p. 134.

<sup>49</sup> Alain Besançon, *The forbidden image: the intellectual history of iconoclasm from Plato to Kandinsky*, translated by Mona Antohi, Humanitas publishing house, Bucharest, 1996, apud Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., *Canon of Orthodoxy: VII Ecumenical Synod, vol. 1. Dogmatically Defining Icons (691-810)*, Deisis publishing house, Sibiu, 2020, p. 1086-1088. That is, giving up, in the conception of the iconic form, the imitation of the naturalistic reality of the image.

by the schematisation and hieratisation of forms, the suppression of perspective and the symmetrical sequencing of the composition, decorativism and the emergence of new iconographic terms.

The end of the Greco-Roman world was marked by the victory of the religious community over the ancient idea of the state, with Christian religious identity taking the place of political identity, and the citizen disappearing before the believer<sup>50</sup>. One of the essential features of what is called by Christians ‘the baptism of art’ was the transfer of the current terms used in imperial and civil iconography into the nascent ‘ars christiana’, giving them a new content<sup>51</sup>. The transfer took place gradually, with many of the old faiths coexisting with Christianity for some time. We recognise in the imagistic and conceptual background of Paleochristian art symbols, personifications and allegories redefined from the iconography of the Greco-Roman Pantheon, some images, attitudes and compositional schemes being almost identically modelled. The images of Oranta, Orpheus, Hermes or Apollo, under which Christ – the Good Shepherd, the Healer or the Teacher – was portrayed, are prototypes that were used not only as graphic models for Christian patterns, but also as didactic and catechetical support. The cultic images of the polytheistic religions served as an introduction to the Christian imagery to the extent that an anecdotal or symbolic resemblance could be found among them. The kerygmatic effectiveness of these overlapping meanings and images could be noticed especially in mixed families or communities, where Christians and non-Christians had to interact socially without sharing the same faith.

#### DIAGRAM 1



**Fig. 6a)**



**Fig. 6b)**



**Fig. 6c)**

<sup>50</sup> Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., *op. cit.*, p. 1078.

<sup>51</sup> Nikolai Ozolin, *Orthodox Iconography of Pentecost – its sources and evolution of the Byzantine iconographic scheme*, translated by Vasile Manea, Patmos publishing house, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, p. 87.



Fig. 6d)



Fig. 6e)

The formal similarity and accuracy of Christian iconography towards the Greco-Roman anthropology is not only due to the influence of Hellenism, because it is also a consequence of the theology of the Incarnation. In Christ and His saints, the idea of humanity in its wholeness was accomplished. The iconic image goes beyond the symbol which can only express an abstract idea<sup>52</sup>. The Romans considered abstractions and their anthropomorphic personifications to be among the most appropriate ways of synthetically expressing religious or political content. If the Roman personifications of Abundance, Providence or Justice were represented anthropomorphically, another category, such as Peace or Concord, were conceived and rendered as pure abstractions in the form of monumental constructions, such as the Altar of Peace or the Temple of Concord. Another way of synthesising and communicating an idea was to use emblematic figures, such as: the representation of the river Tiber through the image of an old man holding a container from which water springs, or the representation of a citadel in the form of a woman sitting on a throne with a crown<sup>53</sup> on her head.

There are, in Roman antiquity, many examples of temples built in honour of abstract notions such as *Sophia*, *Ktisis*, *Aion*, or *Psuche*, conventional figures of some concepts, without any other support than the name of an intelligible reality, figures equivalent to allegories or personifications<sup>54</sup>. Most often, these conventional figures were materialised in effigies and compositions with cosmological themes executed in the

<sup>52</sup> Egon Sendler, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Brilliant, *Roman Art from the Republic to Constantine*, Meridiane publishing house, Bucharest, 1979, pp. 172-173.

<sup>54</sup> Anca Vasiliu, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

mosaic or fresco technique, but such works have been found made from a variety of materials. Many such works were also executed in private residences, the last of them dating from the same period when Christian mosaic art was beginning to shape its own iconographic form.

We witness, in the early centuries, alternating episodes of attempts to Christianize Hellenism with attempts to Hellenize or even annihilate Christianity, one such moment being the short reign of Emperor Julian, nicknamed the Apostate. The process of the universalisation of Christianity took place gradually and naturally, with the Church, assisted by the Holy Spirit, providing answers and solutions, dogmatically and canonically proclaimed in the Ecumenical Synods. Before he became an emperor, Constantine the Great built in Trier a temple to the sun god Apollo, venerated as *Sol Invictus*. Coins minted during this period prove his devotion to the god Mars. After he takes over the empire, the faces of the gods on the coins are gradually replaced by neutral inscriptions and Christian signs. The emperor's cult is depleted of its religious content, retaining more of its political significance, but he does not relinquish the title of *Pontifex Maximus*, which allows him to maintain a balance, ensuring equality and unity between citizens of different faiths.

Constantine continues to finance the construction of temples and churches at the same time, but the temples dedicated to him become public places, without statues and without sacrifices. In the same sense of neutrality and concord, the first imperial churches founded by Emperor Constantine were not dedicated to saints, but were placed under the patronage of divine attributes and concepts such as Wisdom (Ἡ ἀγία Σοφία), Peace (Ἡ ἀγία Εἰρήνη) or Power (Ἡ ἀγία Δύναμις), personified notions that could be interpreted in two perspectives, one Christian and the other in the spirit of Greco-Roman philosophy and mythology<sup>55</sup>.

The periods of religious decline are marked in art by an eclecticism that we also find materialised at the beginning of the Christian era in a multitude of forms covering the whole range of Greco-Roman cults. Imperial art from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> century created a certain stylistic community (*koiné*) similar to the political organisation of the various peoples of the empire under the *pax romana*: a broad framework within which diversity was possible. The stylistic unity, the result of formal solutions and typological models created during the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, makes it possible, for example, – to recognise according to the criteria of the same plastic form – the funerary stars throughout the Empire, all of them belonging to the same common type, created for identical destinations and for beneficiaries belonging to the same

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<sup>55</sup> Pavel Florenski, *The Pillar and Foundation of Truth, an attempt at Orthodox theodicy in twelve letters*, translated by Emil Iordache, fr. Iulian Friptu and fr. Dimitrie Popescu, Polirom, 1999, p. 245.

state<sup>56</sup>. The same unified vision, achieved through assimilation and transformation, but without cancelling out the specific features of each province or local artistic 'school', is also seen in painting and architecture.

Aiming beyond the aesthetic dimension of the work of art, Christian iconography is born under the exigencies of spirituality, creating models and identity patterns, which attempt to take art out of historical temporality, elaborating new stylistic formulas obtained by replacing the classical spatial relations – dominated by the organic principle<sup>57</sup> existing in the culture of pre-Christian antiquity – with an aesthetic vision closer to the abstract or geometric one, usually found in archaic or so-called primitive cultures. Emperor Constantine's Triumphal Arch, for example, departs from the specificity of classical landscape. We no longer find that proportional beauty, which balances each part by size and movement with the part next to it and with the whole; instead, we find a different kind of beauty, which finds expression in a rigorously symmetrical composition, similar to the structure of crystals<sup>58</sup>. This new paradigm of thinking and composing images, – characterized by the attempt to perceive and redefine the alternation of light and shadow, by the rigor of execution, by the aesthetic finish of the volume with emphasis on the contour, by the suggestion of the weightlessness of the volumes, which seem to generate their own light, – will in time spread throughout the empire. The dominant aspect is given by the predominance of straight lines organized in prismatic structures, with planes that meet in a stylized geometry, where, especially in painting, accents of light are applied to volumes in parallel hatched areas, according to a plastic meaning through which an invisible reality is visibly induced, that the iconographic forms are permeated by the inner light of Grace.

We can talk about a light that is born and seems to spring from within the well-defined perimeter of the forms painted in the icon, but the rendering of light is shaped not according to how it naturally falls on the forms, but according to a purely plastic logic<sup>59</sup>. Through the effect achieved by this graphic-pictorial convention, the iconic forms do not claim an

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<sup>56</sup> Richard Brilliant, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

<sup>57</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Intropathy; and other art theory studies*, Univers publishing house, Bucharest, 1970, p. 80. A comparison between the Doric and Ionic temples shows how the abstract principle has been replaced by the organic. The monumentality full of majesty of the Doric temple, based on a purely geometric, or rather stereometric, consistency, which with its inaccessible, superhuman abstraction made one feel the futility of human existence, is no longer found in the Ionic temple.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 90, 91. In fact, it has been observed that the passive nature of crystals is dominated by the hexagonal symmetry of inorganic structures, while pentagonal symmetry is very present in organic structures in the morphology of living beings. See Matila C. Ghyka, *Philosophy and mysticism of the number*, translated by Dumitru Purnichescu, Univers Enciclopedic publishing house, Bucharest, 1998, p. 91.

<sup>59</sup> Georgios Kordis, *Rhythm in Byzantine Painting*, translated by Mihai Coman, Bizantină publishing house, Bucharest, 2008, pp. 88-89.

autonomous source of light, being the symbolic expression of light, whose origin must be sought in the Sinaitic and Taboric experience. The Holy Scripture provides us with numerous examples in which this light, shared in different intensities, makes the reception of revelation perceptible on several levels of understanding. 'If the physical light enables me to see Christ, and the intelligible light enables me to understand him, the uncreated light, the Taboric light, enables me to have the living experience of God, which gives both intellect and body the power to perceive the meaning of God'<sup>60</sup>. As a space of encounter and dialogue between the perceptible and the intelligible, iconically consecrated images have a sanctifying role.

The theology of uncreated light, which is the basis of liturgical art and worship, inspired by and commented on by Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, takes on a particular exegetical complexion in Western Europe after the Great Schism of the Christian Empire (1054). The Areopagite writings were reinterpreted in ways that had a major impact on the subsequent perception and orientation of the way the image was represented and venerated. After the Great Schism, the teaching on the icon is no longer viewed and dogmatically perceived through the same lenses, which means that iconography too, according to the two regions of the empire, is shaped by two different aesthetic visions. The main causes must be sought much earlier than 1054. Of the complex of factors which deepened this gap, the most serious are undoubtedly the iconoclastic crisis followed by the faulty translation of the acts of the Seventh Council by the theologians of Emperor Charles the Great's court. The ambiguous use of the word adoration instead of veneration, with Latin theologians translating everywhere the word adoration as *προσκύνησις*, led to a totally absurd understanding of the decisions of the synod<sup>61</sup> and a misinterpretation of the iconic image. At the emperor's command, the Frankish scholars respond with a series of theses entitled *Libri Carolini* (Opus Caroli Regis contra Synodum).

