

The Paintings  
of the Panagia tou Arakos

*Art, Intercession and Theology*

HENRY MAGUIRE

The Anastasios G. Leventis Foundation



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The eulogy of the Panagia tou Arakos by Henry Maguire is an ekphrasis and an exegesis of the fresco paintings in the church. It is a *λόγος ἐπιδεικτικὸς* inspired, in part, by the rules of Byzantine rhetoric. It was read in Nicosia, Cyprus, on the 3rd of May, 2019.

The editor



The Panagia tou Arakos is a relatively small church, hidden in a valley in the Troodos mountains of Cyprus. Yet, in spite of its modest size and its isolation, the building has attracted international attention, even gaining the status of a UNESCO World Heritage Monument in 1985. The chief cause of its fame is the remarkable compass of the wall paintings inside the church, which are outstanding both for their aesthetic qualities and for their intellectual complexity. According to an inscription painted inside the church above its north entrance the frescoes were completed in December of 1192 at the behest of the Lord Leon. Leon is named as the son of "Authentes", a local magnate who may have instigated the construction of the building a generation earlier. The church was incorporated into a monastery that possibly was founded by the Lord Leon himself. It has been proposed that Leon may have been buried in the western bay of the church, while his wife may have been laid to rest outside the church proper, adjacent to its western wall.



Another inscription naming Leon and his father was painted on its south wall framing a standing image of the Virgin Arakiotissa, who is shown holding her Child and flanked by two angels holding the instruments of his passion. The words of the inscription record the founder's heartfelt pleas for the Virgin's intercession on behalf of himself and his entire family for safety in this life and salvation in the next, "for you alone, Virgin, are to be glorified, when supplicated in all ways by your servants, to desire to grant them the salvation for which they yearn." These requests are reinforced by an urgent dialogue between the icons of the Virgin Eleousa and Christ Antiphonites, who are portrayed on the piers on either side of the opening to the sanctuary. In the dialogue, which is painted on the Virgin's scroll, she asks her son for the salvation of mortals, which, after his initial reluctance, is eventually granted.

fig. 1

After an ascent from the dry plains around Nicosia, the Panagia tou Arakos is found in a rugged setting among rocks and pines. The exterior of the building presents a rustic appearance, which does not reveal the domed form of the interior. The steep sloping roof and the wooden portico surrounding the church could almost belong to a stave church in Norway rather than to a monument of Byzantine architecture. The visitor is in



no way prepared for the experience of seeing the paintings on the interior. These frescoes are rightly famous, for they are among the most important surviving examples of mediaeval Byzantine painting. They are important, in the first place, because they are so beautifully preserved. Due to the protection provided by the wooden roof, the decoration of the church, with the exception of its western wall, is for the most part complete, from the summit of the dome down to the dado at the floor. Once inside the church, the visitor feels completely surrounded by holy figures; in contemporary parlance, one would describe this as a "total immersion experience." In the second place, with the exception of the frescoes in the narthex, all of the paintings essentially belong to the same approximate time period, the late Comnene age of the second half of the twelfth century. Two important icons depicting Christ and the Virgin Arakiotissa also belong to this epoch. They date to the time of the Lord Leon, and, until the last century, were preserved on the iconostasis of the church. This was an especially interesting phase of Byzantine painting, for in this period the art of Byzantine churches was on the cusp of a change, engaged with new experiments in the portrayal of daily life, both physical and emotional. In the third place, there is the artistic quality of the paintings, the fluid elegance of their drawing combin-





ing with the harmony of their hues to create a symphony of movement and colour. Finally, there is the sophistication of the iconography, which has all the intellectual complexity of a learned sermon.

One of the striking features of the frescoes is that many modern authors have discussed the different theological concepts that they express, but there is little overlap between the expositions of contemporary scholars. The paintings can be read and interpreted in many different ways. There is no apparent limit to the range of spiritual meanings that they can provide. The following pages will offer one more exegesis of the frescoes, not to replace the others, but as a personal meditation on their meaning.

