

Summary

Athos. The sense of sight on the Holy Mount

The inquiries presented in this monograph cover the entirety of the religious and cultural heritage created by Orthodox monastic communities that have existed for a thousand years on the Holy Mount Athos in Greece. Our research shows the scope and the way of using the sense of sight as a creator and at the same time a receptor of material and spiritual reality which is manifested in the local liturgy, architecture, art and literature, as well as in mysticism, prayer and the way of everyday life of monks.

The scale of the involvement of the sense of sight in the creation and interpretation of the Athos reality is determined by two existential factors – on the one hand, the usability of natural creations and works of human hands, and on the other hand, the influence of things on human consciousness in the physical and metaphysical dimension of being. As a result of the visual integration of these two processes, objects used on the Holy Mount in sacred and secular activities gain their own agency which manifests itself in their practical and symbolic functions. Due to the fact that these functions are performed in relations with their contractors, objects, become props with the help of which people express and interpret their faith and knowledge, experienced emotions, as well as their own attitude towards the world and fellow human beings. The use of the sense of sight in this process takes places in several ranges of vision: (1) mystical insight, (2) perception of light, (3) perception of shapes, (4) color vision and (5) motion detection.

(1) In Hesychasm, the mystical mainstream of Orthodoxy defining the spiritual identity of the Holy Mount, the perception of uncreated light has identified the carnal sight with the sense of inner vision. This is expressed by the Athos icons of *the Transfiguration* (Greek: *Metamórphose*) showing the supernatural light emanating from the figure of Christ, visible to the eyes thanks to His double – human and divine – nature. In turn, the apophatic texts of St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite describe the mystical experience of reality with the help of metaphors referring to carnal vision. The luminal aspect of the inner sight, already present in the teachings of desert fathers, was negated in the 14th century by Barlaam of Calabria. In a theological dispute with St. Gregory Palamas, however, he suffered a crushing defeat which strengthened and ultimately defined the doctrine of uncreated light as a manifestation of divine energies visually revealed to hesychasts during prayer.

This concept is closely related to the idea of philokalia – love of divine beauty which is also of metaphysical character. This is reflected in a collection of mystical texts written between the 4th and 15th centuries, which appeared in print under the title *Philokalia*

in 1782. Among others, they had a huge impact on Russian Orthodoxy and inspired Fyodor Dostoevsky to state that “beauty will save the world”. On the Holy Mount the idea of love of beauty gives the material reality a spiritual dimension, because it allows one to perceive the presence of God as its Creator in everything. This applies to the landscapes and the architecture of monasteries, as well as works of art and objects created by faith-inspired people. Therefore, the visible beauty of Mount Athos touched also non-orthodox artists such as Edward Lear or Le Corbusier who, each one in a different way, showed it in a transcendental perspective in their works.

(2) Taking into account the physical nature of light and the use of sensual sight on the Holy Mount results from the Orthodoxy luminar theology. This particular physical nature of light was also influenced by the ancient theories of vision of Empedocles and Aristotle. The concept of a fire burning in the eye was important here and helped explain the vision of light on the basis of physiology. As a result, an extraordinary infrastructure of natural and artificial lighting was created on Athos, which is an expression of longing to see the divine glow. Daylight illuminating the interior of the church, cataphatically confirms the presence of God, that is, it shows what He is in His powers. This effect is caused by the construction of the dome leaning on the drum, through the windows into which the sunrays enter from above. They seem to come straight from heaven, reminding us of the splendor of God’s glory to which Christ’s followers are called. The lower light shining through the windows in the walls seemingly makes the iconostases and other gilded furniture emit a supernatural glow themselves. Artificial lighting is used differently on the Holy Mount, because services and liturgy are celebrated in the local churches at night. The flames of candles and oil lamps make the supernatural reality present, thus spiritually uniting monks gathered on the watch. Why this light has an apophatic function is because it mystically illuminates in human hearts the divine mysteries inaccessible to reason.

Beeswax candles are used to illuminate Athos churches for liturgical purposes. They symbolize chastity and, through their preciousness, also sacrifice made to God. Most of them are lit during matins on huge chandeliers, the so-called choros, and during the liturgy itself both single candlesticks and double dikerions as well as triple trikerions are used. Candles made of cheaper ceresin, which are sealed in metal boxes with sand (*panichidnik*), are lit for the dead. The presence of the divine glow on Athos is also expressed by other objects, such as the olive lampades hanging in front of the icons and, more metaphorically, by the gilded icons and illuminated manuscripts themselves.

(3) The perception of shapes on Athos results from the ability of sight and mind to recognize the manifestations of the so-called sacred geometry contained in landscapes, architecture and in various sacred and secular objects. Apart from the human eye’s ability to see light, it is the second most important property of the human eye. St. Augustine claimed that God created the temporal world according to mathematical principles, which are expressed in its geometric arrangement. Therefore, when recognizing shapes, human beings are also confronted with their metaphysical dimension which becomes for them a visual, mental and emotional experience.