According to *Libri Carolini*, representations of art cannot elevate us to the contemplation of the spiritual world and eternal truths, because they can offer us nothing more than an immediate sensory experience. Also from the Carolingian texts we learn that the value of a work of art is given only by its aesthetic appearance and manoeuvre, by which we can judge whether it is beautiful or ugly, but we cannot evaluate whether it is true or false, because

<sup>60</sup> André Scrima, *The Liturgical Church*, Humanitas publishing house, 2005, p. 151.

<sup>61</sup> Dumitru A. Vanca, *Icon and Catechesis*, Reîntregirea publishing house, Alba-Iulia, 2005, pp. 161-162. The Frankish theologians composed a doctrinal work, the Caroline Books, in response to what they believed to be the rulings of Council VII, ending up accusing the Byzantines of idolatry. Where the Byzantines had developed an entire philosophical system to explain the relationship between type and prototype (which for Westerners went unnoticed), the *Libri Carolini* assert that there is no connection between the icon and the represented one (prototype). The relationship is up to the artist – and therefore arbitrary, since only the artist can write on an image 'St. Virgin' or 'Venus'.



for the Frankish theologians a work of art means nothing more than the value of the materials of which it is made. The Frankish painters ‘do not depict divine characters or scenes, but visually reconstruct the interpretations of their meanings’<sup>62</sup>.

## DIAGRAM 2



Fig. 7a)



Fig. 7b)



Fig. 7c)



Fig. 7d)

<sup>62</sup> Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., *op. cit.*, p. 1091.



### DIAGRAM 3



Fig. 8a) Fig. 8b) Fig. 8c) Fig. 8d) Fig. 8e) Fig. 8f)

The *Libri Carolini* theses produced in the art of Latin liturgical worship a series of stylistic transformations and dogmatic innovations foreign to Byzantine iconography. As a result of destabilising the balance of criteria for the perception and validation of the iconic image, the new artistic productions placed increasing emphasis on natural and sensory aesthetic evaluation criteria, to the detriment of theological and spiritual ones. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when scholastic thinkers attempted to theoretically restore the status and veneration of the image, which had been distorted by the *Libri Carolini* theses, an inertia oriented towards the artistic ideals of non-Christian Greco-Roman antiquity had already taken hold in Western ecclesial art.

In the ancient world there was no clear distinction between art, science and religion, between sacred and profane. The pavement mosaics, illustrated for the most part with mythological themes, are the consequence of the type of manifestation of the religiosity of the time, that is, the way of understanding and living the philosophical principles of the time. Mosaic scenes were framed by large, predominantly geometric, ornamental surfaces, because the ancients believed that geometry embodied the primordial patterns of the universe which, when invoked, had the power to imprint heavenly order on earth. Apart from their decorative character, the execution

of mosaics can also be linked to the cyclical commemorations of the many deities of Olympus or to the protagonists of certain mystery cults.

The most popular subjects of the pavement mosaics are, according to the large number spread all over the Mediterranean basin, those deities with a tragic destiny such as Orpheus, Dionysos, Actaeon or Osiris, who, although having met a cruel end, are reborn sparking empathy, admiration and hope in people<sup>63</sup>. Another category of portraits is that of heroes and demigods such as Ulysses and Aeneas, whose lives propose initiatory journeys as a model of knowledge and discovery of the world and the self. In the pre-Christian period there were numerous altars with mosaic wall decoration, built in the privacy of private gardens and courtyards, some of which have survived to the present day buried in the volcanic ashes of the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. A unique testimony of another wall decoration from the ancient period can be found within the walls and arches of the *Domus Aurea* palace, a foundation of the Emperor Nero, whose size and technical solutions made it last over two thousand years.

The walls were painted with frescoes, but what is surprising is the extravagance of the ceiling ornaments, which abounded in mosaics and gilded stuccowork, sprinkled with semi-precious stones and ivory slabs. The major themes of the compositional scenes were inspired by the Iliad and the Odyssey. The composition theme of an octagonal mosaic located in a *nymphaeum* with a fountain, featuring Ulysses as the main character, is suggestive. In the *nymphaeum*, the barrel-shaped dome originally imitated a natural cavern and was lined with pumice stone stalactites, a decoration abandoned during its restoration. It should be noted that the scene of Ulysses and the Cyclops Polyphemus, although set inside a cave, has a background covered with gold tesserae<sup>64</sup>. For a long time, it was thought that gilding the background of a painting or compositional scene was an innovation of Christian iconography. The projection of Ulysses, who for ancient philosophers was considered the 'icon' of memory and non-forgetfulness, on a golden background, gives to the scene an iconic character and to Ulysses a heroic stance, amplifying his victory in the confrontation of the spirit with the brute, telluric forces.

Odysseus' entire effort on the way back to Ithaca is a struggle to save his memory, to not forget who he is, where he comes from and where he has to go. According to the philosophical conceptions of the time, the immortal soul belongs to the world of ideas, but is a prisoner of a body from which it must free itself. The objective of Ulysses' voyage, which symbolically means the itinerary of the soul navigating the sea of this life, is to return to the

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<sup>63</sup> Their worship prepared and familiarized people with the coming of a God Who became incarnate, suffered and rose again, Jesus Christ.

<sup>64</sup> Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 241.

transcendent world of the original homeland from which he had left and alienated himself. In order to achieve the goal of 'reuniting the divine that is in man with the divine that is in the universe', Plotinus proposed an itinerary of the soul, an inner anabasis, whose mythical model is that of Ulysses returning to his homeland<sup>65</sup>. The knowledge of reality and the discovery of the self is one of the main themes of Plato's work, who, in the 'myth of the cave' from the work *Republica*, suggests by analogy that to know, starting from the sensible to the intelligible, is to remember, to recall.

Before the advent of Christianity there were many small memorials or places of meditation and prayer, *nymphaeums* and shrines of 'remembrance' in the empire, many of them dedicated to the nymphs of the springs or the nine muses, daughters of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. Most of these sanctuaries were built on the site of springs, designed as fountains with stone basins, with one or three arched niches in the form of apses, with frescoed walls or mosaics with glass paste and shell tesserae. As personifications of the arts, the muses were meant to maintain order in creation, to guide the principles of the sciences and the harmony of the universe, which is why an institution was dedicated to them and it could not be called anything other than the Museum. The Museum, *musaeum* in Latin or *μουσεῖον* in ancient Greek, was not, as one might think today, a collection of objects, but a place where the sciences that the Muses gave to the people were cultivated. Etymologically, we also have the following words from the Muses: music, *μουσική* (*τέχνη*) the art of the muses or *musica* in Latin; and mosaic, *musaicum* in medieval Latin or (*opus*) *musivum* in late Latin.

The niche or apse at the spring at the sanctuary of the nymphs, framed by a pediment and mosaic-covered columns, will be found transfigured over time as the main architectural element in the composition of Christian altars and in the sacred niches of synagogues (*mizrah*) and mosques (*mihrab*). In archaic cultures, caves, as well as springs, have always been linked to the cult of divinity. They were gateways to the underworld and the supernatural world, the favourite place for epiphanies. The myth of the cave, which for Plato was the symbol of the existential condition, finds its use materialized in the artificial caves of the sanctuaries built and decorated with the polychrome tesserae of the wall mosaics around the springs. A special cult was dedicated to music by the Pythagoreans and Platonists. Pythagoras advised that a temple for the Muses should be built in Crotone, so that they would preserve the concord and harmony that reigned among the citizens. Dedicating a small fountain to the Muses was not just a simple gesture of decorating the garden, but represented the creation of a niche, a cave in front of which to philosophize daily on the condition of life.

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<sup>65</sup> Alain Besançon, *op. cit.*, p. 55. Sirens and all the fabulous entities trying to keep him on track make him proposals to make him forget about himself and his destination.

## DIAGRAM 4

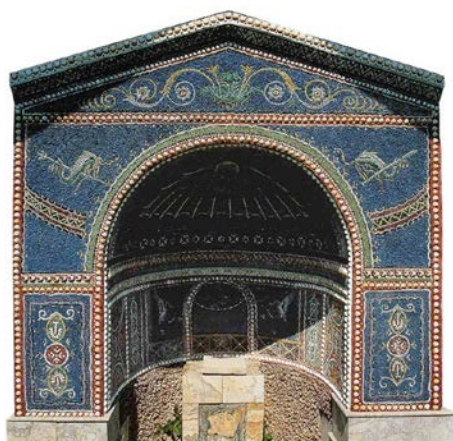


Fig. 9a)



Fig. 9b)



Fig. 9c)

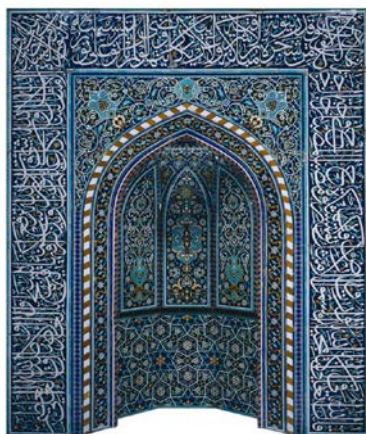


Fig. 9d)

The mosaic was an instrument of meditation on the Beauty and the Light, through which the worshippers of the muses connected to the life of the cosmos, becoming a conscious part of the whole, a connector between the One and the many<sup>66</sup>. Myth has it that, in addition to the arts and sciences, the Muses taught Hermes how to predict the future by observing the arrangement of pebbles in a pool of water. The ceremonial presence before the multicoloured and shining portal of the apse was an exercise in aesthetic contemplation and invocation of the divinity, even though later, for some of

<sup>66</sup> Maurice Nicosia, <http://blog.abaravenna.it/mosaico/i-luoghi-della-rimembranza/>. *Musaea*, the springs decorated in mosaic, are originally 'pebble water pools', with the help of which the future was divined.

the Neoplatonists, the prime nature of Beauty was formless and Light was impersonal<sup>67</sup>.

While in Hellenistic and Roman antiquity mosaic had become a technique of extreme refinement, representing mythological and hunting scenes, Christianity raised the art of mosaic, both literally and figuratively, from the level of pavement decorations<sup>68</sup> to the vertical of wall surfaces, which unfold their iconographic repertoire up to the height of the dome. The first series of mosaics, which demonstrate stylistic and programmatic unity, come to light with the Christians' freedom of expression. These mosaic ensembles still bear the stamp of Greco-Roman art, but gradually, between the 4th and 7th centuries, the stylistics of Christian art complies to the criteria of liturgical worship. Being very demanding, they were mainly financed by emperors and dignitaries of the upper class, and the contribution of mosaic artists was so highly valued that they were exempted from taxes under Emperor Constantine. After the approval of the iconographic programme, mosaic art, like all pictorial techniques, was refined and shaped into a unified whole, later known as what we now call Byzantine art. The height of Byzantine mosaic, from the 12th to the 14th centuries, culminates in the last wall paintings made before the fall of Constantinople. The economic weakening of the Eastern Roman Empire, through the iconoclastic crisis and the Fourth Crusade, had the effect of reducing ecclesiastical painting in the mosaic technique to extinction. Today the technique is revived in various meridians of Orthodoxy.

