Transfiguration and the Marriage of Form and Light in Icons and Church Architecture[1]

AIDAN HART
Iconographer and writer

This article explores the relationship of light and matter in traditional icon painting and church architecture. In particular, it considers how this use of light reflects the Orthodox Church's theology of deification, the material world's transfiguration, the presence of divine *logoi* within the created world, and the capacity of aesthetics to help nurture the state of soul required for theosis. We might call this the ascetics of sacred aesthetics.

In this article we will discuss how the transfiguration of the created world in Christ finds expression in the formal or stylistic means of liturgical art, such as for example the way icons are highlighted, the translucency of the paint, the choice of colour, and the way Byzantine architects managed light and shade in their churches.

The invisible God cannot of himself be depicted. We depict God become flesh. However, the fact of divine grace working within the saints and the material world can be hinted at in the expressive forms of liturgical art. Grace manifests itself through the people and things within which it acts. This objectively changes both the subjects it acts upon and the way we see them. The liturgical texts of the Transfiguration feast allude to both these transformations. Christ himself was transfigured: 'You were transfigured on the mountain, O Christ God, revealing Your glory to Your disciples as far as they could bear it'.[2] But at the same time the eyes of the disciples were transfigured so that they could see Christ as he always was: 'Enlightening the disciples that were with Thee, O

[1] All photos included in this article are by author, except fig. 10.
[2] From the Troparion of the feast. *The Festal Menaion*, trans. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber), 477.

Christ our Benefactor, Thou hast shown them upon the holy mountain the hidden and blinding light of Thy nature and of Thy divine beauty beneath the flesh'.[3] To deny the capacity of art to indicate this transfiguration is to deny the capacity of the material world and the human body to participate in divine grace in any meaningful way.

I am not here referring only to the use of overt symbols to represent this divine activity, such as the painted rays that we see in icons of the transfiguration or theophany, though these will be referenced, but rather to its more subtle aesthetic expressions. This is in part because I am writing primarily not as a theorist but as a practising iconographer and church designer. In the course of work a thousand decisions need to be made about colour, paint application, and the choreography of form and light. To make these aesthetic decisions the artist has to return to the fundamental questions for guidance: How will the fact that I am painting a material world aflame with divine grace affect the way that I paint it, or that the people I depict are bearers of the Holy Spirit? People will worship within the church that I am designing, so how can I help create a state of soul most receptive to divine grace, create an atmosphere conducive to compunction, awe, and peace? These aesthetic details need to accord with correct theology, rather than be random or conform to the latest secular styles or the whims of the artist's ego.

It is sometimes said that icons are not art. This is not true. It is true that they are more than art, but they are at least art. As a work of art the aesthetics of an icon or church building will have a direct impact on the viewer's inner state. This can be for better or for worse depending on how well the work is crafted. If we were opposed to expressing theology through the aesthetics of our visual sacred art then we would equally have to assert that our hymns could be sung to whatever tune, and it would make no difference to worship. We know that in fact these tones do have a profound impact. The melodies of the Church's chants exist primarily to carry the words, but in themselves they also act directly on the human psyche.

Strictly speaking, we are speaking here not of a theology of aesthetics but of an ascetics of aesthetics. Theology proper concerns doctrine of the Holy Trinity, while asceticism is the training and disposition required to

[3] From Matins, Sessional Hymn. *The Festal Menaion*, 479.

align ourselves with the grace of the Holy Trinity. The aesthetical aspect of our liturgical art can encourage, or discourage, the proper inner state needed before deification can occur. God is always the prime actor in this synergy, but to enjoy what is given by the Holy Spirit requires from the recipient an attitude of sobriety, humility, wonder, attentiveness, joyfulness, and compunction. These dispositions can either be helped or hindered by liturgical arts. While the visual forms of iconography or church architecture cannot of themselves create these states in worshippers, they can provide a fertile soil where it is more likely that such an inner disposition will germinate. The very title of that great collection of ascetic writings, *The Philokalia*, meaning 'love of the beautiful and good', suggests this intimate relationship of beauty and asceticism.

If the above is true then this relationship of theology and asceticism with aesthetics is not of merely academic interest. It is fundamental to the development in our times of traditional iconography and church architecture. Although the revival of traditional iconography that began in the early twentieth century is wonderful, it was only a beginning. We are yet immature in our understanding of what constitutes the timeless principles of traditional iconography and church architecture.

