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“THE DA VINCI MODE”

Unsolved Mysteries of Macedonian Medieval Fresco Painting

The field of Byzantine studies, which encompasses the many different aspects of Medieval East in its historical, social and cultural manifestations, has built a solid ground for profound investigation of the artistic production in regard to its theological conception and religious significance. The scholarly efforts of numerous authors related to the program configuration of the painted ensembles, their iconographic features and stylistic characteristics, resulted in creation of thousands of pages dedicated to the canonic principles in depiction of the saintly images, biblical motifs, as well as hagiographic illustrations. The comparative approach, as the most preferential methodological input of Byzantine scholars in exploration of artistic legacy, had its expected output in detection of the iconographic or stylistic similarities and in explication of the painterly analogies and parallels of the works of art in question. As a consequence, we can enjoy the results of investigations of what is common and mutual and celebrate the God-fearing, all- admiring and everlasting rules of Byzantine artistic creation.

However, one should also pay at least minimum attention to the work of the painters who ventured to deviate from the standardized rules of artistic expression by infusing a significant degree of individual approach in the conception, as well as in the depiction of the painterly elements. With the inclusion of peculiar images, graphical symbols and unexpected forms within the customary designed structure of the pictures, they have created a whole world of unexpected shapes, cryptic messages and mysterious signs as components of their genuine, exciting and discreet painterly idiolect. Esoteric in its configuration and confidential in its function, it testifies to the ways and manners of alternative visual practice and its communication with the anonymous stratum of consumers of their secret messages. In the frames of this “underground” Byzantine artistic culture, developed in the period from the very beginnings of medieval painterly practice until the death of Eastern Roman Empire and its creative production in the mid 15th century, we will pinpoint but a few examples belonging to Macedonian medieval treasury of representative fresco ensembles. Their historical significance and social influence, as well as their artistic features and painterly qualities, already confirmed by the majority of Byzantine scholars,

should serve as an appropriate instrument for determination of the generous contribution of Macedonian territory to the masonry of the magnificent treasury of Byzantine visual avant-garde.

The first one is the most significant theological arrangement of the 11th century Byzantium, the painted decoration of the **Saint Sophia cathedral in Ohrid**¹. Commissioned by the Constantinopolitan church dignitary Leo, who was appointed as Ohrid Archbishop in 1037 in order to restore the orthodox faith in Macedonia thorn apart by the widespread Bogomils' heresy, the fresco arrangement of this church, preserved mainly in the altar (**Fig. 1**), reflects the issues of the contemporary theological disputes through the new constituents of the painted programme. The new iconographic canons conceived in the decorative programme of the St. Sophia church which, in the centuries that followed, became the landmark of the painted ensembles in Byzantine monuments, are the most precious contribution of the Ohrid monument to the overall development of Byzantine art. The thoughtfully arranged program configuration of the altar decoration based upon the notion of the cathedral character of the church, the subtly designed liturgical components that radiate with the powerful aura of the Constantinopolitan Dogma, the strongly suggested social context of the illustrated Eucharistic scenes and the display of the religious unity through the performative role of historical portraiture, are the main components of the innovatively composed iconographic structure that will change the decoration of Byzantine sanctuaries forever.

Among the many iconographic novelties that, through the concept of η σοφία (the ultimate wisdom), refer to the sophisticatedly displayed restoration of orthodoxy, the illustration of the Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great is the most