The art of mosaics and stained glass art, as well as the whole decorative complex of precious stones, gems and polychrome marbles adorning liturgical furniture and objects of worship, is built on a long tradition that aesthetically and theologically values the motif of light. The theme of light returns periodically in the history of thought, with consequences in the evolution of iconographic erminia, as an effect of the contemplative vision of saints such as Dionysius the Areopagite, Simeon the New Theologian, St. Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas. With its roots in the tradition of symbolic decoration, polychrome statues and cameo techniques inherited from antiquity and resemanticized in the Christian era,

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<sup>67</sup> Alain Besançon, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-57; 61. Plotinus concludes that the only image of the divine is that which the soul, purified by contemplation, achieves by becoming that perfect 'inner mirror', with its smooth and tranquil surface, in which intelligence and the One can be reflected.

<sup>68</sup> I have shown that in pre-Christian antiquity most of the mosaics were pavements, but there are also some cases of works executed on walls and ceilings, which have survived to the present day. I mention here only the *Domus Aurea* in Rome, built by Emperor Nero in 64, and the facades of some of the altars and fountains in the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a new decorative pavement programme was developed in churches, using a complex of geometric patterns called *cosmatesque*.

the theme of light has multiple meanings in biblical exegesis, from the metaphorical image of the Heavenly Jerusalem to that of the incarnate (embedded) Light, *Lux incorporata*, an interpretation that refers to the Mystery of the Incarnation of God, to the world transfigured by grace, to matter permeated by uncreated light.

In the world of late Roman antiquity, and later in the Byzantine world, there was a belief that the veining or luminous veins of coloured marble, gemstones or translucent stones were embedded rays of light, an intervention of divine light in the rock. The uniqueness of these 'graphic accidents' depicting imaginary landscapes or abstract compositions, if we were to read them in a modernist key of art, are interpreted as signs of God embedded in creation suggesting the unimaginable, the unusual, the ineffable, in short, the paradox of the Christian world summed up in the confession that God is both One and Three, that Christ is both Man and God, and that Mary is both Mother of God and Virgin.

For the cladding of church interiors, slabs were chosen, whose chromorphemes illustrated graphic arrangements and random chromatic fusions, surfaces of a unique plasticity and pictoriality, symbolically expressing the intertwining of the divine with humanity, the mixing of spirit with matter, of soul with body. Dogmatic notions such as hypostatic union and perichoresis are symbolically translated into plastic expressions with a surprising visual impact – offered by the natural textures of the cut and polished rocks – or by contrasting colours that intertwine, melting their shades into sinuous asymmetrical zigzags, or by displaying surfaces dotted with irregular punctiform formations or striped screens that anamorphically fade into chromatic and value gradients, with the sole purpose of suggesting the dogmatic 'contradictions' of the Kingdom of Light which, as they say, 'already exists but not yet'.

In the Church, it is dogma that retains and concentrates the revealed message, and in the worship, word and image form an inseparable totality, a true 'pnevmatosphere' in which the meaning of Scripture, the theological dimension (in the contemplative sense) of divine iconomy<sup>69</sup>, is revealed. In the same sense, in a homily given on the occasion of the consecration of the mosaic painting of a church, Patriarch Photius said that all the symbolic images and iconic faces represented in the liturgical space are the essence of a theological discourse, 'because by blending the flowers of colour with the rectitude of dogma', the painters have immortalised sacred beauty through holy mosaics (*hierois morphōmasi*)<sup>70</sup>.

While there is a certain continuity in the use of mosaics, both as a technical execution and as an iconographic programme in church decoration,

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<sup>69</sup> Olivier Clément, *Considerations on the spirituality of the icon*, Rev. Ortodoxia, XXVII (1975), 2, pp. 384-389.

<sup>70</sup> Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., *op. cit.*, pp. 254-255; 258.

stained glass appears sporadically, more decorative in the ecclesiastical art of the Christian Roman Empire, with the most consistent compositional ensembles being recorded in Western Europe starting with the 12<sup>th</sup> century, coinciding with the period of development of the Gothic style in architecture. The meeting of the abbot Suger de Saint-Denis<sup>71</sup> with the theology of light, mediated by the Dionysian exegetical discourse of John Scotus Eriugena, Hugues de Saint-Victor and other translators, was to form the basis of a new aesthetic and liturgical vision, which led to the appearance of huge polychrome windows in the walls of churches, through the filter of which light gives the retina the materiality of a diaphanous atmosphere. The dominant colour is a sapphire blue, a metaphor for the celestial vault which, in the human imagination, is associated with the Kingdom of God. The same colour, but in warmer shades, *lapis lazuli* and turquoise stones, in association with gold, were the most sought-after, but also the most precious colour combinations of liturgical objects and pew furniture. There was a real fascination with these 'immaterial matters' and oxymoronic states of aggregation, such as the 'solidified light' of precious stones, rock crystals and translucent gems with which cult objects, reliquaries and evangeliaries were adorned<sup>72</sup>.

Suger tries to recreate anagogically, with the help of material means, a state of spiritual elevation that raises the mind and senses to the mystical height of contemplating the world above. The spread of stained glass in the West could be understood as a last effort to affirm iconicity in ecclesiastical art, after the impact that the *Libri Carolini* had on the Western artistic consciousness and before the humanist values of the Cultural Renaissance became manifest. *Libri Carolini* emphasize the rejection of any sacrality and iconicity of the artificial image, the place of the image here being not Christology and the visible symbol as in the East, but the Augustinian filioquist pneumatology and linguistic sign<sup>73</sup>. This Augustinian dualistic vision explains both the rejection of the Eastern icon and the Carolingian religious art limited to bodily vision radically based on sign, word and purely

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<sup>71</sup> Even if not all historians consider that abbot Suger de Saint-Denis was the first to contribute to the design and execution of the first construction with architectural elements specific to what would later be called the Gothic style, he is the example that remains the most visible landmark in history, of which written evidence remains.

<sup>72</sup> Anca Vasiliu, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

<sup>73</sup> Olivier Boulnois, *Au-delà de l'image. Une archéologie du visuel au Moyen Âge (V<sup>e</sup> - XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Paris, 2008, apud Deacon Ioan I. ICA jr., *op. cit.*, pp. 1092, 1095. 'The Augustinian vision of the image has a double classification: theological and anthropological. For Augustine, who reads the Scripture in terms of Plotinian-Porphyrion Neoplatonism, both these essential images of God and man: the Son and the soul, are invisible; they have nothing to do with the lower corporeality. Image of the invisible God, man is exclusively through his invisible soul, in whose memory, intellect and will he sees mirrored the Father, Who begets the Son, His eternal Word, from whose common love results the Holy Spirit, Who proceeds from both and is their common bond.'



intellectual knowledge, promoting the iconoclasm of a purely invisible likeness of God through love, the sign of the presence of the Trinitarian Spirit in a personal and social 'economy'. 'Augustine departs from the tradition of the earlier Fathers by affirming that man is not after the image (after the face) of the Son, but after the image (face) of the common essence of the three Persons'<sup>74</sup>.

Now, the artificial icon is visible because it reflects the economy of Incarnation (and creation) and allows through its likeness visible access to the personal Prototype, known and venerated in (and) through it. In this regard, Mondzain points out that 'iconophile theologians have highlighted the fact that, linked to the paradox of the «economy» of the Incarnation as a hypostatic union between the divine and the human, without fusion or separation, the icon is part of a double «economic» and «eiconic» – «eiconomic» – regime of a relational and imitative type (...)'. «The economy» of the Church and of the icon is the revelation and imitation of the '«economy» of God, and both bring into play the «economic» relation between the invisible natural image – the Son, the eternal icon of the unseen Father, reflected in every human being, an icon of Him, (...) and His artificial image visible in the icon painted and venerated through imitation and for imitation's sake'<sup>75</sup>.

By distinguishing between the natural and the artificial image, Patriarch Nichifor demythologizes the iconoclasts' magical conception of the image. The icon, more precisely the artistic face represented in it, is by its nature different from the model. In order to show this, Saint Nichifor finds his conceptual tool in *Aristotelian categories* and defines the artistic face, the icon, with the category of *relation*, of *faip*. The face is always relational.<sup>76</sup>

The veneration of the artificial icon in the Byzantine space is a synaesthetic interaction whose particularity is the tactile act, an honouring which is under the imperative of a triple function: educational, ethical and cultic. More than an expression of 'the paradoxical relationship prototype-image, according to the Neoplatonic invisible-visible dialectic, the Byzantine icon expresses this relationship modelled on the Incarnation, according to an intangible-tangible dialectic'<sup>77</sup>. Carolingian religious art, based on a 'real

<sup>74</sup> Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., *Canon of Orthodoxy: VII Ecumenical Synod, vol. I....*, pp. 1091, note 62; 1092; 1095.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1090

<sup>76</sup> Christoph Schönborn, *Icon of Christ*, translation and preface by Fr. Dr. Vasile Răducă, Anastasia publishing house, 1996, p. 165. If the theology of the icon is based on the Platonic teaching about model and representation, about type and archetype, Patriarch Nichifor no longer bases the characteristics of the artistic image on the idea of participation to the being, as St. John Damascene had done, but only on the relationship of likeness.

<sup>77</sup> Bissera V. Pentcheva, *The sensual Icon: space, ritual, and the senses in Bizantium*, published by Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park PA 16802-1003, 2010. Apud Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., *op. cit.*, p. 1112. 'The immaterial is revealed on the surface of the

absence' and a fundamental distrust of the materiality of painting, refuses the sacredness of the icon and misses the encounter with divinity, with the polemic texts of the Latins accusing Empress Irina of spreading through material icons a deviant faith in idolatry. Because the icon is a 'memorial of the Incarnation', a seal of God's kenosis, its rejection is tantamount to denying the Incarnation and the entire Christianity<sup>78</sup>.

The echo of Charles' theses had many consequences over time, of which history records two more important aspects: the Protestant Reformation and the status of the autonomous artist. Over the centuries, Calvin radicalised the Carolingian texts in an iconoclastic sense, with the Protestant Reformation reaffirming, almost Islamically, the primacy of the pure Word over the image in the communication of revelation and the obsessive rejection of any veneration of images. Another consequence of the Carolingian theses is the problematisation of the status of the autonomous artist. From the perspective of 'secular' art, the Carolingian theologians can be said to have liberated art as art and restored it to artists. The artist, freed from the canons of the Church, becomes the autonomous creator of his work, with consequences visible to this day.