The Byzantine chain of master-apprentice that had carried both these principles and the artistic means of conveying these principles was broken for centuries. Under the Ottoman yoke the iconography of Greece and Balkan countries became somewhat crude and folkish. From the time of the secularising Peter the Great, Russian iconography and church architecture were dominated by the Baroque taste for decoration, naturalism, and sentimentality. Although the veneration of icons continued unabated during these difficult centuries, the outward form of icons and church architecture by and large suffered from influences foreign to the Orthodox world view. As a result, today's practitioners are left to learn church art like a second language. Archimandrite Vasileios of Iviron monastery often told me that there are epochs where it is difficult to get things wrong, and there are epochs where it is difficult to get things right. We are surely in the latter.

It will take generations before we rediscover enough of those principles and skills known so well by the ancients for Orthodox liturgical arts to become again a first and natural language. This will change in time, but to get there will need every means at our disposal to unearth

the secrets that made it difficult for medieval Orthodox cultures to get it wrong. Among the tools for this archaeological dig will be analysis using the latest technology and computer modelling, scholarship, close observation of past masterpieces, and above all humility and the thirst to improve.

Of fundamental importance to this process of discovery is to learn the objectives of liturgical art, what are its first principles. The authentic tradition is not mindless copying but the activity of the Holy Spirit within intelligent beings made in God's image, called to invest their talents and increase them manyfold.

We now turn to explore a few of these principles and some technical means utilised by Byzantine iconographers and architects used to express these principles.

Transfiguration and transmitted light in icons

> And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal…The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. (Rev. 21:10,11, 23)

The essence of transfiguration is the union of God's uncreated light with his creation in a union without confusion. This union is effected through God the Son's union with human nature and our response of faith to this fact. St John's vision described in the last book of the Scriptures is all about the union of the Bride (the Church) with the Lamb of God, expressed also as the Holy City 'coming down out of heaven from God' to earth. This City is where 'God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them' (v.3).

John's description repeatedly reiterates this union without confusion in the image of light's interaction with translucent matter. The City shines, it is brilliant, it is jewel-like, and it is clear as crystal yet very colourful, with its foundations being 'decorated with every kind of precious stone'. It is radiant for 'the glory of God gives it light' (v. 23).

A second important aspect of John's description is its personal or hypostatic nature. Names are important in his description. It is a union of the bride and bridegroom. God dwells with his people. On the City's gates are written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel and on its foundations are written the names of the twelve apostles. The hypostatic distinction of each apostle is affirmed by each of their representations as a particular jewel, with its distinctive colour and name.

Every jewel has its unique colour, but is also translucent so that the 'white' light of God's glory can pass through it and emerge as a particular colour. The City's purity—'nothing impure will ever enter it' (v. 27)—does not mean that it is left colourless like clear glass. To the contrary, the intensity of each colour is increased as light passes through it. What is seen is always God's glory expressed as light, but this light is communicated through the unique character of the person or thing through which it is expressed. It is incarnate light. This transmission ensures a union without diminution of either the divine light or the deified person.

In painting this has a symbolic parallel in the union of light with paint, and more specifically, in light passing through translucent paint. We experience transmitted light as much richer and subtler than reflected light, which is light bouncing off the surface. This is why a colour viewed on a computer screen or in a stained glass window appears richer than when on the printed page; the former is transmitted light while the latter is reflected light.

It is clear then that an icon will best signify spiritual transfiguration when its paint layers are translucent enough to allow light to pass through them, reflect off the white gesso that lies behind, and then re-emerge as transmitted light. If all the paint layers are opaque then the viewer can only experience colour as reflected light. Uniform opacity is a common mistake in poorly painted icons. It is true that opacity is used in masterpieces, but only in select areas to contrast with translucent areas.

Another consequence of translucency is that it enhances harmony. It means that all the translucent colours are united by the whiteness of the gesso that is allowed to be partly visible beneath. Icons depict a world in concord, where all things are in harmonious relationship. This relationship can take the form of one colour complementing a neigh-

bouring colour (in the horizontal dimension), but also of one paint layer relating to the layer below (in the depth dimension).

Technically this can be done in two ways. In one technique, used more often in Russian icons though by no means exclusively so, glaze is laid upon glaze. A green *terre verte*, for example, might be glazed over a bright yellow ochre, and a red over a blue to create a purple (fig. 1). The other method, used more by Byzantine painters, though again not exclusively so, is to use fine lines with little gaps between so that the layer below is visible between the brush strokes (fig.2). This can work even when each line is made of opaque paint.