The decoration of the interior of the Panagia tou Arakos recreates a kind of miniature cosmos, reaching from earth to heaven. A dado runs around the base of the walls, containing a painted revetment composed of roundels imitating verd antique marble alternating with dark red porphyry. These fictive stone medallions are framed by circular bands replicating white marble, inset with pieces of black stone in the form of small circular discs or radiating triangles. Parts of this dado were repainted by David and June Winfield, when they conserved the paintings between 1968 and 1973. With character-

fig. 2



istic care, the Winfields copied the original design precisely, but omitted the simulated veining of the marbles, so that their work can be distinguished from the original.

The significance of these painted marbles can be understood from the words of a Byzantine poet and rhetorician of the tenth century, named John Geometres, who wrote a short poem describing the church of the Kyros monastery in Constantinople – it was probably the church now known as the Kalenderhane Camii in modern Istanbul. The church of the Kyros, like the Panagia tou Arakos, was dedicated to the Virgin. The building had a real opus sectile floor, featuring roundels of red, green, and black marble framed by smaller pieces of stone cut in angular shapes, similar to the wall revetments evoked by the dado frescoes painted low down in the Panagia tou Arakos. The poem by John Geometres reads as follows:

*Virgin, Queen of all, your house is heaven.*

*Nevertheless, it offers the formost [spoils]  
from the inner chambers of the earth [that  
is, the quarried marbles of the pavement]...*

*But you, O Virgin, have set up a well-wrought  
ladder from earth to the orbit of heaven.*



Following the image offered by this poem, we can see the paintings of the Panagia tou Arakos as a ladder, of which the quarried stones of the dado form the first rung, closest to the earth.

Immediately above the dado with its marbles, we come to the second rung of the ladder evoked by Geometres, which is occupied by the earthly saints depicted on the lower walls. Here we see apostles, bishops, priests, deacons, monks, and other ascetics, including the stylites who reached up to heaven as they sat upon their columns, and the holy hermit Onuphrios, naked of both clothes and sin.

fig. 3

The next level of painting, the third rung, covers the vaults of the sanctuary and nave, together with the upper walls embraced by their arches. This zone is devoted to scenes of the life of Christ on earth, that is, the story of God's incarnation, from the Annunciation of his birth to the Dormition of his mother. The Annunciation, which opens the cycle, is placed in two of the pendentive vaults beneath the drum of the dome, half way between earth and heaven. The two protagonists, the angel Gabriel and the Virgin, are painted respectively in the pendentives to the left and right of the arch opening into the sanctuary; the separation of the two figures expresses the distance between heaven

fig. 4



and earth that is bridged by the incarnation, the reenactment of which is commemorated through the eucharistic rite offered in the sanctuary below. The painting of Gabriel is particularly remarkable, and may be taken as exemplary of the other twelfth-century frescoes in the church. The angel comes down borne on his wings with the lightest of steps, his left foot appearing to just overlap the front edge of the sanctuary arch as he flies. Gabriel can be described in the words of another Byzantine poem, a twelfth century epigram by Manganeios Prodromos, which records a painting of the Annunciation in Constantinople. The poem begins with these words:

*Either spirit here has been turned  
into matter ...*

*Or the painter's brush shapes the  
incorporeal.*

And yet, in spite of his apparent immaterial lightness, the painted angel here betrays a very human emotion — that of hesitation. As Gabriel approaches the Virgin, he twists his body away from her, even as he holds out his hand to deliver his message. The explanation for his curiously diffident pose can be found in Byzantine sermons on the Annunciation, which described in depth the emo-





tions of the angel as he approached his awesome mission – his desire to avoid causing the young girl alarm, his fear of not finding the right words with which to address her, and even his consternation at her beauty. Thus, in the annunciate angel at Panagia tou Arakos, we see a combination that is typical of the most sophisticated Late Commene paintings, an elegant fusion of the heavenly and the human, of spirituality and earthly drama.