The Byzantines had no word for 'art' (being an art without artists), but for Christians art had become a bridge between matter and spirit in 'an interesting kind of hypostatic union between word and image, in which these two languages reveal and affirm each other'<sup>79</sup>. The word-image relationship here is about the equivalence of their discourse, because the visual purpose of icons is identical to that of the oral preaching of the Gospel. The manner, the way of praying, each in the particularities of its cult, in a particular historical period, determines the mode, the manner and the artistic expression. The artistic language is the expression of the spirit of an era. Byzantine art assimilated certain elements, but rejected others, and it is precisely this choice that led to the stylistic unity we are amazed by today<sup>80</sup>.

The vision of the scholastic theology pioneers, shared in part by Suger and all those who along with him shared the same aesthetic and dogmatic creed, theoretically built up the innovative principles of Gothic architecture. From the philosophical perspective of aesthetic perception, which gradually began to dominate the Western ecclesiastical space, what characterises art and religious painting is the absence of mystery. Unlike the religious painting, which is informative, passive and imposes a distance between the viewer and the viewed, the authentic icon is constructively 'a

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icon saturated with a materiality offered to a total synaesthetic perception as a sensitive manifestation of a tangible absence and a presence of the intangible.'

<sup>78</sup> Christoph Schönborn, *Icon of Christ...*, p. 181. Apud *Saint Theodore the Studite, Jesus Christ: Prototype of his icon*, Deisis publishing house, Alba-Iulia, 1994, pp. 21, note 38; 182.

<sup>79</sup> Jensen Margaret Robin, *Face to Face, Portraits of Divine in Early Christianity*, Mineapolis, MN, 2005. Apud Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., *op. cit.*, p. 1110.

<sup>80</sup> Egon Sendler, *The icon, image of the unseen ...*, p. 69.

spatial and performative, active phenomenon, which exists not to be seen, but to prepare a space of mediation, neither only earthly nor only heavenly, between the invisible and the visible, and to unite the viewer and the viewed in a space of encounter'<sup>81</sup>. The icon is a creator of sacred space (*chōra*). Within this hierotopian dimension, its veneration is a performative act, staged through a complex direction, offered not to a transcendent contemplation, but to a total sensorial experience in the space dedicated to the Divine Liturgy.<sup>82</sup>

At once a seen face and an unseen gaze that sees, the icon is both cataphatic and apophatic. To see the icon means to be seen by its invisible divine Prototype whom we see, since we are seen by Him<sup>83</sup>. In the icon, the visible and the invisible embrace each other with a fire that does not destroy but illuminates the divine face of mankind. Before being seen and making itself seen, the icon has only one aim: the crossing of gazes, therefore, strictly defined, love<sup>84</sup>. In Eastern Christianity, the supernatural Light is being communicated and transfigured<sup>85</sup>. In the *Hymns of Divine Love* of St. Simeon the New Theologian, God-Light addresses the saint as a voice speaking to him from the light, presenting to him its supernatural qualities: 'Believe then that I am a formless light, entirely simple, uncomposed, indivisible by nature, inscrutable, unapproachably approachable (...); for I show Myself with love to men, changing my form according to the capabilities of each man; it is not Me who suffers this (change), but those who become worthy to see Me this way, for otherwise they could not, nor would they attain more; therefore, they see Me sometimes as the sun – when their minds are clear – and sometimes as a star, when they find themselves under the darkness and night of this body'<sup>86</sup>. The warmth of love makes Me fire and brightness, for when the friendship coal is ignited in you, beholding the zeal of your love, I also find Myself united with it and I give light and I show Myself as a fire, I who created fire by my word'<sup>87</sup>. Only when the relationship between Creator and

<sup>81</sup> Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., *op. cit.*, p. 1113.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1113.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1166, note 145. Cardinal Nicolaus Cusanus also subtly grasped this logic of the icon in his 1453 treatise on mystical theology, *De visione Dei sive de icona*. In a commentary on his treatise, the cardinal states that seeing God coincides with being seen by Him (*Theos* in Greek was considered to derive etymologically from the verb *theaomai*, 'behold'). In God seeing is identical with caring (*videre est providere*) and loving (*videre est amare*).

<sup>84</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *The Cross of the visible: painting, television, icon – a phenomenological view*, translated by Mihail Neamțu, Deisis publishing house, Sibiu, 2000, pp. 132-134.

<sup>85</sup> Saint Simeon The New Theologian, *The Eros of the Divine Hymns*, 53, in vol. *Hymns, Epistles and Chapters*, Introduction and translation: Deacon Ioan I. Ică Jr., Deisis publishing house, Sibiu, 2001, pp. 142-143.

<sup>86</sup> The passions represent forgetfulness of God. Dead are those who have separated themselves from God by turning to the passions. Saint Maximus The Confessor, *Ambigua*, translated by Fr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, EIBMBOR, Bucharest, 2006, p. 242, note 202.

<sup>87</sup> Saint Simeon The New Theologian, *Hymns of Divine Love*, in *Studies in Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Hymn 39 (Z. 12), translation and notes by Fr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Mitropolia Olteniei publishing house, Craiova, 1990, pp. 142-143.

creation reaches such an intensity is man able to discern and choose boldly between Light and lights: ...O Sun of the sun and of the world, Creator of all the stars and of all other light; hide me outside them, in Thy light; (for only this way) (...), the mind is immersed (baptized) in Thy light, and becomes bright and turns into light, as Thy glory; and he who has become worthy to make himself so, is called Thy mind!<sup>88</sup>

After the discovery of the True Light, St. Simeon asks to be always covered by It, understanding that the transcendent reality contemplated in the radiance of the Light of God is inaccessible to the vision mediated by physical light. In an allegorical interpretation of the Saviour's 'Transfiguration', St. Maximus the Confessor sees in the radiance of Christ's face a metaphor of apophatic theology, while in that of the garments and in the appearance of Moses (as a type of 'providence') and Elijah (as a type of 'judgment'), a metaphor of cataphatic theology. The light of the Lord's face is the symbol of negative mystical theology, since the uncreated cannot be contained by the creature, nor the infinite understood by the bounded<sup>89</sup>. St. Gregory of Nyssa also speaks of the theme of knowledge penetrating the darkness in which God hides in the *Life of Moses* (II, 163.6-7) saying: 'true knowledge consists in «seeing by not seeing» (τὸ ἰδεῖν ἐν τῷ μὴ ἰδεῖν), that is, by overcoming the intellect and approaching the One who transcends all knowledge' (...). 'Thus, to see God in darkness is to understand that he is beyond any knowledge'<sup>90</sup>. St. Dionysius also speaks of the knowledge of God in his *Mystical Theology*, where he writes to Timothy: 'We pray that we may be in this super-luminous darkness, and by not seeing and not knowing may we see and know the one beyond seeing and knowing, that is, by the very fact of not seeing and not knowing – for this is truly seeing and knowing – and super-physically praise the super-physical, by suppressing all that is, just as those who make a natural statue remove all the hindrances that prevent the clear seeing of what is hidden, and only by suppressing it reveals in itself the beauty that had been hidden'<sup>91</sup>.

Echoes of the Dionysian teaching are also found in Michelangelo Buonarroti, who in a similar definition said that the art of sculpture is the science of removing the excess matter from a block of stone, in order to reveal the statue already completed but not yet revealed by the artist<sup>92</sup>. The

<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 580.

<sup>89</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Cosmic liturgy: the world in the thought of St. Maximus the Confessor*, translated by Fr. Alexandru I. Roșu, Doxologia publishing house, Iași, 2018, p. 118.

<sup>90</sup> Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names; Mystical Theology...*, p. 322, note 24.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 253; 323 n. 26. 'The phrase «natural statue» or self-grown statue suggests the idea that the soul must carve into itself its own statue, removing that which covers true beauty'.

<sup>92</sup> Michelangelo, *Poems*, translation, preface, chronological table, notes and comments by C. D. Zeletin, Minerva publishing house, Biblioteca pentru toți, Bucharest, 1986, p. XXXVIII.

similarity between the definitions is not accidental because Michelangelo studied at the Neoplatonic Academy established in the Medici Gardens, at a time when Marsilio Ficino was teaching the philosophy and exegesis of Proclus' teachings.

The circulation of ideas through different environments and spaces is sometimes unexpected, with consequences for the hermeneutics of visual theology and the plastic language through which Revelation is communicated and understood. An example, to stick with Proclus, is the trajectory of some of his writings, compiled in a book of texts from other schools of philosophy as well, entitled *Liber de causis* (Book of Causes). This is a collection of texts by an anonymous Arab in the entourage of the 9<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Alkindi, which circulated as a treatise on theology and ontology attributed to Aristotle. Thomas Aquinas identifies passages from Proclus and Dionysius the Areopagite in *Liber de causis*, after comparing the work with Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, translated into Latin by William of Moerbeke in 1268<sup>93</sup>. Among other things, it could be observed that Saint Dionysius the Areopagite's analysis on evil is very close to Proclus' perspective in *De malorum subsistentia*, although the guiding ideas are also found in Saint Paul's exposition of the Areopagus<sup>94</sup>. The discovery and circulation of the *Liber de causis* manuscript was an encouraging event for Dominican scholastics who were striving to reconcile Aristotle's teaching with Christian theology.

The preparation, emergence and development of Gothic art, and therefore of stained glass art, takes place at the end of the first Christian millennium and the beginning of the second, around the same time as the Crusades, when many of the manuscripts of Greek and Arab philosophers and scholars arrive in Europe. This is the period of Latin translations and exegeses of many Greek manuscripts. In the absence of the original works of the last Great Ecumenical Council of the East on the issue of iconoclasm, Latin theologians attempted to answer some theological dilemmas about the role of the image in the icononomy of salvation but did not always combine

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The non-finite of some of Michelangelo's sculptures is the equivalent of the assonance in popular poetry, the unfinished marble arouses an enigmatic contemplation, ... suggesting the infinity of possibilities of being.

<sup>93</sup> Pseudo-Aristotel, *Liber de causis*, translation, notes and commentary by Alexander Baumgarten, Univers Enciclopedic publishing house, 2002, pp. 5; 111.

<sup>94</sup> Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names; Mystical Theology...*, p. 33. Dionysius shows that evil is simply the capacity to want something other than what is naturally inscribed in one's nature, that of returning to God, of union with oneself and with God. Since by our very nature we tend towards the good, to go against this nature is, at the edge, a contorted way of seeking all good, even if we seek it elsewhere, in another direction. Evil is thus, in the end, also a way of tending towards the good, only in a deficient and unknowing way, missing or even destroying our own nature. Dionysius demonstrates that evil is not 'something' in itself, a specific reality, but it is a para-reality – a parasitic reality that manifests itself at the expense of the good, using the power of the good.

their results in a unitary, unanimously accepted answer. Commentaries have been developed in which attempts have been made to reconcile theses and concepts from Platonism and Aristotelianism with Christianity, on the status of the image and on the nature of light manifested as an intermediary diaphanous medium and epiphanic revealer, in a new aesthetic and liturgical dimension.