The sacredness of geometry in the architecture and art of Athos is mainly justified in the writings of the Church Fathers. On the other hand, this geometry has its source in Euclid’s *Elements* (*Stoichea*), indispensable for the construction of churches and

monasteries. Therefore, starting from his theorem that geometric objects are nothing more than various sets of points underlying them, it is possible to systematize shapes appearing in the space of the Holy Mount as: points, lines, plane figures and three-dimensional solids.

They often fit into the form of a Greek cross, which is symbolically represented by the 18th century phiale from the Simonopetra Monastery, where the point visible on the confluence of the crucifix's arms signifies God as the center of the Universe. Similarly, in the Athos icons of Theophanes the Cretan, Christ in a mandorla points to his navel as the focal point of the visible Universe. The lines mark the golden division of space on proskynnetarions, i.e., old copperplate engravings with images of the Holy Mount. They also connect elements of the architecture of monasteries creating functional and symbolic relations between the gate, the baptismal font, catholikon and the refectory. Plane figures, on the other hand, delineate two-dimensional fields, whose mathematical properties have been discovered by father Pavel Florensky, allow one to see its mystical dimension in geometry. On Athos it is manifested in triangles, rhombuses and circles contained not only in the shapes of sacred objects but also in everyday life utensils. It is also visible in case of the three-dimensional solids forming the semicircular domes of the church symbolizing the celestial vault or the vertical cubes of bell towers bringing the earth closer to heaven.

(4) The perception of colors on the Holy Mount depends not only on their chromatic properties, defined neurobiologically, but is also conditioned by the religious and cultural context of Byzantine civilization and Eastern Christianity. This causes the colors to appear to human eyes as a manifestation of divine beauty inscribed in the metaphysical aspect of being. This is due to both physiological and cognitive abilities of sight, thanks to which colors become a source of sensual and spiritual experiences at the same time. This also applies to gold, white and black "colors", which, according to modern physical theories, are not part of the optical spectrum.

The functions of gold and its cognate yellow colors relate to the mystical presence of God on the Holy Mount. It is manifested in the golden glow of supernatural light emanating from reliquaries, iconostases, liturgical equipment and banners. The use of gold in Athos art is therefore inspired both by its role in the *Bible* and as a part of the Byzantine legacy symbolizing the divinity of imperial power. White also indirectly refers to the symbolism of light on Athos, which is reflected in the white robes of the Risen Christ in the fresco of Manuel Panselinos in Protaton. Their brightness was obtained by using white lead as a pigment. Vestments used in liturgy, such as sticharion, are also white which is justified by the biblical interpretation of this color and the traditions of early Christianity. Black, deprived of light, is very rarely used in Athos frescoes and icons, however blackness is present on the Holy Mount mainly in the clothes worn by monks which symbolizes their renunciation of the temporal world. In the past deep shade of black was difficult to obtain so it was not until the 20th century that their robes actually turned black. Interestingly enough, despite endless efforts, non-fading black ink required for writing books was unavailable for centuries.

Among chromatic colors, red is the most important on Athos. It has many uses, hence many different shades and names. The robes of Christ and the Mother of God are painted with pigments obtained from cinnabar, while the walls of catholicons were

originally decorated in red with ochre paints. In turn, various shades of purple, the imperial color in Byzantium, are used in frescoes, and the porphyry columns in some churches are also in this color. Green dominates on the Holy Mount mainly in its flora, and decorates the domes of the catholicon of St. Pantaleimon monastery. Blue is less popular and since the 11th century it has symbolized above all Mary's chastity. Its deepest shades are obtained in icons and frescoes from powdered lapis lazuli.

(5) For the visual apparatus, the sensation of movement is the most difficult phenomenon to interpret, because most of the receptors in the human eye are not designed to distinguish between static and dynamic objects. On Athos, however, the changeability and transience of the temporal world are additionally contrasted with eternity. This means that movement is perceived there both in the physical and metaphysical dimensions. It finds its expression in the interpretation of the passage of time, the wandering of pilgrims, the kinetics of the liturgy and in the apparent stillness of figures in icons and frescoes.

As evidenced by the Julian calendar and counting the beginning of the day from sunset, time measurement is a Byzantine heritage on the Holy Mount. The apparent movement around the earth determines the night and day hours, shifts of the guards, and the canonical hours. Time for worship and liturgy, as well as for work, meals and recreation for monks are regulated according to them. Athos time is now measured by mechanical clocks which are adjusted to the actual solar time once a week. Therefore, time-lapse becomes a function of the movement of pilgrims climbing to the top of the Holy Mount, who do it each year on the Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God (August 6th). This pilgrimage is a movement of the soul taking place in the body so it becomes an ascetic practice bringing people closer to God as taught by St. John Climacus in the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. It is also reflected in Athos liturgy which is a moving spectacle with human actors and God as the "director" of this sacred spectacle. Although it affects all senses, sight is privileged here. It was brilliantly shown by Vasily Barsky, who in *Travels to the Holy Places (Путешествие к святым местам)* drew the movement of clergy and deacons on the plan of the Monastery of the Great Lavra. Created under the strong influence of Hesychasm, Athos icons show a specific image of the movement. The holy figures depicted in them look from the perspective of eternity, and at the same time participate in the scenes of earthly life as their mobile actors.