

## **Lux Magna. The Spectacle of Light in Architecture and Art**

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Oana Maria Nae, *Lux Magna: o istorie culturală a utilizării luminii în artele vizuale din antichitatea târzie până în zorii modernității/ Lux Magna: A Cultural History of the Use of Light in Visual Arts from Late Antiquity to the Dawn of Modernity*, Editura Universității „Al. I. Cuza”, 2023, 315 p.



*Lux Magna: o istorie culturală a utilizării luminii în artele vizuale din Antichitatea târzie până în zorii modernității/ Lux Magna: A Cultural History of the Use of Light in Visual Arts from Late Antiquity to the Dawn of Modernity* came out at “Al. I. Cuza” University Publishing House from Iasi, in 2023, totalling 315 pages. From the beginning of the book, Oana-Maria Nae thanked the professors who guided her and referred the doctoral thesis (prof. Tereza Sinigalia – the scientific coordinator of the doctoral thesis, prof. Ruxandra Demetrescu and prof. Petru Bejan), as well as the university professors George Bondor and prof. Cristian Nae who encouraged her to publish this extensive research.

The author, doctor of philosophy in visual arts, art historian and member of the teaching staff at the “George Enescu” National University of Arts Iași, made a rich foray into aesthetics and art history. Her approach was different from the already existing research that highlighted the artistic

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changes according to the most representative eras and regions in the history of art. Oana-Maria Nae offered the reader a complex reading from a conceptual point of view, drawing on the history of culture, the history of art, theology and the aesthetics of light. The author mentioned different theories in this work, referring to emblematic works of architecture, sculpture and painting.

The book *Lux Magna* was divided into three chapters and numerous sub-chapters, of which we mention the introduction, with three very important sub-points for the understanding of this research – Methodological preliminaries – the intention of elaborating a cultural history of the use of light in visual arts, The metaphor of light – from theophany to aesthetic experience and Light in visual arts – artistic environment and aesthetic device –, the first chapter – The metaphor of light in medieval thought, the second chapter – Light and space in medieval art and architecture, the third chapter – Renaissance, Baroque, Enlightenment and the light show and conclusions. By reading this book, one feels guided by a certain historical, cultural and visual context, which emphasizes philosophical, artistic, religious changes, as well as the continuous evolution of the concept of light.

Over time, numerous philosophers, theologians and scientists have focused their attention on the concept of *light*, each acquiring different symbolic valences, from Aristotle, Plato, Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Saint Augustine, Saint Bonaventura, Robert Grosseteste, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Berthold of Moosburg, to Nicolaus Copernicus and Isaac Newton.

Natural light and artificial light were very important in architecture, in general, and in the ecclesiastical one, in particular, Oana Maria Nae noting that through them the builders managed to intensify or weaken the religious feeling, of anxiety or even fear. The book was divided into two from a temporal point of view, in the first two chapters problems related to medieval thought and art were described, and in the third chapter an incursion was made through several periods such as the Renaissance, the Baroque and the Enlightenment.

In the first part of the book, the one dedicated to Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the role of light was defining for the relationship between architecture and mural decoration. In medieval churches, natural light, filtered through simple windows or decorated with stained glass, was intended to inspire the presence of God in the church, devotion and the idea of spiritual enlightenment.

In the first chapter, The metaphor of light in medieval thought, definitions and interpretations of light in the aesthetics of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages were given. This incursion began with the three theories of the Greeks, that of the rays of light belonging to Empedocles, of the simulacra of Leucippus and Democritus, as well as that of the diaphanous of

Aristotle. The term diaphanous arose from the fusion of two Greek words that suggest *visual acuity* or *luminous clarity*. In Aristotle, the diaphanous was a mediator, representing the manifestation space for light in various environments, forms or spirits act. This journey through the history of light was continued with the ideas of Themistius and those of Plotinus, who associated light with the diaphanous and the metaphor. The ideas of the two philosophers were important because they achieved the transition from the thinking specific to Antiquity to a new system of thought, a theological one, characteristic of the Middle Ages. Plotinus was considered a pioneer in mysticism. In his conception, light referred to the spiritual field, being associated with divine thinking. Plotinus' theories about art, beauty, light and spirit were of major importance for medieval thought, and, as a rule, light was associated with the image of God.

References to the aesthetics of medieval light were divided into two distinct branches, that specific to the Eastern Middle Ages and that of the Western Middle Ages. The Fathers of the Church highlighted the fact that light can be associated with God and with the acquisition of eternal life. As Oana-Maria Nae specifies in the first chapter, Byzantine aesthetics and Byzantine art had as their central element light as a metaphor for God, Christ and the eternal world. The theologian Origen brought new meanings to the concept of light, which is identified with Christ – the Light of the world, the true Light, the Light of men. The same theologian associated light with sudden awakening and progressive illumination, while Dionysius linked the idea of beauty with the idea of emanation on the hierarchical scale of divine power that contained original beauty.