In the two pendentives beneath the dome on the western side, facing the Annunciation, we see portraits of the four Evangelists, seated and holding their Gospels in their hands. Like the angel Gabriel, they are conveying the message of heaven to earth, even though they are not spirit but flesh. In an epigram describing an image of St. Matthew, the fourteenth-century poet Manuel Philes described the Evangelist as follows:

*Since you do not possess the fleshless nature  
of angels,*

*You bear the form of a fleshly Evangelist,*

*Not because the angels have something  
higher,*



*But because you write for us the incarnate  
word.*

Raising our eyes higher, to the drum containing the windows beneath the dome, we see there the prophets holding their scrolls which transmit through their inscriptions the word of God from heaven to earth. This is the fourth rung of the ladder, where the seers of the Old Testament, their bodies animated by a dance-like energy, bestow the spiritual light of their messages on those below, just as the windows beside them give physical light.

fig. 5

The fifth rung is occupied by the heavenly court of angels and archangels, who are shown in a ring of medallions around the base of the dome. The angels incline their heads in veneration towards the easternmost medallion of the ring, which is filled with the Hetoimasia, the great jewelled throne that is prepared for the Second Coming of Christ.

Just above, at the topmost level, Christ himself appears in a large circle at the crown of the dome, shown bust length, dressed in a vivid blue robe against a dark red ground, and holding the book of his Word. He can be described in the words of the contemporary Byzantine author, Nicholas Mesarites, who wrote an ekphrasis of a similar

fig. 6



image of the Pantocrator, which was executed in mosaic in the central dome of the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. Mesarites picks up the theme of the Second Coming, saying:

*This dome shows in pictured form the God-Man Christ, leaning and gazing out, as though from the rim of heaven ... toward the floor of the church and everything in it.... I believe, we now know in part as though in a riddle and in a glass [darkly] the things concerning Christ ... [that] the God-Man will appear to us from heaven at the time of His second sojourn on earth.... Wherefore one can see Him, to use the words of the Song [of Solomon], "looking forth at the windows, leaning out" as far as His navel "through the lattice" at the summit of the dome, like an earnest and vehement lover.*

In this startling simile, of an earnest lover gazing down from the centre of the dome, we find a key to the understanding of the images. The frescoes express a hierarchy, from earth to heaven. Yet it is not a hierarchy that *separates* what is above from what is below. On the contrary, there is a constant communication, an ardent reaching downwards and upwards. The whole church is filled with the



fervent interchange of voices. We hear from above the words of the angel Gabriel, of the Evangelists, of the prophets, and of Christ himself, which mingle with the petitions of the Virgin Eleousa flanking the sanctuary below, and with the pleas of the founder, Leon, inscribed low down on the south wall.

From the variegated stones of the ground to Christ looking forth earnestly from the orbit of heaven, there is not only a chorus of colours and voices, but also a whole universe of ideas contained in the paintings of this small church, small in size, but great in spirit and understanding.

1. The Virgin Arakiotissa and Kecharitomenē (Full of Grace)





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ΚΕΚΧ ΑΡΙΤΗ

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ΟΝ ΤΩ ΚΑΛΩΣΤΕ ΤΩ ΚΑΡΕ  
Α ΤΑΠΤΙ ΑΣΩΠΕΤΙΧΡΟΣ ΕΥ  
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2. A dado runs around the base of the south wall



3. St. Onuphrios, west wall within the prothesis



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4. Archangel Gabriel of the Annunciation, north-east pendentive



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5. Prophets and the Throne of Preparation, east side of the dome





ΗΕΤΥ

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ΒΡΙΑ

ΧΘ

6. Christ Pantokrator, apex of the dome



ИСУ

ХРИСТУ



#### BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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