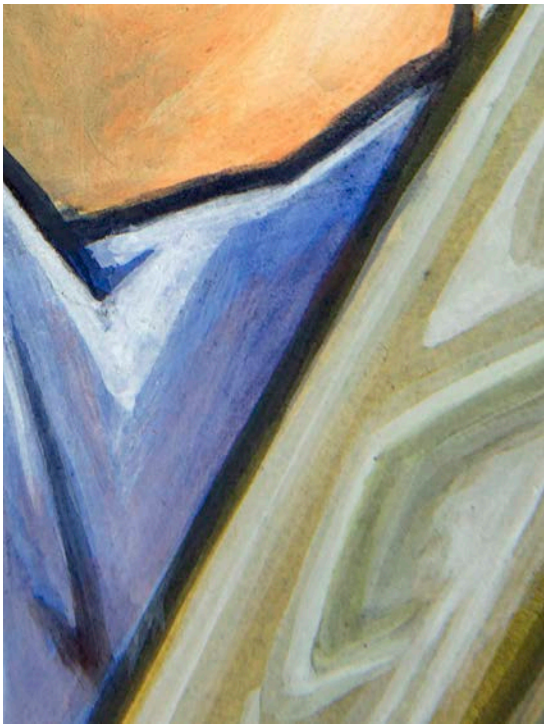

Figure 1: Detail showing the effect of translucent glazes.

Figure 2: A similar effect of depth gained by fine brushstrokes.

Using either of these techniques one can achieve a new hue with richer results when two pure hues are mixed in the viewer's eye rather than in the palette. For example, instead of creating an orange by mixing yellow and red in the palette, you glaze a red over a yellow or apply fine brush strokes of a red over yellow. This mixing in the eye rather than

on the palette is the secret behind the brilliance of Impressionist and Pointillist paintings. In both these techniques there is an interaction between layers in depth, and not just between layers in breadth on the picture plain. This union of two colours without them being irreversibly mixed on the palette is analogous with the union without confusion of the Creator and creature that is theosis.

By describing these painterly techniques and relating them to spiritual transfiguration I am not saying that to be efficacious they need to be read cerebrally and consciously as a symbol. They act directly on the soul, as does music. This aesthetic feeling of harmony cannot compel anyone, nor is it intended to stimulate sentimentality; the person is left free to choose. But it does help contribute towards the atmosphere of compunction, love, and awe within worshippers.

In Byzantine architecture—and we shall be speaking in this essay primarily about the interior and not exterior of its churches—we do not find much opportunity for light to literally pass through material things. We instead need to explore how their interiors unite matter and light in other ways, a subject to which we now turn.

The source of light in church interiors

Here we shall concentrate on the domed cross-in-square church that is characteristic of Byzantine and Slavic Orthodox traditions. The basilican design is also used widely, but space does not permit a detailed discussion of this type.

In general, the emphasis is on natural light entering from above, chiefly through the windows in the drum that supports the dome (fig. 3). The dome is directly above the centre of the nave, which is usually square in floor plan. The hemisphere of the dome represents God and heaven, while the square or cubic nave represents earth—or more accurately, paradise (the four elements, the four points of the compass). The apse with its half dome is the womb of the church, and there the Mother of God is usually depicted. Together these shapes represent the Church, the union of heaven and earth, of Creator and creation.

