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Delightful Landscapes: Elements of the Greco-Roman Tradition in the Work of the Post-Byzantine Painter Ioannis Permeniatis

After the Fall of Constantinople (1453) and the dissolution of the Byzantine Empire, the tradition of Byzantine art was kept alive among the Greek Orthodox population ruled by the Ottomans or the Venetians. The latter had dominated Byzantine lands since the Fourth Crusade (1204). In particular, the island of Crete was ruled by the Venetian Republic for a long period of time (1211–1669) and grew into an important center of commercial, cultural and artistic activity [19; 20].

Icon painting flourished in the capital city of Candia (modern-day Iraklion) and other urban centers of Crete. or the Venetians. Who The latter had dominated Byzantine lands and stylistic modes of Western art, as Cretan artists were to satisfy the demands of a mixed clientele, both Greek Orthodox and Latin. Contacts with Western art were achieved through many ways: Venetian and other Italian painters living in Candia and Greek painters travelling to Venice; Italian paintings adorning Roman Catholic religious foundations and private residences; and the wide circulation of Western European prints [6; 11; 12; 13].

Numerous Cretan and other Greek painters settled in Venice, especially after the establishment of the Greek Confraternity in 1498. With their works they served the Greek community, whose life was centered round the church of *San Giorgio dei Greci* (St. George of the Greeks) and the need to maintain its identity within the foreign environment of the metropolis. At the same time though, they were directly exposed to Western art and responded to it showing varying levels of receptiveness [2; 7; 9; 21].

A significant aspect of the dialogue between post-Byzantine and Western art was made particularly evident during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Along with the compositions in the Byzantine tradition, typically set against the gold ground, there was a growing tendency towards the depiction of the natural environment, reflecting the contemporary developments in Western Renaissance art [6, pp. 475–476; 9, pp. 575–577; 17, pp. 73–80; 28].

The Adoration of the Magi, an early sixteenth century painting attributed to Ioannis Permeniatis (Benaki Museum, Athens) is a good example of this trend (Ill. 55). From the late fifteenth century the theme of the Adoration of the Magi, a variant of the Nativity, was often depicted by post-Byzantine painters influenced by the wide diffusion of this theme in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries Italian art. The painting at the Benaki Museum with a rich landscape extending far into the distance obviously displays a conception of structure and space radically different from the traditional Constantinopolitan models of the Nativity with the circular structure of the composition and the rocky setting against the gold ground [5; 7,

pp. 1209–1212, fig. 1307; 17, pp. 77–78]. Ioannis Permeniatis was recorded as a member of the Greek Confraternity of Venice in 1523. Only three autographed works are presently known. Two of them, the *Virgin and Child and Christ the Savior*, signed in Greek, are displayed in the Byzantine Museum of Kastoria, in northern Greece. The third one is located at the Museo Correr, Venice, and signed in Latin. It depicts the enthroned Virgin and Child between Sts. John the Baptist and Augustine against an extensive landscape, in the type of the Venetian *sacra conversazione* (It.: sacred conversation) established by Giovanni Bellini and other Venetian artists. A number of paintings have been attributed to Permeniatis on the basis of iconographic and stylistic criteria, especially on the basis of his distinctive landscape settings [3, pp. 289–290; 7, pp. 1208–1217; 8; 9, pp. 573–577; 4, pp. 134–147].

Permeniatis could not seek inspiration in his Byzantine artistic training for the depiction of landscape. The portrayal of nature in Byzantine art was restricted, due to the general Byzantine attitudes towards the terrestrial world, especially after Iconoclasm. As Henry Maguire has stressed, these attitudes were marked by ambivalence: nature in its beauty and abundance reflected the glory of God and at the same time it was considered corrupt, illusory and even harmful for one's spiritual life. Byzantine artists used the gold ground and, quite often, architectural settings in order to symbolize sacred space and convey the spiritual values of their faith [18].