The skies of antiquity were populated by concepts embodied in images representing winged beings (*erotes*), who were also an embodiment of the intellect, half divine and half human, mortal and immortal at the same time. The nature of the intermediary, such as that of Eros, simultaneously belongs to two genres – two sequences that this ambivalent nature places in a relationship of implicit continuity, in order to give form (image or *eidos*) to a state of the being in the absence of any form. In Aristotelian language, from the relation of relative opposition between (Power) Δύναμις and the pure act ἐνέργεια, the *diaphanous* is born as a paradigm of the third genre or of the intermediate term<sup>95</sup>.

The diaphanous is nothing in itself, being instead *present* in every thing of the external contact it causes and in the dialogue and established otherness of seeing and thinking. This is also the explanation of the persistence of the scholastics who seek to define, in turn, the diaphanous, returning again and again to the incorporeality of a light that is embodied in the very matter of colours and to the mediating and apparitional status of the image – iconic receptacle of a diaphanous ‘presence’ that unfolds itself while remaining essentially ineffable<sup>96</sup>. The diaphanous is the *emergence from itself* of the luminous act and at the same time of the obscure potentiality of things, which it somehow brings into the world by giving them visibility and colour<sup>97</sup>.

From the documentary evidence that has survived, it can be confirmed that Abbot Suger was in the entourage of some theologians involved in these debates, such as Hugues de Saint-Victor, translator and commentator of the Areopagite writings. We can assume that from these discussions and commentaries the theoretical framework for the argument for the appearance of the stained glass art and the terrestrial glass model of the

<sup>95</sup> Anca Vasiliu, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20. Subject to perpetual movement, heterogeneous and sensitive, the diaphanous environment thus unites opposites, while possessing a limit that circumscribes and determines it. The limit of the diaphanous medium is not nocturnal or blind opacity, but simply colour, i.e. an otherness of the diaphanous that defines the intermediary through its periphery.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 184; 342, note 1. For Avicenna the intermediary is only a ‘conductor’ of light and not an epiphanic revealer of its presence. The interval is therefore a luminous and at the same time a rarefied medium (*translucens* and *pervietas*), therefore a corporeal medium – even if it is, of course, a very subtle body, similar to the *pneuma* of the Stoics – and not a nature common to all visible things.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 320.

Church of the Heavenly Jerusalem was built. The debates preceding the conceptualisation of the prototype plan are not known to us, but the obvious and tangible result is the glass and stone architecture that has survived through the ages to the present day. Hugues de Saint-Victor's main teachers, whose works he would comment on and sometimes even correct, were Rabanus Maurus and John Scotus Eriugena, the latter playing a role that was as important as it was distorting in the reception of Dionysian thought in the Latin West. What Eriugena tried to do through his exegesis was in fact a retranslation and reformulation of Dionysius' work. By taking the Neoplatonic apophatic schemes and language used by the Greek holy fathers from the Hebrew biblical matrix of their thought, autonomizing Aristotelian categories and recycling them speculatively, Eriugena succeeded in blocking, through a rational discursive system, the true reception in the West of Greek and Byzantine patristic thought as ecclesial theology, contemplative liturgical mystagogy and asceticism<sup>98</sup>. If in the Christian East, through the voice of Saint Maximus the Confessor, 'the solution to the return/unification of creation is Christological – the *hypostatic* union and renewal of natures in Jesus Christ – and the method is ascetic-contemplative-mystical, for Eriugena the solution is anthropological and the method epistemological'<sup>99</sup>. Human nature, through the intellectual knowledge acquired via the 'liberal arts', says Eriugena, is capable, through dialectical reductions, of bringing about the return and unification of all creation in a single nature, in God. The absence of Christocentrism explains why the discourse of Eriugenean speculative theology remains a Hellenistic essentialist discourse of a generalized 'physiology'<sup>100</sup>.

According to Eriugena – which will also bring him the condemnation of some synods –, God, being beyond all intelligible form and intellect, is invisible in Himself, being seen only through intermediate symbolic theophanies which conceal Him as much as they reveal Him<sup>101</sup>. The parallel with the Areopagian view on the theme of this study is illuminating. 'For Dionysius, the medium through which light manifests itself by illuminating and self-transmitting through reflections to terrestrial things is a hierarchical

<sup>98</sup> Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., *op. cit.*, p. 503, note 61.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 502-503.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 503, note 61. As Ernesto Mainoldi has shown, in a clear review of the reception of Dionysian thought in the Latin West, this was in fact a retranslation of it from the 'hypostatist-energetist' register of the Cappadocian Fathers' 'revolution of ontology' to the 'ontological-idealist' register of philosophical thought. (...) Latin theologians continued to prefer the synthesis between Neoplatonism and Christianity, which they knew from the more accessible writings of Blessed Augustine. Because of the Eurygenistic view, the chance of a profound dialogue between the two Christian traditions was lost, which could have blocked the drift of the anti-Greek polemic started by Charles the Great and relaunched by Pope Nicholas into the irreconcilable theological antagonism that unfortunately came later.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1096. The Eurygenistic position was condemned in 1241, but also in 1334 and 1346.



medium, communicating itself in an order of descending purity as the luminous emanation moves away from its source. For John Scotus Eriugena, on the other hand, this intermediate diaphanous medium incorporates the light (or the divine essence), makes it present in everything and everywhere (...) and thus transmits it without the phasing or gradient of a luminosity as in the Dionysian hierarchical cosmos<sup>102</sup>. Dionysius uses the terms διαυγής and φωτοδοσία for the diaphanous, transparent and/or illuminating medium, while Eriugena uses the terms *lucidus* and *claritas*, with the remark that there is a distance between the two authors regarding the role and significance of the intermediary. At the risk of schematizing, one could say that diaphaneity is a cosmological and theological notion for Areopagite, while Scotus conceives it from the philosophical angle of aesthetic and metaphysical perception<sup>103</sup>.

From the Eriugenean, aesthetic and philosophical perspective of the term with which Suger supports his theory of anagogical illumination, the diaphanous medium is dependent on the optical phenomenon of physical light passing through the translucent or transparent density of multicoloured coloured glass. Similar to the stained glass, by its willingness to receive light and make it visible, the diaphanous 'illuminates' like a 'clear stone', but its 'power' does not last long and darkens when the light weakens<sup>104</sup>. 'O may it never grow dim!', Suger had it written on one of the inscriptions marking the consecration of the new choir at Saint-Denis, and elsewhere he wrote: '...the church shines (...) for bright is that which in a luminous way is linked to light'<sup>105</sup>.

The diaphaneity allows us to define the dual nature by the fact that it is both earthly, like water, for example, and heavenly, like air or ether. The relatedness or similarity of diaphaneity with light also plays an important role in liturgical practice: it makes certain translucent matters be considered more suitable than others for use in worship and sacrament. Hugo de Saint-Victor and Thomas Aquinas explain by diaphaneity (*sua diaphaneitate est luminis susceptiva*) the preferential choice of water as 'matter in the mystery of baptism', capable of symbolizing grace, invoking the resemblance of water, through its natural properties, to the very nature of grace, before any institutional placement. Rabanus Maurus also defined glass as a matter which, by its qualities, was suitable for building the church to match its

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<sup>102</sup> Idem, *On the diaphanous: the medium of light in ancient and medieval philosophy...*, pp. 181-182, note 1.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 179-180; 181, note 1.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibidem...*, p. 344.

<sup>105</sup> George Henderson, *Gothic*, translated by Gabriel Gafița, Meridiane publishing house, Bucharest 1980, pp. 47, 77.

model, as *Ecclesia celestis*, which is also the place where the baptism of believers should take place as a purifying bath of light<sup>106</sup>.

Following the model of Saint-Denis, the Gothic cathedrals built later included in their design the idea of becoming allegorical images of the Church of the Heavenly Jerusalem, with an architecture of imposing verticality, with walls translucent like glass, in the colours of beads (Revelation 21:21), all forming a monumental instrument for capturing the light and goodwill of God. In the same way, the transparent or translucent surfaces of the goblets, chalices, reliquaries and other liturgical objects are enlarged, allowing as much light as possible to shine in. The prismatic crystal or glass surfaces of the treasures, sometimes polished to a lens-like finish, amplified the intensity of the light entering these 'devices' for capturing the luxes and 'storing grace'. (see Diagram 3)

Among the stained glass windows, which at night were reduced to the function of furniture (glass paintings), the spaces were filled with huge painted panels, pieces of pew furniture and all kinds of monuments and sculptures. However large the surface area of the windows (with the exception of Sainte-Chapelle and perhaps a few others), the multitude of pillars and interior stone pillars occupied a large enough area inside the cathedral to fragment the space and interrupt the visual unity of the unfolding narrative of the iconographic programme, unlike the Byzantine basilica, whose interior architecture covered with fresco or mosaic paintings allowed for continuity in reading the iconographic discourse. It is possible that one of the aesthetic principles of the Gothic style, that visual *continuum* through which the distinctions between the major and minor arts were blurred, also had in mind restoring the possibility of reading from a single perspective the multitude of visual scores juxtaposed in the ecclesiastical space, through the formal similarity of architectural details, furniture and ornamentation<sup>107</sup>. This principle of the visual *continuum* would later be identified in the compositions of the *art-nouveau* style.

Although much more decorative than frescoes or mosaics, Gothic stained glass tries to recover and restore to the Western liturgical space as much as possible of the specificity and characteristics of the iconic image lost at the end of the first millennium. Strictly technically defined, stained glass

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<sup>106</sup> Anca Vasiliu, *op. cit.*, p. 345 note 2. And as for the Eucharistic mystery: the gifts are ready to be consecrated (according to John Colet's comments on Dionysius' *Church Hierarchy*), when they are also considered transparent through diaphanousness and translucent, becoming receptacles, suitable for the 'offering of light' by the officiating priests. Rabanus Maurus uses the term *perspicuus* instead of *diaphanus*, from classical Latin. It was not until the discovery of Aristotelian texts between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the diaphanous made its lexical appearance again, that it received its own Latin translation (*transparens*).

<sup>107</sup> George Henderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 72, 77, 84. The visual *continuum* is that artificial link between pattern and rhythm, it is the formal compromise which alone provides the context in which the motifs and individual elements of the Gothic repertoire can be related to each other.

is, according to some historians, merely the artistic conclusion of a physical experiment in which the optician's light, i.e. electromagnetic waves passing through Newton's prism, creates decorative effects. Certainly, stained glass painting is much more than just a bright ornamental carpet. On the same critical note, some historians point out that, depending on how the symbolism of light is understood and received, there is necessarily a confessional antagonism between stained glass and mosaic techniques, from which it would appear that the potential of stained glass technique to fully express an icon is less than that of the mosaic technique<sup>108</sup>. There are, of course, nuances, just as there are stained glass windows with iconographic scenes made in a spirit much closer to Byzantine legacy than some of the poor-quality mosaics in some Orthodox churches. In fact, we notice that more and more Orthodox churches are built with Byzantine architecture, having stained glass windows (not just ornamental, as it was the tradition in some parts of Byzantium), and new Roman Catholic cathedrals are adorned with mosaics.