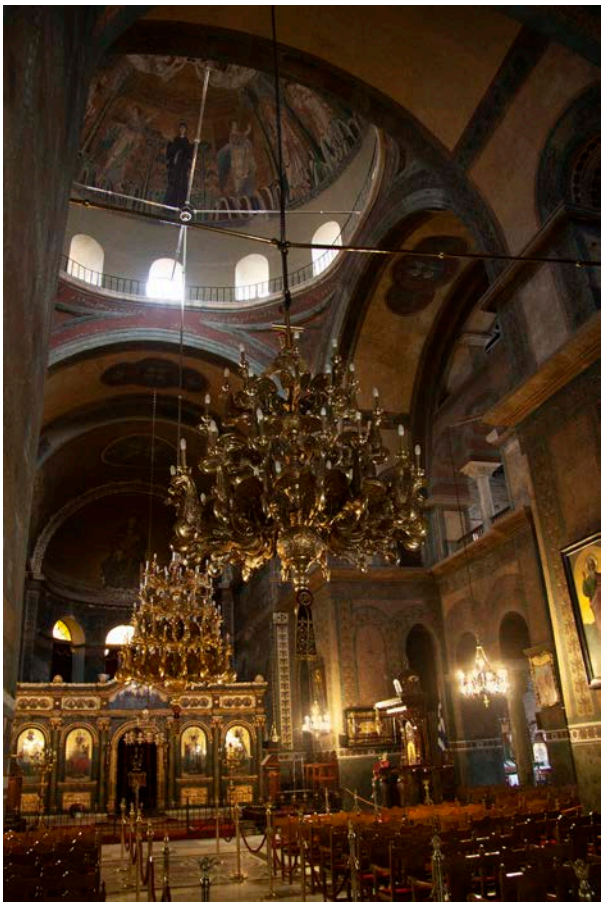

Figure 3: Hagia Sophia, Thessaloniki, showing natural light descending from above, while liturgical lights emphasise the icons.

Side windows are used in the nave, but these tend to be slim or high up. When, as on Mount Athos, there are larger windows low down in the north and south transepts to light the choirs, these are set back considerably and are not visible until one is almost in the centre of the nave.

This fullness of light around the dome creates two gradients of light intensity, one vertical and the other horizontal. Within the nave the light is of higher intensity at the top, around the dome, and lower below. Wassim Jabi and Iakovos Potamianos have done computer modelling to show how expertly the architects of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople angled the window reveals at the dome's base to create an even and strong light throughout the dome, from where it reflects down into the nave.[4]

On the horizontal plane, the visitor passes from the sunlight outside to enter the dark narthex (fig. 4). This is a place of repentance and preparation, where catechumens and those under penance would remain during services. When there are frescoes or mosaics these are usually on the theme of struggle and repentance. As the person continues they pass through the beautiful gate and into the nave where the light is more intense, being at its strongest directly under Christ depicted in the

[4] Wassim Jabi and Iakovos Potamianos, 'Geometry, Light, and Cosmology in the Church of Hagia Sophia', *International Journal of Architectural Computing*, no. 2, volume 5 (June 2007): 303–319.

dome. They have entered paradise, a dwelling place of God's glory and all the saints.

As well as receiving light from above, the church also gives the sensation that light is coming from within. The glory of God fills the temple from above but also dwells within it. Orthodox aesthetics is always incarnational. The Byzantine scholar Procopius of Caesarea described the light of Hagia Sophia in this way: '...it abounds exceedingly in gleaming sunlight. You might say that the [interior] space is not illuminated by the sun from outside, but that the radiance is generated from within'.[5]

Figure 4: The horizontal transition from the dark narthex to the lighter nave.

This accords with the charismatic nature of the Body of Christ. From the time of Pentecost the Church is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, 'the Lord, the Giver of Life' as the Creed affirms. St John tells us that when he saw the Holy City he heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God' (Rev. 21:3). As we shall see, it is thanks to such as mosaics and other reflective surfaces like brass chandeliers and gold leaf, and also the flames of oil lamps and candles, that we are given a lively sense of light radiating from within as well as entering from without. The church interior is thus both enstatic and ecstatic.

[5] Procopius, *De aedificiis* I. i., trans. Cyril Mungo, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1453* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1986), 74.

In Byzantine churches the openings that admit natural light tend to be small and numerous rather than large sheets of glass. Even when a window arch is large, this is often filled with a marble slab with smaller holes which are then filled with glass (fig. 5). This is in part practical, since Byzantines could not make large sheets of glass. But this perforation of material (the marble slabs) with small windows also serves to create a sense of light and matter intermingling rather than of pure light, as would happen with very large windows. Another method of mingling light and matter was to use slabs of translucent stone like marble or onyx (fig. 6). In this way the light that enters the church has been mingled with the mediating stone. It was thus again incarnate light.

Figure 5: Perforated marble slabs for windows. Panagia Chalkeon, Thessaloniki.

Figure 5: Onyx window. Galla Placidia, Ravenna..

The partnership of light and shade

To choreograph light requires the skilful use of shade. Darkness can be used in three ways in liturgical art. Very dark shades can symbolise man's rejection of God, or by contrast, his incapacity ever to know God as he is according to his essence. The third use is to create a sense of interiority and stillness, like the cell of a monk at prayer.

