THE HIERARCHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: This paper is focused on the hierarchical perspective, one of the methods for representing space that was used before the discovery of the Renaissance linear perspective. The hierarchical perspective has a more or less pronounced scientific character and its study offers us a clear image of the way the representatives of the cultures that developed it used to perceive the sensitive reality. This type of perspective is an original method of representing three-dimensional space on a flat surface, which characterises the art of Ancient Egypt and much of the art of the Middle Ages, being identified in the Eastern European Byzantine art, as well as in the Western European Pre-Romanesque and Romanesque art. At the same time, the hierarchical perspective is also present in naive painting and infantile drawing. Reminiscences of this method can be recognised also in the works of some precursors of the Italian Renaissance. The hierarchical perspective can be viewed as a subjective ranking criterion, according to which the elements are visually represented by taking into account their relevance within the image while perception is ignored. This paper aims to show how the main objective of the artists of those times was not to faithfully represent the objective reality, but rather to emphasize the essence of the world and its perennial aspects. This may represent a possible explanation for the refusal of perspective in the Egyptian, Romanesque and Byzantine painting, characterised by a marked two-dimensionality.

Keywords: hierarchical perspective, space representation, Ancient Egyptian art, Byzantine art, Romanesque art, infantile drawing

The history of the artistic methods of representing space intermingles with the very history of the development of culture, with all its social, historical, philosophical, religious, and economic implications. The types of perspective used before the discovery of the linear perspective during Renaissance depend on the tradition and the cultural and philosophical context of those times, as well as on the scientific developments made up to that point. We can identify genuine solutions for representing space that were dictated by very clearly established canons and traditional artistic conventions, solutions which can be considered to be defining elements for the respective periods of time. Their presence can be explained by the lack of a theoretical representation system, as they do not rely on scientific backgrounds or rational geometry and they are not supported by adequate

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means of expression. For a long time, critics have considered these methods "primitive" or "naïve" solutions for representing space, in contrast with the scientific system of the Renaissance linear perspective, thought to be the "right" or "true" system of space representation.

Despite the fact that the physiological structure of the human eye is the same for all individuals (regardless of race, historical period or geographical area) and the laws of geometrical optics are universal and have not been changed or contested since their assertion by Euclid, the visual representation of space did not rely on the linear perspective before the Renaissance period. Even if every human being visually experienced the apparent convergence of parallel edges of objects, this appears not to have had an immediate effect in pictorial representation. Therefore, although the illusion of the parallel lines converging was obvious, as well as the assumption that it represented pictorial realism, this rarely preoccupied pre-Renaissance painters, and when it did, it happened almost exclusively within the western area.

Long before perspective was thoroughly studied, visual arts had been dominated by personal solutions or generalised rules that were typical of the cultural spaces they had been used in. The most well known pre-Renaissance methods of representing three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface are: the multi-storeyed perspective, the superimposed perspective, the reverse (or inverted) perspective, the axial perspective, the oblique (or Asian) perspective and the hierarchical (or affective) perspective, which will be subjected to a more in-depth analysis in the present paper.

The hierarchical perspective is an original method of representing the three-dimensional space on a flat surface, which characterises the art of Ancient Egypt and a considerable part of the Medieval art, being identified in the Eastern European Byzantine art, as well as in the Western European Pre-Romanesque and Romanesque art. It is a type of symbolic perspective where the characters are not represented in accordance with their placement in space, but rather with the role they occupy in a social or spiritual hierarchy. The main objective was not to faithfully represent the objective reality, the artist being interested in emphasizing the essence of the world and its perennial aspects. This could definitely explain the refusal of perspective in Egyptian, Romanesque and Byzantine painting, characterised by a pronounced two-dimensionality.

As mentioned above, one of the most important reasons that explains the Egyptian and Byzantine painters' lack of interest in perspective is represented by certain canons. These artistic conventions were followed in all stages of development of the Egyptian and Byzantine painting. In time, Egyptian art acquired a rigorous canonical character, its traditional theoretical formulas allowing no innovations, despite the fact that the effects of perspective on objects were observed by the artists.

Likewise, Byzantine art had a slow evolutional process, artistic revolution being practically impossible due to the strict control exerted by the Court and the Church, any deviation from the canon being immediately eliminated, as art historian Viktor Lazarev[1] asserts. The artist's liberty was infringed, the subjects for his paintings being pre-established in detail. Due to this authoritarian character and of power, art became an instrument of propaganda.

Even though the Egyptian, Byzantine and Romanesque art systematically rejected the rules of linear perspective, we can still identify certain "traces" of space representation, because there are no strictly flat, two-dimensional images, as the psychologist Rudolf Arnheim[2] claims. The hierarchical perspective can be seen as a primitive method of representing three-dimensionality, which characterises the art of these cultures.