Different in perception and spiritual message, authentic Byzantine mosaics are not only works of art, but also models and patterns of identity for Eastern spirituality. In Eastern churches, light enters reservedly through narrow windows and lunettes, its place being taken by candles and memory lights. Thus, the mosaic seems to emanate light from itself, from the gold of the mandorlae, haloes and backgrounds, and the saints' robes, pierced with golden haloes, radiate an inner, timeless and immaterial light<sup>109</sup>. In the 13th and 14th centuries, after Byzantium stopped decorating churches with mosaics, a series of portable icons covered with micromosaics appeared, a technique that could rival the meticulousness of jewellers' work of unimaginable refinement. Shrinking the tesserae to the size of poppy seeds offers new possibilities of expression, but I hope to come back to this and to the mosaic art in general with more data and information in a future study.

Under cover of the concepts on the image established by the Caroline Books, the artist has moved further and further away from the tutelage of the Church, and thus, freed from any ideal model, becomes the creator and autonomous sovereign of his images, which have become his projection, his work and his expression. The works of art, now signed, showed that they were the expression of their subjectivity on a number of Church themes. Religious contemplation had become aesthetic emotion, the religious image a painting, and worship an art<sup>110</sup>. Dogmatic deviations lead to stylistic

<sup>108</sup> Pavel Șușară, *Brâncuși – a sculptor from the East*, Monitorul Oficial R. A. publishing house, Bucharest, 2020, p. 65.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65.

<sup>110</sup> Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., *op. cit.*, pp. 1097-1099. Nicolaus Cusanus speaks of the existence of an 'icon of God' without the mediation of Christ's humanity; this is man himself, who projects his own image in God, God and man reflecting each other perfectly in each other: the anthropomorphosis of God corresponds to the theomorphosis of man who has become a creator himself.

reconfigurations in terms of plastic expression, just as over-emphasis of any kind leads to further exaggerations. 'In the absence of a proper theology of the icon, as in the Byzantine world, left free to the inspiration of artists and public or private commissions, religious images in the West have become less and less the place of a visible manifestation of the invisible and the divine and more and more the scene of affirming artistic creativity and aesthetic sensibility, announcing the modern transformation of religion into art and of churches into museums'<sup>111</sup>.

Western Christian art, alienated with the Renaissance from the universe of the old Western medieval symbolism and the Eastern icon, becomes an autonomous approach and an end in itself, subject to aesthetic quests, oscillations between realism and abstraction, and the crisis of the subject in the modern and postmodern world. In the attempt at the figurative, in the death of image and contemporary art, historian Alain Besançon notes the triumph of an aesthetic gnosis in metaphysical conflict with nature, creation and man. 'Emancipated from the prototype, the image no longer represents anything or only itself and its creator as realities opposed to the created world'<sup>112</sup>.

For some painters, the theories of Albert Einstein and Max Planck at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had an extraordinary impact on our understanding of the world and art. According to the new theories, quantum particles reveal another dimension of the world, a microuniverse that is just as real and immeasurable, but governed by different laws. In the logic of quantum mechanics, the world appears to us as a work of light of varying degrees of opacity and transparency, with particles having a diaphanous structure and the property of delocalisation. As a carrier of information, light combines the structure of space and time, underlying the relationship between matter and energy. Modern physics states that there is only a difference in density between matter and energy<sup>113</sup>.

All the archaic cultures that developed so-called geometric artistic styles noticed that there are no straight lines in nature, so in order to represent transcendence or to have a dialogue with divinity they created a geometrized and abstract imagistic language. We recognise this geometric artistic style in the Cucuteni Culture, for example, a sun-worshipping civilisation, where

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1100.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 1086-1090.

<sup>113</sup> Quantum particles are like clouds or vibrating strings of energy that oscillate and interact with each other, continually relocating and recomposing. Quantum particles are self-organizing structures resulting from crystal lattice vibrations, an apophatic dimension of matter that is difficult to penetrate and understand. Although they have these specificities, quantum particles make up the objects of this world and ensure the coherence of macroscopic matter that we see as opaque, hard, consistent and perfectly locatable. The data are taken from a lecture given by physicist Adrian Ștefan Cârstea from the 'Horia Hulubei' National Research and Development Institute for Physics and Nuclear Engineering.

vases and statues were painted with geometrized solar symbols and synthesised in spiral and zigzag shapes. Most objects that were consecrated and dedicated to the god bore the graphic evidence of this abstracted language.

Abstraction, for artists such as Paul Klee, Kazimir Malevich, Vasili Kandinsky or Piet Mondrian, was like an attempt to escape from this materialistic world and an attempt to mediate the encounter of man with the transcendent. In a technologized and atheistic world, abstract art brings together the artistic consciousnesses of different faiths and confessions, which partially claim a soteriological dimension along with the originality of their vision. Their mission was to educate the eye so that through the exercise of contemplating abstract art it could go beyond natural sight and discover an unseen world. Identifying idolatry with the realist naturalism of images, abstraction, in the stylistic sense of the term, is nothing more than an explicit formulation of the withdrawal of the figure away from the threat of idolatry<sup>114</sup>.

The central objective of Kandinsky's and Malevich's painting is the knowledge of God, but unmediated by matter, a non-objective knowledge that disregards God's creation. Inspired by the theories of R. Steiner, W. Worringer and M. Planck, Kandinsky believes that shapes, colours and sounds come from the same primordial vibration that brings things to life. According to Planck's quantum theory, you can access an unseen world, with abstract painting being an attempt of bidimensional illustration of the fourth dimension. The multi-dimensional geometries of the Surrealists and the 'hyperspaces' of Salvador Dali are well known. In order to see the invisible, artists perform a reduction, an abstraction (they place the sensible world between brackets) by dissolving the object and keeping the subject. In their understanding, emptying the world from objects is not nihilism, because detachment from the object means the return to the original state, a creative liberation and the construction of a new reality, which Malevich calls Suprematism.

In 'The Black Square' (Fig. 4, Appendix 7), the painting that would become the banner of Suprematism, Malevich introduces the idea of the 'presence of an absence' (of the zero of sensation), a paradoxical formula synonymous with the 'darkness of unknowing',<sup>115</sup> in the negative theology of the mysticism of uncreated light. The 'black square' is the visual quintessence into which Malevich projects his idea of the revealed God of the Old Testament whom Moses could only 'see' from behind. Because of Malevich's extraordinarily elevated idea about painting and the painter's

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<sup>114</sup> Marie-José Mondzain, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

<sup>115</sup> Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, *op. cit.*, pp. 247; 322, n. 22.

mission, 'The Black Square' is an equally extreme response through the austerity of simplification of the figurative and imitation in painting<sup>116</sup>.

On an even more apophatic note, P. Klee's work with the title 'Rotating Black Sun and Arrow' (Fig. 3, Appendix 7) can also be considered one of the plastic resolutions of the oxymoronic expression 'super-luminous darkness' in Dionysian theology, where the 'Black Sun' suggests the moment of Christ's Second Coming (Revelation Ch. 6, 12). The paradoxical image<sup>117</sup> of the 'Black Sun' is rendered by a swastika revolving around its axis, central image projected contrastingly on the background of an explosion of light: 'And night shall be no more; and they have no need of the light of the lamp or of the light of the sun, for the Lord God will be their light' (Revelation 22:5). The line of force of the compositional scheme is a double swastika whose valorically and chromatically rhythmic arms suggest a centrifugal dynamic. On either side of the sun, Klee introduces two elements suggesting the fourth dimension, that of time. The arrow shows the flow of historical time towards Eshaton, and on the other side Trinacria is depicted, the rotating black triangle with three arms, symbolising the Holy Trinity and time as eternity.

The theory of relativity has had a major impact on the evolution of image and art. Even if God did not give us natural receptors to look at this dimension of creation, the world of quantum mechanics exists and has been the subject of many artists' works. Among others, Jackson Pollock, an abstract expressionist and gesturalist illustrator of matter seen through a 'microscope' or 'telescope', is one of the atypical investigators of pictorial language; his work does not fit into the paradigms of known modernity. His compositions have neural, plasmatic or galactic structures, an uncoagulated or post-apocalyptic world, with undefined spaces suggesting the pulsation of the universe. His painting, like a spongy mass, is made up of layered networks of colour that seemingly randomly interweave, a texture that is both material and immaterial at the same time, which you can only penetrate and visualise by settling into his unique regime of perception.

The mission and the vocation of the artist who gets the visible out of the invisible, who, like Orpheus, brings life out of darkness into light, is the

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<sup>116</sup> Alain Besançon, *op. cit.*, pp. 385-386. The expressive force and compositional synthesis in art lies, *a contrario*, in the elementary and minimal character of the forms, 'creative thought flees from openwork and tangled ornaments', the work of abstraction being in accordance with the 'principle of minimum action' or 'principle of optimization' of the laws of physics. 'Treat nature through cylinder, sphere and cone'! said Cezanne, from whom Picasso, Brâncuși and many modern artists claim credit.

<sup>117</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22. 'Paradox affirms the visible but opposes or rather reverses it; it literally constitutes a counter-visible, a counter-view, a counter-appearance, which proposes as a spectacle the opposite of what one would expect to see at first sight. More than a surprising opinion, the paradox often designates the miracle – it makes visible what we should not be able to see and what cannot be seen without astonishment'.

act of a resurrection whenever he makes an image visible. Klee's polyphonic paintings shed a light on that original unity, the depth without form and content of which the beginning of the Bible speaks. For Klee art does not render the visible, it reveals it when it is hidden. Klee's abstract works try to capture the moment when the world breaks out of nothingness to become something. God's thoughts existed in a pre-time of creation. Nature was made through a plasticisation of this reason, says St. Maximus the Confessor. The artist (Orpheus) imitates the act of creation through the law of nature, except that he does not create like God, out of nothing. The artist enters the undefined universe of pre-creation, in that *tohu wa bohu*, in order to rediscover, reconstitute and recreate through convention a world of the visible<sup>118</sup>. He is a co-worker with the Creator of the world and, symbolically, a saviour who gives voice to the nostalgia for the lost paradise world. The painter descends into the obscurity of chaos to miraculously get out of the Kingdom of Shadow a new, previously unseen visible. If every painting gives us a rescued Eurydice, every icon initiates a soul-saving encounter<sup>119</sup>.