¹ П. Миљковиќ-Пепек, *Материјали за македонската средновековна уметност. Фреските во светилиштето на црквата св. Софија во Охрид*, Зборник на Археолошкиот музеј I, Скопје 1955-1956, 37-67; Р. Љубинковиќ - М. Коровиќ-Љубинковиќ, *Средновековното сликарство во Охрид*, Зборник на трудови, Охрид 1961, 101-106; В. Н. Лазарев, *Живопись XI-XII веков в Македонии*, Actes du XII^e Congrès international d'études byzantines I, Beograd 1961, 114-121; С. Радојчић, *Прилози за историју најстаријег охридског сликарства*, Зборник радова Византолошког института VIII/2, Београд 1964, 355-381; П. Миљковиќ-Пепек, *Материјали за историјата на средновековното сликарство во Македонија III. Фреските во наосот и нартексот на црквата Св. Софија во Охрид*, Културно наследство III, Скопје 1967, 1-25; В. Ј. Ђурић, *Византијске фреске у Југославији*, Београд 1974, 9-11; R. Hamann-Mac Lean, *Grundlegung zu einer Geschichte der mittelalterlichen Monumentalmalerei in Serbien und Makedonien*, Giessen 1976, 224-248; A. Wharton-Epstein, *The Political Content of the Painting of Saint Sophia at Ohrid*, Jarbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik 29, Wien-Köln-Graz 1980, 315-329; Ц. Грозданов, *Слика јављања премудрости св. Јовану Златоустом и Св. Софији Охридској*, Зборник радова Византолошког института, 19, Београд 1980, 147-154; idem, *Портрети на светителите од Македонија од IX-XVIII век*, Скопје 1983, 24-26, 43-47; А. М. Лидов, *Образ Христа-архиепископа в иконографической программе Софии охридской*, Зограф 17, Београд 1986, 5-21; Ц. Грозданов, *Циклусот на четириесетте маченици во Света Софија Охридска*, Студии за охридскиот живопис, Скопје 1990, 42-50; idem, *Фреските на Св. Софија Охридска*, Скопје 1998, 3-16; A. Wharton, *Art of Empire. Painting and Architecture of the Byzantine Periphery*, University Park and London 1988, 105-106; S. Korunovski – E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia. L'arte medievale*, Milano 2006, 52-56

Fig. 1 St. Sophia, Ohrid,
Altar decoration

Сл. 1 Св. Софија,
Охрид, Олтарска
декорација



Fig. 2 St. Sophia, Ohrid,
The Liturgy of St. Basil
the Great

Сл. 2 Св. Софија,
Охрид, Литургијска
служба св. Василија
Великог



interesting one² (Fig. 2). Placed in the eastern portion of the northern wall of the altar and depicted with a number of iconographic details, this scene occupies a festal position next to the main apse, revealing the particular performance of a solemn religious ceremony. Within the structural design of the scene, Saint Basil, accompanied by the priests and the deacons, reads the verses from the scroll, bowing to the symbols of Christ's Eucharistic sacrifice placed on the

² П. Миљковиќ-Пепек, *Материјали за македонската средновековна уметност, Фреските во светилиштето на црквата св. Софија во Охрид*, 47; С. Радојчиќ, *Прилози за историју најстаријег охридског сликарства*, 363-364; A. Wharton-Epstein, *The Political Content of the Painting of Saint Sophia at Ohrid*, 315-325; eadem, *Art of Empire. Painting and Architecture of the Byzantine Periphery*, 106; S. Korunovski – E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia. L'arte medievale*, 53



Fig. 3 St. Sophia, Ohrid, The Liturgy of St. Basil the Great (detail)

Сл. 3 Св. Софија, Охрид, Литургијска служба св. Василија Великог (детал)

altar table. In the western part of the composition, the believers express their admiration with various gestures of appreciation, watchfully following the liturgical service. Performed by its author and his clergy in the altar of a domed church and attended by a group of citizens who stand in front of the massive wall structure of the naos, it seems that it takes place in a very precisely defined spatial context of the depicted religious edifice. Having in mind the dome as an element of the original building of Saint Sophia from the time of archbishop Leo, confirmed by the architectural analyses and destroyed after the Muslim conversion of the church into a mosque in the 15th century³, we suggest that the picture represents the interior of the Ohrid church as a location of the festal performance of the orthodox liturgy in its genuine form.