Mention must be made that, alongside with the other aforementioned styles, the hierarchical perspective also appears in naïve art and infantile drawings, for in these two cases, the characters and elements are visually represented by following a subjective hierarchical criterion, as they do not depend on perception, but rather on their relevance within the image. Similar to the case of Egyptian or Medieval painters, children do not mechanically imitate the elements they notice. As opposed to the representatives of art movements, who intend to create illusionistic images, children do not give much importance to the proportions between the elements they visually perceive. The dimension of the elements is represented according to the place they occupy in a certain official, religious, or personal hierarchy, and also to the visual logic.

Following this principle, in Egyptian art, the god or pharaon appears much bigger than the rest of the characters, whose dimensions are significantly reduced even when they are physically located closer to the observing eye. The silhouettes of the characters have different proportions and they are represented on different scales within the same image, depending on the role they occupy in that particular context. In spite of the differences in size, the characters are always well-proportioned. This is due to the fact that there was always a preliminary work stage, in painting as well as in sculpture. Before carving a statue or decorating a wall, the Egyptian artists used to create a network of horizontal and vertical guiding lines (a square grid) on the surface of the rock or wall, so that they could be able to respect both proportions and canons. For instance, a standing figure could measure 18 squares from top to bottom. By dividing the number of squares in 2 or 4 equal parts, the artists could represent other characters on smaller

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[1] Viktor Lazarev, *Istoria picturii bizantine (History of Byzantine Painting*), Meridiane Publishing House, Bucharest, 1980, vol I, p. 52.

[2] Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1974, p. 219.

scales, but keeping them well-proportioned. The result was a real proof of artistry.

The hierarchical perspective is also present in the private art of the important members of the royal administration. The owner of the tomb and his wife are depicted on a bigger scale in comparison with other characters who accompany them. The silhouettes of the children, smaller than those of their parents, are drawn on a scale that corresponds to their age. The animals, birds, plants and architectural elements are much smaller than the silhouettes of the high officials or tomb owners, having a mere symbolic role in the context of the representation.

In the first image (Fig. 1), Menna (a character working in the royal administration) and his family are represented while fishing and hunting birds. Menna, the biggest silhouette in the image, is depicted twice: fishing, on the right side of the image and hunting, on the left side. His wife (the second in size), son and daughter accompany him. The relative size of people and animals indicate how important each one is to Menna. It is interesting to notice how the two fish Menna is about to catch are much bigger than the crocodile nearby. The water is rising, forming a kind of mound and it becomes obvious that Menna is on the verge of making a big haul. The animals are subjected to the same principle of representation, depending on their importance in the context. Similarly, the boat the characters are in is very small, being reduced to a symbolic attribute.

Fig. 1. Menna and his family fishing and hunting birds, Thebes, 18th Dynasty, 1400-1350 BC

The next image (fig. 2) depicts a scene from the tomb of Nakht from Thebes, who was a priest and astronomer during the 18th Dinasty. Here too, we can identify the same method of representing the characters, depending on their importance. The owners of the tomb, on the left side of the image, have the same size, their silhouettes being much bigger than the rest of the

characters, who are represented on a smaller scale, since they are simple servants and workers.

These representation standards governed the Egyptian art for more than 3,000 years, offering it the clarity and generalisation level that we can identify today as belonging to modern art. It was only during times of restlessness and social disturbance that proportion canons and painting had to suffer stylistic alterations.

Fig. 2. Scene from the tomb of Nakht, Thebes, 18th Dynasty, cca. 1400-1350 BC

This original method of representing three-dimensional space on a flat surface is not characteristic only to the Egyptian art. It is also typical of the Medieval art, being used both in the Byzantine and the Western European art of the Middle Ages.

In Byzantine imagery, the elements and characters populating the artistic space are represented on different scales in the same work of art due to the role they occupy in the story the painting depicts and not as a result of the decrease in perspective, depending on a social or religious hierarchy. The most important character occupies a privileged position and it is depicted on a bigger scale than the characters that are given less consideration, even if the latter ones are located closer to the observing eye. Although this technique does not follow an aesthetic principle, but rather meets hierarchical demands, it proves to be very efficient especially in the cases of the large mural scenes painted inside churches, where the central figure is immediately perceived. In many works, the figures of Christ, Virgin Mary or the emperor (the symbolic expression of the entire Byzantine state) appear much larger than the ones of the other characters.