Regarding the rejection or ignorance of God, in icons we find black used in the Nativity cave, in Hades in the Resurrection icon, and also surrounding Cosmos in the Pentecost icon. Concerning God's ineffability, the aureole surrounding Christ's body usually has a deep blue centre, from which radiates ever lighter rings. This suggests the distinction of God's unknowable essence (the dark blue) and his participable energies (the whiter light). Of the stilling effect of dark colours, the most common instance is the deep blue background used for most wall

paintings. In architecture, traditional churches use darkness to great effect, to evoke a sense of mystery and to attract the eye either from low light areas towards the more important areas that are better lit, or vice versa.

Figure 7: A low-lit church, allowing the oil lamps and candles to highlight the icon faces.

Monastic churches are commonly designed with a low ambient light. Even in daytime the walls tend to be in relative shade. This permits the pinpoint light from oil lamps to give emphasis to the icon faces, something impossible if the interior were drenched in light (fig. 7). Such an emphasis on the icons and on their faces in particular gives the church a hypostatic or personal quality. On entering and seeing figures gently lit up the faithful are reminded that they are not so much entering a building as 'the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem', that they 'have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven…' (Heb. 12:22, 23).

Low ambient light also means that the saints and angels depicted on the wall only reveal themselves gradually as the eye adjusts to the darkness. Things unfold in time as well as in space.

Another way that shade and light are used to great effect is the pierced drill-work of many Byzantine capitals, the most obvious example being the basket capital (fig. 8). The contrast of the light surface and the dark crevices creates a lace-like effect. A capital is the interface between the great weight of the roof and the supporting column, and as such experiences a great compressive stress. Yet the decorative piercing of the capital makes it appear that its load weighs very little.

Here it must be noted that transfiguration as not dematerialisation. Light (symbolic of divine grace) unites with matter (symbolic of the whole created world) in a union without confusion so that both continue their existence. The sense of masses being lightened is to reflect the fact that the created world is ultimately supported 'from above' by the *Logos*

through the indwelling *logoi* of things, and not from below by brute created force. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it: 'The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word' (Heb. 1:3). This radiance of the indwelling *logoi* of things transfigures the material world, and does not dematerialize it.

Figure 8: A perforated and painted capital, appearing to lighten the load it bears. San Vitale, Ravenna.

Perichoresis and the movement of light

Our chief source of insight into how Byzantines experienced their liturgical art is found in the descriptions of churches and iconography in the form of *ekphrasis* (meaning 'description' in Greek). These poems or homilies were written in poetic form following a topos inherited from ancient Greece. They were a means of transforming visual art into language. Byzantine *ekphraseis* not only described but also offered insight into the essence of the art described.

Many scholars have observed that an oft repeated theme of these Byzantine *ekphraseis* is movement, how the church interior draws the eye from one place to another. Two passages illustrate this theme, the first by Choricius of Gaza about St Sergius church in Gaza, and the second by Patriarch Photius of Constantinople, describing the Church of the Pharos:

> When you enter [the church], you will be staggered by the variety of the spectacle. Eager as you are to see everything at once, you will depart not having seen everything properly, since your gaze

> darts hither and thither in your attempt not to leave anything unobserved.[6]
>
> But when with difficulty one has torn oneself away from there [the atrium] and looked into the church itself, with what joy and trepidation and astonishment is one filled! It is as if one had entered heaven itself with no one barring the way from any side, and was illuminated by the beauty in all forms shining all around like so many stars, so is one utterly amazed. Henceforth it seems that everything is in ecstatic motion, and the church itself is circling round. For the spectator, through his whirling about in all directions and being constantly astir, which he is forced to experience by the variegated spectacle on all sides, imagines that his personal condition is transferred to the object.[7]

In contrast to a classical sense of beauty in which a more static balance is sought, this Byzantine beauty is clearly dynamic. It does possess a sense of balance, but a balance more akin to a moving rather than standing figure. Beauty for the Byzantine is designed to produce wonder, awe, and movement.

This complex feeling of movement and going outside oneself while being at rest reflects Christianity's trinitarian faith. The beginning and end of all things is trinitarian love, the movement of love among the three Persons of the Trinity and also the reciprocal movement of love between the Trinity and creation.

In particular, this dynamism created by traditional church interiors echoes the concept of *perichoresis* beloved of so many of the Church fathers in describing the nature of the Trinity, and also of the relation between the divine and human natures of Christ. The term suggests the mutual indwelling, coinherence and interpenetration of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and the movement of love among the Persons. It was used in this sense by Cyril of Alexandria and later developed by John of Damascus, although the theological basis for its meaning

[6] Choricius of Gaza, *Laudatio Marciani* (I, 23), trans. Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire*, 16.