The icon does not exhaust itself in an object offered to the eye that might see in it a simple display. It lets another gaze appear. The invisible transits through the visible, so that the painted icon sustains the pigments less through the wood of its panel than through the liturgical prayerful exchange of the gazes that meet in it. The icon achieves the penetration of the invisible into the visible in a more radical way than the Suprematist *Square*<sup>120</sup>. Art evolves and it will find new forms of expression as long as the world exists, but the liturgical icon will remain in the artistic landscape, through its relationship with Christ, a mark of the absolute, a constant, like the speed of light in the equations of mathematics.

## APPENDIX 1



Fig. 10a)

<sup>118</sup> Paul Evdochimov, *The Art of the Icon: a theology of beauty*, Meridiane publishing house, Bucharest, 1993, p. 74.

<sup>119</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-56.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 47-48.



Fig. 10b)



Fig. 10c) Fig. 10d)

APPENDIX 2



Fig. 11a)



Fig. 11b)



Fig. 11c)



### APPENDIX 3



**Fig. 12a)**



**Fig. 12b)**



**Fig. 12c)**

APPENDIX 4



Fig. 13a)



Fig. 13b)

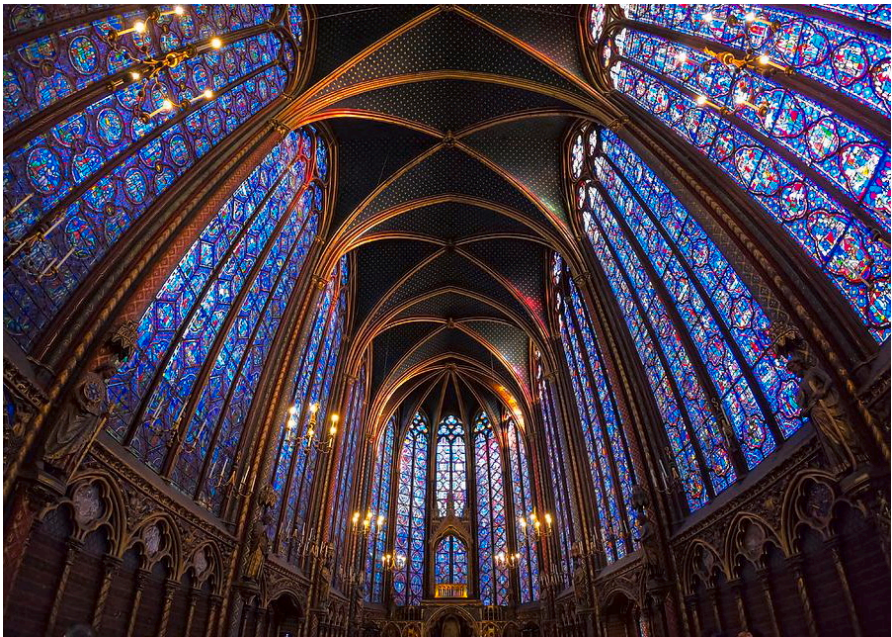
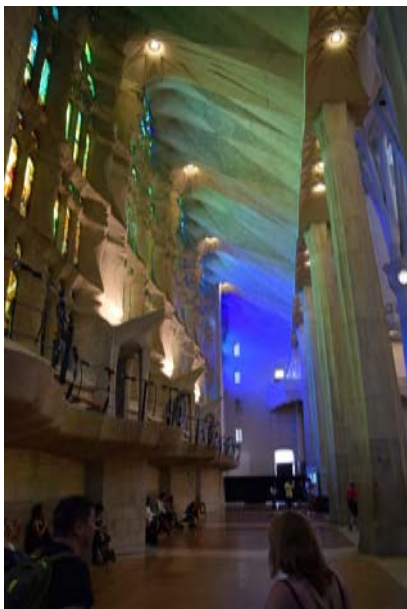


Fig. 13c)



## APPENDIX 5



**Fig. 14a)**



**Fig. 14b)**



**Fig. 14c)**



**Fig. 14d)**

## APPENDIX 6



**Fig. 15a)**



**Fig. 15b)**



**Fig. 15c)**



**Fig. 15d)**



**Fig. 15e)**

## APPENDIX 7



**Fig. 16a)**



**Fig. 16b)**



**Fig. 16c)**



**Fig. 16d)**

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**Fig. 1.** Roman mosaic, 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Sousse, Tunisia. Bardo National Museum of Archaeology, Tunis.

**Fig. 2.** Personification of the sun represented by a male figure surrounded by a nimbus of golden light. Spartan mosaic from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. In Christianity, the image of Helios will become that of the Christ with halo. The same metamorphosis will occur with the type of representation of the image of Orpheus, who, from taming the beasts with music, becomes through the power of the Word the Saviour of the lost.

**Fig. 3.** 'The Good Shepherd', mosaic, 6<sup>th</sup> century. Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna.

**Fig. 4.** Scenes from the iconographic programme of the church of the Monastery of 'Saint Catherine' in Sinai. Mosaic, 5<sup>th</sup> century. The event of the 'Transfiguration', depicted in the apse of the altar, and the scenes above, which recall the miracle of the 'Burning Bush' and the reception of the Law on Sinai, are linked to the theme of light. The azure-tinted panes of the two windows in the altar on the east-west axis of the church makes the sunrise give the overflowing light a special character.

**Fig. 5.** The mausoleum of Gallei Placidia in Ravenna, decorated inside in marble and mosaic, has the lunettes covered with alabaster slabs through which filtered light highlights the striations of the translucent stone with an ember-like appearance. The optical effect is related to the idea of inner light and the symbolism of uncreated energies that are at work in the materiality of this world.

**Fig. 6a).** Byzantine Engolpion with cameo depicting Saint George. The gold pendant is decorated with pearls, gemstones and glass. 11<sup>th</sup> century, Constantinople, Collection of the Vladimir-Suzdal National Museum of Art History and Architecture, Russia.

**Fig. 6b).** Amethyst intaglio with the portrait of a dignitary of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Roman Empire, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Walters Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland, United States.

**Fig. 6c).** Byzantine engolpion with chalcedony cameo, depicting the Blessed Virgin and the Christ Child on the throne. Gold setting with pearls, emeralds, garnets, sapphires and sardonyx. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

**Fig. 6d).** House of the Great Fountain of Pompeii, 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, Italy. It is one of the few monuments with a mural mosaic preserved to this day. The shape of the apse, the ornamentation and the dominant blue colour give us grounds to assume that the designs of the first Christian mosaic altars were inspired by some sacred niches dedicated to the Muses of the springs.

**Fig. 6e).** Mosaic in the 'San Vitale' Cathedral of Ravenna, built between 526 and 548. Detail. The votive portrait of Empress Theodora illustrates the abundance of pearls and precious stones in the jewels, which at once emphasised the pecuniary value, the aesthetic quality and the status of political authority. Above all, what distinguishes the jewellery of Christian dignitaries, whether in the imperial or ecclesiastical administration, is the symbolic-theological dimension of the gems and pearls nominally indicated in the revealed texts, with uses in religious worship.

**Fig. 7a).** Gold engolpion reliquary with enamels and gemstones. Byzantine workshop, 12<sup>th</sup> century. Treasury of the Santa Maria de la Scala Hospital in Siena, Italy. The shape of the engolpion, with one row of stones less, reminds of that of the 'Judgment helmet' worn by the hierarchs of the chosen people described in the Book of Exodus (28:17-20). 'A setting of precious stones, set in four rows. One row of stones shall be: a sardonyx, a topaz, and an emerald; this is the first row. In the second row: a ruby, a sapphire and a diamond; in the third row: an opal, an agate and an amethyst; in the fourth row: a chrysolite, an onyx and a jasper. These are to be set according to their order in gold nests'.

**Fig. 7b).** Gilded copper reliquary, engraved and decorated with enamels in the *champlevé* technique, illustrating the journey and adoration of the Magi. Limoges, 1200s. Cluny Museum, Paris. The dominant chromatics of Byzantine goldsmithing are gold, blue and green.



**Fig. 7c).** Ariberto's evangeliary, 11<sup>th</sup> century, decorated in gold with precious stones and enamels in the cloisonné technique. Above the Cross of the Crucifixion of Christ there are the words 'the Light of the World'. Duomo Museum, Milan, Italy.

**Fig. 7d).** Cover of the *Codex Aureus* Gospel Book, Abbey of 'Saint Emmeram'. This manuscript was produced around 870. Today it is in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich, Germany.

**Fig. 8a).** Rock crystal, gold and enamel cross. Year 1170. Royal Museum of Art and History in Brussels, Belgium.

**Fig. 8b).** Byzantine votive crown, donated by Leo VI (886-912), now in the Treasury of the St. Mark Basilica in Venice, Italy. It had a special shape, with pendulums, or ornaments hanging on chains from the main crown. The central statuette and the rock crystal ornament were added later. Votive crowns were designed to be suspended by chains in an altar, as royal gifts expressing the monarch's allegiance to God.

**Fig. 8c).** Gilded silver reliquary ark decorated with prisms and crystal caps mounted as oversized windows, if one were to compare to the size of the box, with white zoomorphic ornaments on a blue background in enamel. Venetian workshop, 15<sup>th</sup> century. Gallery of the Academy of Florence, Italy.

**Fig. 8d).** Byzantine setting chalice, 11<sup>th</sup> century. The green cup is of Arabic origin. Gilded silver, enamel, stones, pearls and glass. Treasury of the 'St. Mark' Basilica in Venice.

**Fig. 8e).** Byzantine chalice with two handles and an inscription of Emperor Romanos, 10<sup>th</sup> century. Sardonyx, gilded silver, cloisonné enamel, stones and glass. Treasury of the 'St. Mark' Basilica in Venice.

**Fig. 8f)** Byzantine chalice, ivory, gilded brass and enamel. Manufactured in two stages, it was begun in a German workshop and finished in a Lombard workshop between the 14th and 16th centuries. The Duomo Museum in Milan, Italy.

**Fig. 9a).** Pompeii, the Fountain in the House of Scientists. One of the sanctuaries of 'remembrance', a place of meditation and prayer dedicated to the Muses, daughters of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. The sanctuary's artificial 'cavern', with apse and basin, is decorated in mosaic with glass paste and shell tesserae. The type of apse and the blue colour theme of the sanctuary, framed by a pediment and sometimes also by mosaic-covered columns, are also found with some modifications as the main architectural element in the composition of Christian altars and in the sacred niches of synagogues (mizrah) and mosques (mihrab).