Those who are very familiar with the rules of linear perspective may associate the representation of characters at different scales with perspectival diminution. But such an interpretation is far from the stylistic conception of the Byzantine iconography. Perspective representation implies depicting the world the way an observer sees it, thus expressing his or her subjectivity. It does not mean representing the objects the way one knows they are, but the way an observer sees them from a certain place (a single "point of

view”).This approach, which favours the perception on the objective reality, was unacceptable according to the theology of the Byzantine Middle Ages. In accordance with its principles, the perspective representation created a hierarchy that the Church did not want to establish. During that period of time, it was inconceivable to represent Jesus Christ or the emperor on a smaller scale than a simple earthling just because they were located farther from the observing eye. Space as a three-dimensional concept was not of any concern to the Byzantine visual art. As art historian Nadeije Laneyrie-Dagen[3] asserts, from the Paleochristian times to the Romanesque period the artists avoided any form of *trompe l'oeil* and any illusion of depth, placing characters and motifs at levels that have no significance to their relative position, filling the background with horizontal stripes and creating ambiguity, as there is no way of telling if the figures are located inside or outside.

However, the architect P. A. Michelis considers that space can still be perceived due to the different levels suggested by the comparison of dimensions and the movements of the characters within the two-dimensional surface of the work[4].

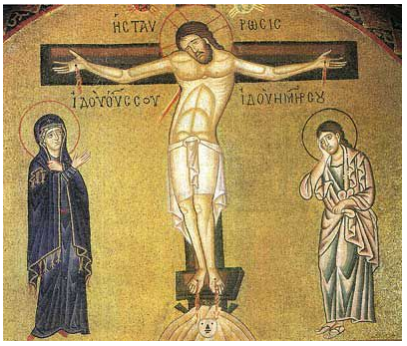

Fig. 3. *The Crucifixion,* Hosios Loukas Monastery, 11th century

Fig. 4. *Descent into Hell*, Saint Mark’s Basilica, Venice, 11th century

The principle of the hierarchical perspective can be very well observed in the scene of *The Crucifixion* (fig. 3), a simple composition with three characters that is representative for the 11th century iconography. The figure of Christ dominates the composition, due to its size. Virgin Mary and John the Apostle, much smaller than Christ, reticently share His sufferings. The symbolic importance of Christ crucified is emphasized by placing the action in an unreal, transfigured space. The figures seem to be floating in

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[3] Nadeije Laneyrie – Dagen, *Pictura-secrete şi dezvăluiri (How to read paintings),* RAO Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 79.

[4] P. A. Michelis, *Esthétique de l’art byzantin,* Flammarion, Paris, 1959, p. 185.

front of a golden background. There is no indication of the earth surface, the hill of Golgotha being reduced to a small spot, right beneath the cross. The same representation principle is applied in the scene of the *Descent into Hell*, presented above (fig. 4). Christ dominates the composition through His stature, much bigger than that of the other characters, as well as through His central position.

Furthermore, in Byzantine art, the proportions between the characters and the furniture or buildings do not comply with the visual perception. There are many images where people can be as tall as a building or where they can hold an edifice in their hands, the latter being the case of the church founders in the votive portraits (see figs. 5 and 6). Rudolf Arnheim argues that this example shows "how size differences arise in response to considerations of meaning, e.g., when the relation between creator and creature or saint and emblem is to be expressed"[5].

Fig. 5. The votive portrait of Stephen the Great, Voroneţ Monastery, Romania, 15th century

Fig. 6. The votive portrait of Neagoe Basarab, Curtea de Argeş Monastery, 16th century

As previously stated, the hierarchical perspective as a method of visual representation is also present in the Western European Pre-Romanesque and Romanesque art and it can be identified in mural and panel painting or in manuscript illumination. The presence of this type of perspective in the Romanesque art can be explained through the influences of the Late Antique and Byzantine art. The method is used both in religious and laic works. In the next image (fig. 7), one can notice the same principle of enlarging the size of the king in comparison with the characters from his entourage. Although stylistically different from the Byzantine art, the image reminds of the mosaics of *San Vitalle* in Ravenna.

The abundance of the well-preserved mural paintings from Catalonia (Spain) allows us to study the distinctive traits of the Romanesque painting

[5] Rudolf Arnheim, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

better than in any other European country. The representations that are typical to this region were influenced by the Mozarabic adornments, which are characterised by a pronouncedly linear, yet very colourful decorative style. In the apse of the church of *Saint Climent de Taüll*, a remarkable example of mural painting, one can notice the obvious two-dimensional character of this style full of rigour, where the line plays a major part, producing an effect that is similar to the one created by stained glass. The principle of the hierarchical perspective can be noticed in fig. 8, where Jesus Christ dominates the composition through His dimensions. The evident anti-naturalist intention and the subtle geometrisation of shape are the main elements that highlight the two-dimensional character of the image.