[7] Photius Patriarch of Constantinople (858–867, 877–886), *Hom.* X,4,5, trans. Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire*, 185.

was developed much earlier, particularly by Athanasius the Great. The following passage from St John of Damascus expresses the principle clearly:

> For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit: and the Spirit in the Father and the Son: and the Father in the Son and the Spirit, but there is no coalescence or commingling or confusion. And there is one and the same motion: for there is one impulse and one motion of the three Persons.[8]

The dynamism of the church interior is clearly not an attempt to imitate this ineffable trinitarian reality in its fullness and subtlety, but simply to suggest the dynamism inherent in love, that 'there is one impulse and one motion of the three Persons'.

We discussed earlier the importance of translucency in icon painting. Translucent means literally the movement (*trans*) of light (*lux*). In the case of the passages quoted above, the dynamism of church architecture that they describe not only concerns the movement of light but also the movement of sight. The dynamism is literally in the eyes of the beholder as they move their eyes hither and thither. However, it ought to be noted that the classical concept of sight was that a beam of light projected from the eye and it was the confluence of this beam and the observed object that created vision. In the Byzantines' perception we are in fact speaking of a movement of light as well as of sight.

How then do churches create this movement? Here we will describe just a few techniques employed. First, let us look at mosaics. The bedding layer of plaster for the mosaic tesserae was usually undulated to increase the play of light. That this was deliberate and not merely the result of rough stonework or lazy plastering is evident from finds during the recent conservation of mosaics at the Nativity basilica in Bethlehem. Restorers found that while the second plaster layer was finished flat the final bedding layer undulated; this bedding layer was deliberately applied unevenly.

[8] John of Damascus, *An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, I, 14, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, tr. E.W. Watson and L. Pullan, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 9 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1899).

A further play of light was achieved by setting tesserae at various angles rather than rigidly flat, as are so many modern mosaics that are made using the reverse method. Apart from the random inclinations of the coloured glass (called smalti) or stone, gold tesserae were set at particular angles to achieve maximum reflection. Many techniques were used. The background tesserae of the famous deisis in the emperor's gallery of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, are for example laid in a trefoil pattern so that the reflection changes dramatically as the sun moves across the window sited beside the mosaic. The tesserae on the triumphal arch of St Catherine's, Sinai are angled downwards at forty-five degrees, which is more or less at right angles to the viewer's line of site from the nave. In Hagia Sophia the west windowsills of the inner narthex are inclined to catch the afternoon sun, while in the apsidal windowsills the gold tesserae are inclined upwards to direct light toward the apse mosaic.[9]

Another method Byzantines used to create a dynamic experience was to draw the viewer towards spaces only partially visible. The eye is drawn in particular from a large space into receding and smaller spaces, these only partially visible behind columns and arches or through interior windows or doorways. One is given the sense indeed that 'my Father's house has many rooms' (Jn 14:2). This creates a sense of expansion, of spaces extending outwards and forwards into the depths. Shade is utilised to great effect for this end.

In her splendid book, *Mosaics in the Medieval World*, Liz James notes that from the sixth to twelfth centuries there was a tendency to admit less natural light into churches, a move away from the large and light-filled basilicas towards the smaller domed churches. These domed churches were 'more compact and darker space[s] with fewer windows and more nooks and crannies', and she cites Hosios Loukas in Boeotia as one such example. In this, the gallery has windows, but the windows themselves are not visible from the nave so that 'the gallery spaces appear to glow from within'.[10]

This journey outward is greatly aided by the thick walls and pillars found in old churches. This thickness creates large slabs of light and

[9] Liz James, *Mosaics in the Medieval World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 87.

[10] James, *Mosaics*, 92, 93.

dark at right angles to each other, and these act as steps that entice the eye forward and out towards the partially concealed spaces (fig. 9). Thin walls by contrast produce a more two-dimensional surface, without the large intermediate faces at right angles that draw the eye outward.

Figure 9: Thick walls strongly contrast areas of shade and light, which draws the eye into the recesses. Church of the Holy Apostles, Thessaloniki.