In the West, light played an essential role during the Gothic period, when stained glass was perceived as a gateway to God through the new architectural and lighting solutions used in churches. Saint Augustine adapted the specific ideas of Antiquity to Christian theology, emphasizing three main elements associated with the Holy Trinity – God is spiritual light, intangible truth comes from God and divine illumination.

In the second chapter, Light and space in medieval art and architecture, the author presented us with certain aspects that belong to different fields such as theology and art, which are harmoniously intertwined when we talk about the sacred image. Byzantine religious architecture was inspired by ancient architecture, taking over some plans that had nothing in common with the architecture of pagan temples. The plans often encountered in the Paleo-Christian period were the basilican and the central one, with mixed plans appearing later – the basilican plan covered with one or more domes. In the Byzantine Empire, churches with an austere exterior were decorated opulently, with much gold appearing in mosaics, frescoes and icons. The works of Byzantine art were designed according to certain rules, called Byzantine canons of representation, which aimed at the use of the

reverse perspective, the use of the gilded background and certain specific stylizations of the human figures. There was a dependency relationship between Byzantine architecture and decoration, having light as common denominator.

Regarding artistic representations, natural and/or artificial light had a privileged role in the reception of mosaics, frescoes, icons, miniatures and stained-glass windows by believers, highlighting particularly important spiritual aspects in the liturgical context inside churches. The connection and harmonization between the images and the service performed by the priest emphasized over time the formative and didactic role that works of art had in the Eastern and Western Churches.

At the beginning of the third chapter, Oana-Maria Nae made a transition from medieval art to Renaissance, Baroque art, culminating in the Enlightenment. The author of the book highlighted from the beginning of this chapter that aesthetics and art during the Renaissance followed a revival of the humanist spirit specific to Antiquity. In shaping the emblematic particularities of the Renaissance, the works of Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus were rediscovered, becoming important sources of inspiration for both writers and artists.

Oana-Maria Nae grasped the changes that occurred in medieval and renaissance art, emphasizing the importance of humanism in this context. The most important characteristic of the art of this period concerned the secularization and diversification of the sources of inspiration, which during the Middle Ages were predominantly religious.

From a visual point of view, the changes materialized in the artists' desire to render three-dimensionality and the pictorial illusion of spatiality with the help of linear perspective, to the detriment of reverse perspective – used extensively during the Middle Ages. Lighting played an essential role in highlighting the three-dimensionality and spatial depth, the light in the works of religious inspiration gradually transforming, from that which captures spirituality/divinity to the natural/real. In the same innovative spirit, changes appeared in the works with religious themes – the gilded backgrounds and symbols of the divine world being replaced by concrete elements from nature. Also, halos were drawn much more subtly than in medieval art or disappeared altogether. In this way, lovers of art and beauty gradually witnessed a desacralization of religious art and a proliferation of subjects inspired by Greco-Roman mythology. From the multitude of artists representative of Renaissance art, Oana-Maria Nae proposed a selection of a few names, starting with a representative artist of the Proto-Renaissance, Giotto di Bondone, then continuing with Masaccio, Fra Angelico, Piero della Francesca, Carlo Crivelli, Leonardo da Vinci and Titian.

Leonardo da Vinci, a brilliant Renaissance artist, was passionate about light, identifying three types of illumination – direct or solar light,

diffuse light in cloudy weather, and discreet light – before dawn. The games of light and shadow were highlighted with the help of sfumato and especially chiaroscuro, procedures so loved by painters from various periods in the history of art.

As far as baroque art is concerned, it brought major changes from a visual point of view, being considered eminently dramatic, theatrical and dynamic. Regarding the light, it played a primary role for the understanding of the works of art, through the luxuriant use of chromaticity and chiaroscuro, which gave a certain drama to the images.

In the last part of this chapter, the focus was on scientific innovations, the Copernican revolution, Newton's prism and optical devices. Isaac Newton was among the modern researchers concerned with aspects related to the perception of light. He studied the refraction of light with the help of a glass prism that can break down white light into seven colors. Along with Newton, Marco Antonio de Dominis, Francesco Maria Grimaldi, Giovanni Battista Riccioli had a significant contribution to the development of optics.

Continuing this journey through the history of light with the Enlightenment, it represented a metaphor of reason, marking the spiritual evolution of humanity. The scientific aspects of this chapter have been supplemented with examples of representative works from the history of art.

In conclusion, the present study accounted for essential artistic changes, the light turning into a research direction in the context of art history, cultural history, scientific discoveries and different specific ideologies. Oana-Maria Nae developed a piece of interdisciplinary research, managing to combine different fields of knowledge, light often acquiring metaphorical values specific to both the visual and the aesthetic spectrum. The book *Lux Magna* becomes essential reading for students, researchers or readers passionate about art history, having the role of systematizing essential information about the use of light from Late Antiquity to the dawn of modernity.