As an argument supporting this hypothesis, one can mention the character painted as peeking at the liturgical ceremony from the window of the building depicted behind the church wall (**Fig. 3**), which could allude to one of the medieval edifices still existing on the slightly elevated terrain on the side of the entrance of the Saint Sophia church. If we accept the possibility of such metaphrasic approach to the illustration of the first ever represented scene with the depiction of the liturgical rite conducted by Saint Basil, than we have to take into serious consideration the idea that by placing this ritual within the cathedral of Saint Sophia, one intended to accentuate the significance of orthodox rites for the believers' benefits of Ohrid church diocese. This symbolic inter-relation of the orthodox faith, manifested by the depiction of the genuine religious ceremony and its symbolically specified performative location in the Ohrid cathedral, is an effective visual allusion to the primary role of the eminent church intellectual Leo, sent to restore the orthodox belief in the significant and influential Episcopal see of Ohrid.

³ S. Korunovski – E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia. L'arte medievale*, 29-30

Fig. 4 St. George,
Kurbino, Ascension

Сл. 4 Св. Ђорђе,
Курбиново, Вознесење



Fig. 5 St. George,
Kurbino, The Melismos

Сл. 5 Св. Ђорђе,
Поклоњење архијереја



Another example of creation of a sophisticated concept of encoded visual messages within the canonically conceived design of a Byzantine painted ensemble, is the fresco decoration of the church dedicated to **Saint George at the village of Kurbino** (1191)⁴. Commissioned by an anonymous donor, the image of whom is tragically devastated and kept only in a small fragment preserved on the western façade of the church, this monument is even more mysterious due to the missed opportunity for disclosure of the appropriate social

⁴ Р. Љубинковић, *Стара црква села Курбинова*, Старица III серија, књ. XV, Београд 1942, 101-123; М. Рајковић, *Трагом једног византијског сликара*, Зборник радова Византолошког института 3, Београд 1955, 207-212; А. Николовски - З. Блажић, *Конзерваторски и истраживачки работи на средновековниот споменик св. Ђорѓи во село Курбиново*, Разгледи, Скопје 1958, 468-477; В. Н. Лазарев, *Живопис XI-XII веков во Македониј*, Actes du XIIe Congrès international d'études byzantines I, Београд 1963, 129-131; L. Hadermann-Misguish, *Les eaux vives de l'Ascension dans le contexte visionnaire des théophanies de Kurbino*, Byzantion XXXVIII, Bruxelles 1969, 374-385; В. Ј. Ђурић, *Византијске фреске у Југославији*, Београд 1974, 14-15; L. Hadermann-Misguish, *Kurbino. Les fresques de saint Georges et la peinture Byzantine du XII siècle*, Bruxelles 1975, 43-318, 321-551; R. Hamann-Mac Lean, *Grundlegung zu einer Geschichte der mittelalterlichen Monumentalmalerei in Serbien und Makedonien*, Giessen 1976, 276-281; Ц. Грозданов - Л. Хадерман-Мисгвиш, *Курбиново*, Скопје 1992, 51-64, 74-79; S. Korunovski - E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia. L'arte medievale*, 74-81

origin, as well as historical role of its khetor. Still, the fact that the unknown patron is represented in the company of the Byzantine royalty and positioned next to the figure of Ohrid's Archbishop, speaks in favour of his most probable appurtenance to the highest circles of clerical nobility. Widely renowned for its genuine program configuration of the painted arrangement, its finely designed iconographic novelties and its extraordinary painterly qualities based on the dynamic whirl of kinetic energy (**Fig. 4**), the decorative arrangement of Kurbinovo is enumerated among the most inventive fresco programmes of the Middle Byzantine period. However, despite the numerous pages of scholarly papers dedicated to the investigation of its sensational features, the Kurbinovo fresco decoration still keeps many secrets of its painterly conception in the sphere of iconographic innovations, as well as in the domain of artistic expression. In the frames of this paper, we will point out only two of them.