A further method used to reflect the dynamic nature of life with God concerns 'artificial' or liturgical lighting, by which I means oil lamps, chandeliers and candles as distinct from sunlight. In the fullest liturgical use of artificial lights, such as one sees on Mount Athos for example, the chandeliers and choros are lit and swung at high points of festal services, such as at the Praises in Matins (Psalms 148–150). One senses that indeed the constellations are obeying the Psalmist's call in majestic dance: 'Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars' (Ps 148:3). The moving lights in turn create shifting reflections off the polished brass, silver, golden icons and polished floor.

This movement is not just through space but also through time. At the Midnight Office virtually all lights are extinguished, then these are gradually light as the vigil progresses towards the Divine Liturgy.

We turn now to the subject of light's relationship with form in icons.

Highlights

Contrary to some popular writing, icons do model form. It is true that they reduce the depth dimension and thus remain true to their nature as flat image, but they by no means eliminate this depth altogether. They have their own means of affirming the materiality of the created world that they depict while preserving this flatness of the picture plane. Chiaroscuro is not used, at least not in the extreme sense of a Caravaggio painting, but the icon tradition does use light to model in other ways that are more in accordance with the theology of transfiguration. Four techniques might be identified.

First, those parts of the person or object closer to the viewer—let us call these the highest areas—are shown lightest while those further back (the 'lower' areas) are rendered deeper in tone. This highlighting occurs for example in garments when the body is in contact with the garment, which pushes the cloth outwards, or when one fold is in front of another. So light is used to model, but not with a single directional light as in chiaroscuro. We can say that light radiates from within, as with the transfiguration.

The second way of modelling, complementary to the first but transcending it, is the use of distinct calligraphic lines of white applied to these high points. They are called *psimythies* or *phota* ('lights') in Greek and *ozhivki* in Slavonic. These possess a curious dual nature. Because they are applied only to high points they do relate to created form, but on the other hand they are so calligraphic and visually distinct that they also appear to be of a different order. To me they suggest uncreated light, a quiet manifestation of the Holy Spirit dwelling within the saint. We might think of them as a white version of the Pentecostal flame. They transform matter without violating it.

The most radical use of *psimythies* is by Theophan the Greek in his frescoes at the church of the Transfiguration on Ilyina Street, Novgorod (1378). He painted his figures rapidly using just red, white and blue

black pigments. Dashes of pure white on their fingertips make the Stylites look like flames atop their pillars (fig.10). There is good reason to believe that Theophan used this dramatic technique deliberately to indicate uncreated light.

Theophan was born around 1340 in Constantinople, studying art and philosophy at its university before eventually arriving in Novgorod by 1378. While living in Constantinople he would certainly have become well versed in the hesychast controversy that had recently raged there, and which continued to simmer until the end of that century. Hesychastic teaching affirmed that the light the disciples saw on Mount Tabor, and which some hesychastic monks had experienced, was uncreated light or grace. It is this same grace (also called energies) by which humans can know God in truth. At the same time hesychastic teaching asserted that God can never be known as he is in his essence (*ousia*). So important was the controversy that it had spawned six Synodal councils between 1341 and 1351, all but one of which decided in favour of hesychastic teachings.

Figure 10: Fresco by Theophan the Greek, showing bold white highlighting. Church of the Transfiguration on Ilyina Street, Novgorod.

In the light of the above there is every reason to believe that these dramatic strokes of white in Theophan's Novgorod frescoes are an artistic means he intended to suggest the radiance of this divine light, an uncreated light which Palamas had asserted was visible to the transfigured physical senses of the disciples on Mount Tabor. Further support for hesychasm's influence on Theophan's work is that Theophan probably came to Novgorod at the behest of the newly consecrated hesychastic St Cyprian, Metropolitan of Kiev. Cyprian had lived on Athos and moved to Constantinople in 1363, where he lived for some years and therefore overlapped with Theophan's residence in the city.[11]

Theophan was renowned in Russia as a wise and articulate philosopher, who was willing and able to express his vision in fresh ways. We have a remarkable description of him by his friend, the Russian chronicler and painter Epiphanius the Wise. In one passage Epiphanius writes:

> Now, as he was drawing or painting all this, no one ever saw him look at models as is done by certain of our icon painters who, doubting everything, make constant use of them, looking hither and thither—not so much working their paints as compelling themselves to look at the model. But he, it would seem, painted on his own, all the time moving about, conversing with visitors, and while he discussed everything otherworldly and spiritual, with his outward gaze he saw the beauty of earthly things.[12]

A third form of light modelling uses gold lines, called *assist*. These operate in a similar way to the *psimythies*, but being of gold rather than paint they more clearly represent divine light. Like the *psimythies*, lines of assist are applied to the high points of form, so that while they represent a transcendent light they do not violate the created order.