Fig. 7. *Otto III*, image from an enluminated manuscript, cca. 1000

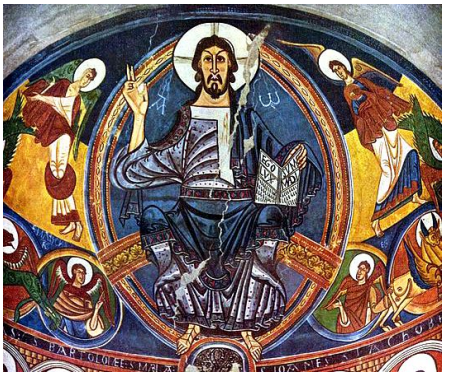

Fig. 8. *Christ in Majesty,* Catalan art, cca. 1123

In infantile drawing, the proportions between elements are also used by following subjective criteria. Although the main objective of the child is to represent the surrounding reality, the trees, the houses and people have approximately the same dimensions. When children want to render the details of a portrait, the face has to be large enough (much larger than the body) in order for them to draw the eyes, the nose, and the mouth. This can be seen in the images bellow (figs. 9 and 10), drawn by two five-year-olds, where the elements and portraits are oversized. In figure 9, an illustration for the Romanian folktale *The Little Bag with Two Coins,* the character has the same size as the cock. The child does not take into consideration the real proportions between the sizes of the two elements, giving them the same importance in the context of the representation. The same lack of interest in the proportion between the elements can be seen in the next image (fig. 10), where the characters, the car and the building are drawn in accordance with the principles of the hierarchical perspective. These seemingly incorrect proportions between the elements, often attributed to the lack of skills or attention, are explained by Arnheim as it follows: ”The basic irrelevance of

visual size is shown most strikingly by our habitual obliviousness to the constant change in size of the objects in our environment brought about by changes in distance"[6].

Fig. 9. Illustration for the Romanian folktale *The Little Bag, with Two Coins,* drawing by Catrina, 5 years old.

Fig. 10. *The City,* drawing by Ruxandra, 5 years old.

Fig. 11. Giotto, *Madonna Ognissanti,* 1310.

Fig. 12. Duccio, *Maestà,* 1308-1311.

The hierarchical perspective is also present in the work of some artists considered to be precursors of the Italian Renaissance, such as Giotto (fig. 11), Duccio (fig. 12) and others. In his work, *Madonna Ognissanti*, Giotto uses the hierarchical perspective, as well as a type of instinctive linear perspective. The Virgin is painted on a bigger scale than the other characters, who are less important in the context of the representation. At the same time, Giotto approximates the nearness of the characters in the foreground, who are located in front of the others, represented at a smaller scale. This slight sensation of spatiality is suddenly contradicted by the flat golden background, in Giotto's case this is a reminiscence of Byzantine painting.

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[6] *Ibidem*, p. 201.

After the principles of linear perspective were consolidated during the Renaissance period, the hierarchical perspective was abandoned by the painters, who focused their energy on conquering the space, in the midst of which stood the new Renaissance man.

List of illustrations:

Fig. 1. Menna and his family fishing and hunting birds, Thebes, 18th Dynasty, 1400-1350 BC. http://www.lost-civilizations.net/ancient-egypt-egyptian-afterlife-coffins-mummy-masks-page-2.html

Fig. 2. Scene from the tomb of Nakht, Thebes, 18th Dynasty, cca. 1400-1350 BC. http://www.papyrus-museum.com/history_egyptian_wall_painting_3.htm

Fig. 3. *The Crucifixion,* Hosios Loukas Monastery, Greece, 11th century, Byzantine mosaic. http://www.icon-art.info/hires.php?lng=en&type=1&id=2631

Fig. 4. *Descent into Hell*, mosaic, 11th century, Saint Mark's Basilica, Venice. http://www.icon-art.info/masterpiece.php?lng=en&mst_id=2455

Fig. 5. The votive portrait of Stephen the Great, Voroneţ Monastery, 15th century, fresco. http://www.stefancelmare.ro/Tablouri-votive-s6-ss22-c4.htm

Fig. 6. The votive portrait of Neagoe Basarab, Curtea de Argeş Monastery, 16th century, fresco. http://www.crestinortodox.ro/liturgica/locasurile-cult/noile-biserici-odihna-celor-vechi-118557.html

Fig. 7. *Otto III*, image from an enluminated manuscript, cca. 1000, Ottonian art, parchment, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, München. http://www.proprofs.com/flashcards/cardshowall.php?title=art-history-exam-4-set-1

Fig. 8. *Christ in Majesty,* Catalan art, cca. 1123, fresco, Church of *Sant Climent de Taüll*, now at Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sant_Climent_de_Ta%C3%BCll

Fig. 9. Illustration for the Romanian folktale *The Little Bag with Two Coins,* drawing by Catrina, 5 years old. Personal photo.

Fig. 10. *The City*, drawing by Ruxandra, 5 years old. Personal photo.

Fig. 11. Giotto – *Madonna Ognissanti*, cca. 1310, tempera on wood panel, 325 x 204 cm, The Uffizi Gallery, Florence. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Giotto_Ognissanti_Madonna.jpg

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