The first one is the oldest representation of the *Melismos* scene⁵ (**Fig. 5**) with the depiction of the Amnos laid on the altar table as an innovative iconographic formula which, filling into the location of the former *Hetoimasia*, concludes the process of the designing of the liturgical commemoration of Christ's Eucharistic sacrifice in the altar decoration of Byzantine churches. Considered as a visual reflection of the subtle theological ideas related to Christ's redemptional sacrifice explicated at the church councils held in Constantinople during the 12th century⁶, this fresco in Kurbinovo was strongly connected to the notion of its Metropolitan dogmatic, as well as artistic origin. Related to the nature, substance and meaning of the sacrifice of Christ and its perpetual enactment in the liturgy, the debates of the most influential church dignitaries in the seat of the powerful Patriarchate were considered as the crucial impact over the iconographic design in depiction of Christ's role in the Eucharist⁷. However, no supporting examples of this early representation of the *Melismos* concept have survived in the Byzantine capital, which could be employed in a chronological or iconographical comparison. On the other hand, geographically much closer to the Kurbinovo church, there is a monument in the altar decoration of which, the Amnos is suggested through an encoded system of sophisticatedly designed visual and textual messages.

Namely, in the sanctuary of the church dedicated to Saint Achillius at Prespa⁸, commissioned by the Emperor Samuel in the closing decade of the 10th century, the representation of the *Hetoimasia* is followed by a verse referring to the Eucharistic rite celebrated within the altar, which reads:

⁵ В. Ј. Ђурић, *Византијске фреске у Југославији*, 14; L. Hadermann-Misguish, *Kurbinovo. Les fresques de saint Georges et la peinture Byzantine du XII siècle*, Bruxelles 1975, 67-74; R. Hamann-Mac Lean, *Grundlegung zu einer Geschichte der mittelalterlichen Monumentalmalerei in Serbien und Makedonien*, 280; Ц. Грозданов - Л. Хадерман-Мисгвиш, *Курбиново*, 53-54; Sh. E. J. Gerstel, *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries. Programs of the Byzantine Sanctuary*, Seattle and London 1999, 91-92; S. Korunovski - E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia. L'arte medievale*, 76-80

⁶ Г. Бабић, *Христолошке распре у XII веку и појава нових сцена у апсидалном декору византијских цркава*, Зборник за ликовне уметности 2, Нови Сад 1966, 11-30

⁷ Sh. E. J. Gerstel, *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries. Programs of the Byzantine Sanctuary*, 45-47

⁸ П. Миљковић-Пепек, *Фреските и иконите од X и XI век во Македонија*

*“Beholding the sanctuary of the Lord’s altar
Stand trembling, O man and bow with obedience
For within, Christ is sacrificed daily
And the powers of incorporeal angels, celebrating
Circle around the sanctuary in fear.”⁹*

Alluding to the sacrificial role of the Savior in his festal participation within daily liturgical service, the Eucharistic verses of Saint Achillius finely contour the idea of the mystical presence of Christ as a corporeal sacrifice, laid on the altar table. Moreover, we should mention that the *Hetoimasia* in Saint Achillius is not depicted in its traditional and standardized form of a throne, but in a shape of a real altar table¹⁰, prepared for the lay down of the Amnos. Thus, this refined Eucharistic allusion of the depicted *Hetoimasia* from the cathedral church of Samuel’s Archbishopric at Prespa could be easily seen as an immediate prefiguration of the concrete iconographic model formulated in the altar of the Kurbinovo church, as a visual reflection of the sacrificial dimension of Christ’s incarnation. As a supporting argument, we would like to mention the fact that the Kurbinovo church was created as a smaller replica of the Saint Achillius cathedral as the most representative sacral edifice in the Prespa region, a fact confirmed by the analyses of the architectural features of the two monuments, such are: the plan, the spatial organization and the building technique¹¹. Therefore, the origination of the *Melismos* composition in Kurbinovo can be seen as a further, visual development of the methaprasic concept conceived in the Archbishopric see of Tsar Samuel’s Empire in the period of its greatest political and cultural rise, instead of being interpreted as a religious import from the distant theological realm of the Byzantine Metropolis.