The fourth method of modelling utilized in iconography, though more rarely than the above, does in fact involve shadow cast by an external light source. A much quoted example is the shadow cast on

[11] Felix Shabuldo, 'Kypriyan' in *Encyclopaedia of the History of Ukraine*, vol. 4, ed. V.A. Smoliy et al. (Kiev: Institute of History of Ukraine, 2007), http://www.history.org.ua/?termin=Kypriyan_mytropolyt.

[12] Gerol'd Ivanovich Vzdornov, *Theophan the Greek* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1983), trans. B. Meerovich. Another translation of the last phrase is 'seeing the inner goodness with the eyes of his inner feelings'.

Christ's neck in the deisis mosaic in the emperor's gallery at Hagia Sophia. However, this mild form of chiaroscuro seems designed to act liturgically rather than to be an attempt at naturalism for its own sake. This neck shadow is precisely what would be created by the light coming from the window to the mosaic's left if Christ were standing there in the flesh. This shadow is intended to give the viewer a lively sense that Christ is present here now, in this place and time.

The divine logoi and movement towards fulfilment

The above discussion leads us to our final point, that of the divine *logoi* within creation and how liturgical arts indicate their activity. Scriptural verses like the following led many Church Fathers such as Pseudo-Dionysius[13] and Maximus the Confessor[14] to write of a divine *logos* within each created thing. This unique *logos* from the *Logos* is the creative cause of the person or thing, sustains it in being, and as the 'closest approach of God to creation' it presents us an object of contemplation. Each *logos* also guides its subject towards its end of perfection in God, its *telos*: [15]

> The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.[16] After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. (Heb. 1:3)

> The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he

[13] For an excellent analysis of Dionysius' thought, see A. Golitzin, Mystagogy: *A Monastic Reading of Dionysius Areopagita* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013).

[14] See Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1995).

[15] This summary of the multiple activities of the *logoi* comes from Golitzin, *Mystagogy*, 119.

[16] The Greek word here is ῥήματι rather than *lógos*, and indicates a living voice, which makes even more clear the active nature of this indwelling word.

> might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col. 1:15-17,19)

When Christ ascended and sat at the right hand of the Father he did so as God united to humanity. As the *Logos* who is the origin of the multiple *logoi*, he unites in himself all the *logoi* of creation. As a human he contains in himself also the whole created world sustained and directed by these *logoi* and reveals it as radiant with these multiple *logoi*. By his death, resurrection and ascension Christ made the world a cosmos, an adornment for himself, transparent to the Spirit. He raised it to the Father as one, while preserving the integrity of each thing through its unique *logos*, a body with its many members.

We have already indicated some ways in which liturgical art uses light and colour to suggest the translucency of the redeemed cosmos to the *logoi* within, and to create an aesthetics of movement in general. But what devices are used to suggest movement specifically towards its spiritual fulfilment, its *telos*?

In a well-constructed festal icon the background landscape or architecture manifests the inner dynamics of the event. The riverbanks in the Theophany icon part like the waters of the Jordan that opened to allow the people of God to pass through to the Promised Land. Or in the Dormition icon the horizontal and dark funeral bier of the Mother of God is sublimated into the heavenwards-pointing and white vesica piscis of Christ's mandorla. This movement upwards suggests Mary as the first-fruit of all things raised and gathered together into Christ.

Icons will also use a hierarchy of colour intensity to draw the eye towards the most important people. In the Nativity icon, for example, the Mother of God is usually surrounded by the bright vermilion of her 'mattress', while Christ is in white swaddling bands set against the darkness of the cave.

In Byzantine church architecture the ideal seems to have been to design things such that a shaft of sunlight fell on the Holy Table at high points of the liturgical year. The choreography of light drew everything towards a culmination, in this case the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Holy Gifts. In their study of Hagia Sophia, Jabi and Potamianos

concluded that 'the apse was designed to admit a light shaft on the altar through one of the apse windows on a significant time of day of important celebration dates …The heptagon apex at the altar aligns on December 25th of 532'.[17]

The principles and techniques described above reflect but a tiny proportion of the wisdom possessed by the medieval sacred artists. One can but pray that more centres of study and training will arise that further the restoration of authentic liturgical arts.

[17] Jabi and Potamianos, 'Geometry, Light, and Cosmology', 307, 309.