**Fig. 9b).** Synagogue of Dura-Europos, Syria, years 244-5 AD. Painting in tempera on dry plaster. The Torah altar or niche in the Synagogue wall (mizrah), facing Jerusalem. Reconstruction in the National Museum in Damascus, Syria. Although mizrah is the Hebrew word for 'east' or 'sunrise', in practice it indicates Jerusalem, the direction in which believers worship during prayer. Usually, the wall facing Jerusalem is inscribed with the word mizrah (Hebrew: מִזְרָח *mīzrah*), with symbolic images and scriptural passages such as 'From the rising of the sun (mi-mizrah) to the setting of the sun, praise be to the name of the Lord' (Ps. 112:30). The symbolism of light is also evident in the depiction of the burning menorah. Above the niche of the Torah at Dura-Europos, in the centre, the Temple of Solomon is symbolically depicted, and, inside it, the Ark of the Covenant is featured. On both sides the menorah, the lulav (bundle of palm leaves) and the scene of Abraham's sacrifice are depicted. This bouquet, together with the citron fruit, are used in the prayer service on the mornings of the Feast of Tabernacles.

**Fig. 9c).** Mosaic-decorated niche from the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, 6<sup>th</sup> century. The symbolism of light and water is richly represented in the apses of the mausoleum. In Greek funerary art, the dove drinking from a vessel symbolises the spring of memory<sup>121</sup>. In the upper register of the niche, the mosaic depicts two doves drinking from a large bowl, a source of water, between two saints interceding in prayer for the ‘eternal remembrance’ and repose of the souls of those buried in the sarcophagi of the mausoleum. Here the spring, represented under both bezels, is associated with the source of light that flows through the translucent alabaster tile, symbolising the divine energies that permeate matter transfigured by grace. The image of the spring from which the stags drink is a reference to Psalm 41:1; ‘As the stag desires the springs of water, so my soul desires you, O God’. Above the scene is a fan-shaped, shell-shaped canopy, a regular feature in the niches of ancient Greco-Roman altars and shrines. In Christianity, this covering symbolises the protection and intercession of divine grace.

**Fig. 9d).** Mihrab (prayer niche) in a mosque in Isfahan, Iran. The calligraphic style and compositional tendency indicate the Safavid period, after the years 1500. Today it is in the Cleveland Museum of Art, USA. The prayer niche or mihrab is the most important point inside a mosque and it is located in the wall that is facing Mecca, the holy city of Islam. The white enamel inscription, which surrounds the mihrab like a frame, is rendered in a form of Arabic script called *thuluth*. It is a quotation from the Qur’an, from the Chapter of Light (*Surah An-Nur* 24, 35) which says: ‘Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. His light is like a niche in which there is a lamp, the lamp is in a crystal, the crystal is like a shining star. It is lit from a blessed olive tree, neither to the east nor the west, whose oil would almost glow, even without being touched by fire. Light upon light!’<sup>122</sup>.

**Fig. 10a).** The Rotunda Church of St. George in Thessaloniki, built between 300-306. The graphic-pictorial convention arrived at in order to illustrate the rainbow in the visions of Revelation and the prophet Hezekiah. Fragment of the polychrome (rainbow-like) girdle on the mosaic of the dome, 4<sup>th</sup> century.

**Fig. 10b).** Marble pavement and other rare ‘Cosmati’ stones, Basilica of St. Hrisogon, years 1123-1129, Rome. With the development of the art of stained glass, we also see, in parallel, the development of a decorative pavement programme executed in the *opus sectile* technique, works of remarkable artistic virtuosity and a unique inventiveness of the geometric forms. These inlays of coloured stones would later be called *cosmatesque*, after the Cosmati family, four generations of creators and makers of these ensembles.

**Fig. 10c).** The plinth-belt in the interior fresco of the Bogdana princely church in Rădăuți, 14<sup>th</sup> century. The variously coloured stones in the fresco, arranged at the base of the wall, refer to the foundations of the Citadel wall in the Book of Revelation, which are adorned with all kinds of precious stones (jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, emerald, sardonyx, sardius, hrisolite, beryl, topaz, chrysoprasus, jacinth, amethyst (Revelation 21, 19-20).

**Fig. 10d).** Church of the Arbore Monastery dedicated to the ‘Beheading of St. John the Baptist’, Arbore, Suceava. 16<sup>th</sup> century. Detail of the frescoed interior plinth with

<sup>121</sup> André Scrima, *Spiritual experience and its languages*, Humanitas publishing house, Bucharest, 2008, p. 302.

<sup>122</sup> Internet Archive <https://clevelandart.org/art/1962.23>



modular elements, which, like those at Bogdana Monastery, symbolize the precious stones from the wall of the City of Jerusalem mentioned in the Book of Revelation. The type of stylisation of the cut of the gems varies from one church to another, sometimes their geometric surfaces imitate the veining and striations of marble slabs, but their placement in the iconographic programme will always be at the base of the pictorial ensemble. More often than not, the perimeter of the plinth will compete for its surface with another type of ornament, the folded drapery, an adaptation of the *velarium*<sup>123</sup>, those ancient stylised canopies which Christian iconography has taken over, converting their mythological meaning and exploiting their ornamental value. Present in the decoration of the residences of dignitaries and hypogean tombs, painted draperies were a common practice in antiquity. They were an integral part of the scenery of imperial and religious ceremonies, and were found at the base of buildings, marking certain ceremonial routes, or demarcating an area to be used for religious rites (see the Tent of Confession). Having become part of Greco-Roman pictorial imagery, the plinth-draperies will also find their place in the iconographic programme of Christian churches, with specific variations.

**Fig. 11a).** Altar of the Chora Monastery in Constantinople, 11th century.

**Fig. 11b).** Chora, detail. Imitation in fresco of the marble slabs symbolizing the stones in the walls of the Citadel of the Heavenly Jerusalem. Even in the absence of the marble slabs, which may have been absent for financial reasons or because the painter thought it was better for the visual unity of the whole, their place in the region of the plinth is replaced by painting imitating these slabs. This shows how important the symbolism of placing these panels on the plinth of the interior walls of the church is in the iconography of the iconographic programme.

**Fig. 11c).** Dečani Monastery, Serbia, 14<sup>th</sup> century. Fresco. Details of the painting imitating the striations and veins of various slabs of coloured marble. The painters' imagination is more daring in capturing the most bizarre configurations of marble. Symbolism alluding to the beading of the gates and the stones in the foundations of the Citadel of the Heavenly Jerusalem is evident. The further we move towards the margins of the empire, where artists are not as cultivated as those in Constantinople, there is a 'site folklore', which manifests itself in many ways, but which is primarily characterised by greater stylistic freedom, rawness of language, a slight indifference to detail (in the writing of texts and the rendering of figures), of symbolic and allegorical interpretation, which give a certain expressiveness to the narrative, but also give archaeologists and restorers a lot of trouble today.

**Fig. 12a).** The painting of the 'Annunciation' painted by Fra Angelico in 1432. Museum of the Church of *Santa Maria delle Grazie* in San Giovanni Valdarno, Italy. Detail, tempera on wood. Half of the background of the composition is covered with large slabs of marble, or rather tiles that fancifully imitate the chromatic blends of translucent marble panels with diaphanous iridescence. The emphasis on the imaginative play of colours, which interweave spectacularly on the fissures that bound shades which melt into each other, or become firm again to highlight the contrasts, only suggests through an artistic licence, with abstract resonances, the miracle that Mary is both the Mother of God and the Virgin.

**Fig. 12b), 12c).** Icon of the 'Annunciation' in the Church of St. Clement of Ohrida, tempera on wood. Years 1300 - 1325, Ohrida, North Macedonia. The scene of the

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<sup>123</sup> Velarium, or cloth cover used in Roman amphitheaters to protect spectators from the sun.

‘Annunciation’ takes place in an iconographic setting in which the marble elements appear with an unusual and unpredictable texture of striations, a plastic convention marking an equally unpredictable and inexplicable event, the miracle of the Annunciation of the Incarnation of the Lord.

**Fig. 13a).** Ivory and glass skylight, Patras, Roman period, 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century AD stained glass dome skylight. Polygonal glass panel consisting of a honeycomb-shaped ivory frame and trapezoidal surfaces that are covered with opaque blue and white glass. At Pompeii (a city buried in ash and lava in 79 AD), the public buildings and the houses of patrician families had enclosed verandas with stucco or plaster frames in which pieces of glass or thin translucent alabaster slabs were embedded. Pliny the Elder described several of these, which are among the earliest testimonies of the art of stained glass.

**Fig. 13b).** Stained glass window in the Saint-Denis basilica (chapel of Saint Pérégrin). 12<sup>th</sup> century. Detail from The Life of Moses. The burning bush.

**Fig. 13c).** Interior view of the *Sainte-Chapelle* de la Paris, 1242-1246. The chapel sums up all the stylistic acquisitions begun a century earlier by the master craftsmen of the Saint-Denis Basilica (1137 - 1144).

Fig. 14a) 14b) Antonio Gaudi, the Sagrada Familia Cathedral, begun in 1882 and still under construction. Barcelona, Spain.

**Fig. 14c).** Temple of the Goddess Hator in Dendera, Egypt, 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.

**Fig. 14d).** Phra Sri Rattana Chedi Golden Stupa, Temple of the Emerald Buddha in the Grand Palace, Bangkok, Thailand. The gold-blue colour pair (in all shades), as well as transparent and translucent rocks, are the pigments and materials that people have dedicated to the sky deities in all religions and cultures of the world.

**Fig. 15a).** Egyptian Museum in Cairo, gold, enamel and gemstone pectoral ornament in the shape of a scarab. It comes from the tomb of Pharaoh Tutankhamun at Luxor.

**Fig. 15b).** Detail from the Gate of the goddess Ishtar in Babylon. Glazed terracotta. Built in 575 BC, huge fragments of its walls are now in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin.

**Fig. 15c).** Two-headed serpent, Aztec sculpture on display at the British Museum in London, England. Made from small fragments of turquoise applied like a mosaic to a wooden base, it is one of nine pieces of the same material that are in the British Museum.

**Fig. 15d).** Amulet case of Vishnu Riding Garuda, Nepal, 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century. Amulet cases had talismanic functions, and the images depicted often refer to the divine realms. Here Vishnu travels in a cosmic sphere on his Garuda vehicle. New York Metropolitan Museum of Art.

**Fig. 15e).** Detail from Pharaoh Tutankhamun’s mask, discovered in his tomb in the Valley of the Kings. Made of gold and predominantly blue enamel. Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

**Fig. 16a).** Faience statuette with blue glaze depicting Isis with the infant Horus. Ptolemaic period, 332-30 BC. Egypt.

**Fig. 16b).** Buddha statue of green jade in the Wat Phra Sing temple, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Thailand. As the god of light, his statues are made of gold or of luminous, transparent or translucent materials.

**Fig. 16c).** Paul Klee, ‘With the Black Rotating Sun and Arrow’. Gouache and tempera on canvas. Granet Museum, Aix en Provence, France. Year 1919.

**Fig. 16d).** Kazimir Malevich, 'Black Square', 1915. The work is located in the exhibition in the top corner, where icons are usually placed in the house.

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