Much more mysterious and unsolvable is the peculiar artistic handwriting of the leading master of the Kurbinovo painterly atelier¹². Evaluated as one of the most energetic fresco painters of the Komnenian era, he became well known by his temperamental drawing, by the elongated figures executed with a shivering graphic play of the lines and by the elastic rhythm of the draperies that float with their weightless unrest¹³ (**Fig. 6**). Imbuing his figures with a dynamic whirl of kinetic energy, shaping the anatomic features of the characters with a subtle cohesion of the details and permeating the saintly images with a refined

(Во периодот на Самуил и по него), Културно наследство VI, Скопје 1975, 40-42

⁹ Н. Радошевић-Максимовић, *Један епиграм из базилике Св. Ахилија на Малој Преспи*, Зборник радова Византолошког института 12, Београд 1970, 9-12

¹⁰ П. Миљковиќ-Пепек, *Фреските и иконите од X и XI век во Македонија* (Во периодот на Самуил и по него), Сл. 5

¹¹ S. Korunovski – E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia. L’arte medievale*, 52

¹² L. Hadermann-Misguish, *Kurbinovo. Les fresques de saint Georges et la peinture Byzantine du XII siècle*, 341-562; Ц. Грозданов - Л. Хадерман-Мисгвиш, *Курбиново*, 74-79; Е. Димитрова, *За боите и ритмот, Стилските игри во македонското средновековно сликарство*, Културен живот 2, Скопје 2001, 50-51; S. Korunovski – E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia. L’arte medievale*, 80-81

¹³ S. Korunovski – E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia. L’arte medievale*, 80



Fig. 6 St. George, Kurbinovo, Harrowing of Hell

Сл. 6 Св. Ђорђе, Курбиново, Силазак у ад



Fig. 7 St. George, Kurbinovo, Archangel

Сл. 7 Св. Ђорђе, Арханђео



Fig. 8 St. George, Kurbinovo, Archangel

Сл. 8 Св. Ђорђе, Курбиново, Арханђео



Fig. 9 St. George, Kurbinovo, Archangel Gabriel from the Annunciation

Сл. 9 Св. Ђорђе, Курбиново, Арханђео Гаврило из Благовести

psychological expression of the movements, the Kurbinovo master created a glamorous world of aristocratic elegance and luxurious grace, never before encountered in the sphere of mediaeval painting (Fig. 7). With a sophisticated selection of the hues, the delicate blending of the painted harmonies and the softly applied shadows, he accentuated the maelstrom of the wavy draperies living their own life in the abstractly playful form, as a crucial element of his painterly discourse (Fig. 8). Much more than just expressing the interior spiritual charge of the figures, as thought by the scholars engaged in investigation of the Kurbinovo painterly attributes, the dynamic commotion of the draperies did not serve only as a perfect instrument for capturing of the nervous and sensitive rhythm of the animated artistic interpretation (Fig. 9); it comprised the many different cryptic signs and symbols, that in a form of numbers, letters and floral elements (Fig. 10), contained the secret messages of the esoteric artistic language of the master. Subtly woven in the fluttering fabric of the draperies as threads of an enigmatic puzzle, the cryptograms of the Kurbinovo painter may never be deciphered; still they will wave the garments of the figures with their illuminative energy, until the end of time.

Another example of the encoded system in transposition of visual messages within Macedonian medieval cultural treasury is the fresco decoration of the church dedicated to Saint Archangel Michael at Lesnovo (from around 1343)¹⁴. Investigated for almost eight decades by a great number of scholars in



Fig. 10 St. George, Kurbinovo, Archangel Gabriel from the Annunciation

Сл. 10 Св. Ђорђе, Курбиново, Арханђео Гаврило из Благовести

¹⁴ N. L. Okunev, *Lesnovo*, L'art byzantine chez les Slaves, Les Balkans, Paris 1930, 226-235; С. Радојчић, *Старо српско сликарство*, Београд 1966, 143-148; idem, *Лесново*, Београд 1971; Ј. Радовановић, *Једно чудо арханђела Михаила у Леснову*, Зборник за ликовне уметности 10, Нови Сад 1974, 49-58; В. Ј. Ђурић, *Византијске фреске у Југославији*, Београд 1974, 64; С. Габелић, *Четири фреске из циклуса арханђела Михаила у Леснову*, Зограф 7, Београд 1977, 58-64; eadem, *Нови податак о севастократорској титули Јована Оливера и време сликања лесновског наоса*, Зограф 11, Београд 1980, 54-62; eadem, *Чудо о кривоклетнику из Леснова*, Зограф 17, Београд 1986, 54-56; eadem, *Једна локална сликарска радионица из средине XIV века, Дечани - Леснов - Марков манастир-Челопек*, Дечани и византијска уметност средином XIV века, Београд 1989, 367-378; eadem, *Циклус Арханђела у византијској уметности*, Београд 1991, 45, 51, 55, 71, 75, 87, 89, 90, 104, 111-117; eadem, *Diversity in Fresco Painting of the Mid-Fourteenth Century: The Case of Lesnovo*, The Twilight of Byzantium, Aspects of Cultural and Religious History in the Late Byzantine Empire, Princeton 1991, 187-215; И. М. Ђорђевић, *Зидно сликарство српске властеле*, Београд 1994, 153-157; С. Габелић, *Манастир Лесново. Историја и сликарство*,



Fig. 11 St. Archangel Michael, Lesnovo, The Portrait of Jovan Oliver

Сл. 11 Св. Арханђео Михаило, Лесново, Портрет Јована Оливера

regard to its programme conception, painterly features, as well as artistic qualities, the fresco ensemble of this monument is enumerated among the most picturesque decorative arrangements of the 14th century. The inventive iconographic details included into the standard skeleton of compositional matrixes, the brave deviation from the painterly standards by the introduction of elements from contemporary liturgical practices into the usual configuration of the scenes, as well as the infusion of a substantial dose of expressiveness of form and immediacy of the painterly expression are the three elements decisive of the artistic attributes of the Lesnovo fresco ensemble. Commissioned by the most powerful feudal lord in the King Dušan's hierarchy and executed by an anonymous atelier of painters prone to the vigorous resonances of a joyful and exuberant artistic vision,

this monument belongs to the circle of the most splendid aristocratic endowments of Byzantine Macedonia.

However, many of the challenging components hidden beneath/within the conventionally structured iconographic design of the scenes have been neglected even from the most perceptive scholars. This particularly refers to the depiction of the donor's portraits representing the mighty nobleman Jovan Oliver in his glamorous and admirable appearance¹⁵. The one located in the eastern portion of the northern wall of the naos pictures the corpulent and vigorous aristocrat in his full-blooded masculinity (**Fig. 11**). Well-trimmed and dressed in an exclusively luxurious attire, ornamented with golden threads and pearls, he proudly presents the church replica to the militant figure of Saint Archangel Michael, thus participating in the binal iconographic concept of the khetorial scene. The second portrait, included in the two-zonal khetorial ensemble executed on the northern wall of the narthex (from 1349), radiates with the glow of gold and gems of Jovan Oliver's extraordinary palatial costume, revealing his chivalrous elegance and astonishing glamour. Still, his older image, located

Београд 1998, 51-154; Б. Тодић, *Натпис уз Јована Оливера у наосу Леснова. Прилог хронологији лесновских фресака*, Зборник радова Византолошког института 38, Београд 1999/2000, 379-381; S. Korunovski – E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia. L'arte medievale*, 190-195

¹⁵ С. Габелић, *Манастир Лесново. Историја и сликарство*, 112-118

Fig. 12 St. Archangel
Michael, Lesnovo,
Khtetorial ensemble
in the naos

Сл. 12 Св.
Арханђео
Михаило, Лесново,
Ктирорска сцена у
наосу



Fig. 13 St. Archangel
Michael, Lesnovo,
The Portrait of Jovan
Oliver

Сл. 13 Св.
Арханђео
Михаило, Лесново,
Портрет Јована
Оливера



in the naos and accompanied by the militantly designed church patron, is preserved much better than the one painted in the narthex; thence it is much more significant for our insistent investigation.

In that regard, having in mind the extraordinary configuration of the donor's scene executed in the naos, the composition of which encompasses only the commissioner's portrait and the figure of the patron saint (**Fig. 12**), we can not but notice that it deviates from the already established concept of khtetorial arrangements, in which the Serbian feudal subjects are represented in configuration with the sovereign of the State¹⁶. Occupying the central position on the northern wall, designed to impress the spectators with its monumental dimensions and structured as a simplified version of the traditional iconographic matrixes of khtetorial scenes, the donor's composition in the Lesnovo naos gives

¹⁶ Б. Тодић, *Натпис уз Јована Оливера у наосу Леснова. Прилог хронологији лесновских фресака*, 379-381; Е. Dimitrova, *The Portal to Heaven. Reaching the Gates of Immortality*, Niš & Byzantium, The Collection of Scientific Works V, Niš 2007, 373-374



Fig. 14 St. Archangel Michael, Lesnovo, The Portrait of Jovan Oliver (detail)

Сл. 14 Св. Арханђео Михаило, Лесново, Портрет Јована Оливера (деталј)



Fig. 15 St. Archangel Michael, Lesnovo, The Portrait of Jovan Oliver (detail)

Сл. 15 Св. Арханђео Михаило, Лесново, Портрет Јована Оливера (деталј)



Fig. 16 St. Archangel Michael, Lesnovo, The Portrait of Jovan Oliver (detail)

Сл. 16 Св. Арханђео Михаило, Лесново, Портрет Јована Оливера (деталј)

significant references in regard to the comprehension of its distinctive historical, as well as political context. The exclusion of Dušan's image, which refers to the possibility of immediate interference of a foreign ruler in the promotion of Jovan Oliver into a high-ranking feudal lord on one hand¹⁷, and the mysterious origin of this highly influential and extremely wealthy immigrant on the other, are the two indications stimulative enough for us to search for a certain historical substantiation of Jovan Oliver's social background. The extraordinary design of his fascinating portrait in the naos of Lesnovo reveals this enigmatic issue to, at least, some extent.

Namely, on the façade of the church model held by the donor, sideways of the entrance, we can notice the cryptic signs, that, in a form of a graphic decoration, embellish the western wall of the temple (**Fig. 13**). Unknown to the architectural design of Byzantine church facades, let alone to the concepts of depiction of khetor church replicas, these unique visual symbols can be identified among the cryptograms from the secret catalogue of a certain esoteric iconography. The symbolic signs, designed in a shape of floral ornaments depicting a sword (**Fig. 14**), a helmet (**Fig. 15**) and a shield (**Fig. 16**) are the most distinguished emblems of the members of a very influential and extremely wealthy medieval church order, known under the name of Templars¹⁸. Although no confirmation of this hypothesis alluding to the links of the Lesnovo khetor with the Western knights can be found in the historical sources or surviving documents,

¹⁷ *eadem*, 374

¹⁸ M. A. Leinart, *The Iconography of the Knights Templar*, University of Sheffield 2002, Ch. 4

the well known social, political and financial power of Jovan Oliver, as well as his highly appreciated diplomatic ambiguity, speak in favor of a character much closer to the western sustainable opportunism than to the Byzantine or Serbian political conservatism.

In the long search for the key of many unsolved mysteries undertaken by the western science as well as fiction, the ones related to art history are among the most sensational. From Boticelli to Leonardo, from Hieronymus Bosch to Dürer, one can list an exciting catalogue of visual phrases and crypto signs of their finely coded painterly language. However, from a chronological point of view, they all appeared much later than the highly sophisticated system of secret messages of Byzantine artistic culture. Although neither Leonardo, nor the Kurbinovo master will never ever be fully comprehensible even to the most ambitious scholars, their exquisite painterly idiolect, permeated with the hues of a powerful emblematic vision, will always testify to the ever-inspiring puzzle of supreme artistic creation.

Елизабета Димитрова
ДА ВИНЧИЈЕВ МОДЕЛ

Неразрешене мистерије македонског средњевековног фреско сликарства

Сфера византијских студија, која обухвата различите аспекте Ромејске цивилизације у доменима историјских, социјалних и културних манифестација, створила је чврсту базу за истраживање уметничког стваралаштва у односу на његову теолошку концепцију и религијски значај. Оно што је у целости остало ван истраживачког интереса научних кругова су специфични начини изражавања појединих аутора који су се одважили да напусте стандардна начела уметничког израза, упуштајући се у авантуристичке подухвате индивидуалних приступа у конципирању и представљању сликарских елемената. Уношењем чудноватих обриса, графичких симбола и неочекиваних облика у оквиру традиционално дизајниране ликовне структуре фреско ансамбала, они су створили читав свет мистериозних контура, тајних порука и чудесних знакова, као обележја њиховог оригиналног, узбудљивог и дискретног сликарског идиома. У том контексту, међу бројним средњевековним фреско аранжманима на македонској територији, у којима постоје споменуте компоненте, три су најкарактеристичнија. Први је олтарска декорација Светософијске катедрале у Охриду (после 1037.), где је први пут представљена Литургијска служба св. Василија Великог као илустрација конкретног чина свечане церемоније у њеном изворном облику. Притом, литургијски ритуал не прате само верници у храму већ и тајанствени “аутсајдер” који вири кроз прозор своје куће, лоциране на једној узвишици иза цркве. Прецизно дефинисан просторни контекст сцене упућује на претпоставку да композиција приказује ентеријер Охридске цркве као локацију свечаног перформанса Василијеве литургије у њеном оригиналном облику. Други пример софистицираног концепта кодираног уметничког језика је фреско декорација цркве Св. Ђорђа у Курбинову (1191), у којој је по први пут представљена сцена Поклоњења архијереја жртвованом Христу у литургијској служби у олтару. Сматрана визуелном рефлексijом суптилних теолошких идеја повезаних са евхаристичном улогом Христа у литургији, разматраних на црквеним саборима у Цариграду у току XII века, ова фреска из Курбинова је била чврсто повезана са идејом о њеним престоичким догматским и уметничким пореклом. Ипак, једини пример који

се може сматрати уводном фазом у конципирању евхаристичног садржаја Поклоњења не налази се у Цариграду, већ је представљен у облику кодираног система рафинирано дизајнираних визуелних и текстуалних порука у олтару храма Св. Ахилија на Преспи, који је и географски много ближи Курбиновској цркви. Да је курбиновски мајстор био вичан у креацији ликовних кодова говоре нам и бројни тајанствени знаци, који су у облику бројева, слова и флоралних елемената сакривени у лепршавој структури расталасаних драперија као елементи сложене енигматске слагалице. Трећи пример кодираног система у преношењу визуелних порука је декорација цркве Лесновског манастира, у чијем је наосу представљен један од најлепших историјских портрета балканског средњовековља: фасцинантна фигура моћног севастократора Јована Оливера (око 1343). На ктиторском моделу који он држи у рукама изведена је фасадна декорација у облику флоралних елемената која се може наћи једино у Темпларским каталозима графичких симбола, упућујући на могуће порекло Оливеровог политичког опортунизма.