In Western world the attitude towards nature and its representation followed a different path. In the late Middle Ages the development of urban life led to the appreciation of the countryside or, in other words, to its rediscovery after a long period after the end of the classical age. The first signs of this appreciation could be found in the works of Petrarch, who considers natural beauty as a source of delight and describes a landscapes by following models of classical authors. [23, pp. 202–203].

Furthermore, classical texts, such as Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* and Vitruvius' *On Architecture*, provided evidence for painted landscapes in antiquity and thus sanctioned landscape painting in Renaissance art and promoted its appreciation [14; 23, pp. 202–203; 25, pp. 23–24]. According to Leon Battista Alberti, for example, the sight of painted landscapes is a source of pleasure, as he points out in his *Ten Books on Architecture*: "Our minds are cheered beyond measure by the sight of paintings depicting the delightful countryside, harbours, fishing, hunting, swimming, the games of shepherds, flowers and verdure..." [15, pp. 110–111; 24, p. 37]. Furthermore, this sort of pleasure was not restricted only to an educated audience, but was meant for all, as implied by the Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola: "The closer the painters imitate nature, the more pleasure they give. And so people who praise any pictures say: look, these animals seem as if they are alive, and these flowers seem natural ones" [23, p. 37].

The Renaissance fascination with landscape acquired a special character in Venice around 1500. The pastoral poetry of antiquity was revived, based on the models of Theocritus' *Idylls*, published in the original Greek, and mainly Virgil's *Eclogues* in Latin. Inspired by their classical predecessors, Venetians and other Italian writers in their own compositions exalted nature as a place of beauty, refuge and peace. The most popular and influential work was the Neapolitan poet Jacopo Sannazaro's *Arcadia*, written in the vernacular and published several times.

The revival of pastoral poetry in Venice brought about the emergence of a new mode in early sixteenth-century Venetian art, pastoral painting. The great Venetian artists Giorgione and Titian were the leading exponents of the pastoral landscape, which became a typically

Venetian mode of painting and was widely diffused, through the engravings and drawings by Giulio and Domenico Campagnola.

Nature is the real protagonist in both literary and visual modes of the Venetian pastoral: the serene, idyllic landscapes inhabited by shepherds, who often act as musicians or poets, revive the *locus amoenus*, the “pleasant place” of the ancient poets, where man lives in perfect harmony with nature [1, pp. 19–22; 24; 25; 26].

It is worth mentioning that the Venetian pastoral falls within the realm of pastoralism, which has been interpreted by modern scholars as a broad cultural phenomenon and a particular way of life [16; 22]. Its key figure is the shepherd but its essence lies in “the contrast between the little world of natural simplicity and the great world of civilization, power, statecraft, ordered society, established codes of behavior, and artifice in general” [15, pp. 70–71]. Furthermore, according to a genetic theory of pastoralism, ancient civilization shepherds were considered mediators or liminal figures “in a double sense. Their work placed them on two kinds of threshold: that between society and the surrounding environment (nature), and that between society and the transcendent or supernatural — the realm of divinity” [22, p. 212].

The popularity of the Venetian pastoral landscape had a significant impact on the works of Ioannis Permeniatis. Some components of the typical Venetian *locus amoenus* [25, p. 48; 26, p. 163] can be seen in the upper part of his painting in the Benaki Museum (Ill. 55): the figures of the two shepherds tending their flock and a tall tree marking the spot, the grassy meadow and the shady grove, an expanse of water, further away a town with a tower, a church, a water-mill and other rustic buildings, and a chain of mountains in the atmospheric distance. The specific position occupied by the shepherds in the composition seems to exemplify the aforementioned concept of the shepherd as a liminal figure, although in a different context.

Permeniatis portrayed the same type of landscape in a number of his works. Two of them also depict the theme of the Adoration of the Magi: a painting formerly in a private collection in New York, almost identical to the painting of the Benaki Museum except for some minor differences [7, pp. 1209–1211, 1254 note 35; 9, p. 574, fig. 3]; and a variant with the Adoration of the Magi and the Shepherds, lately reappearing on the art market [7, pp. 1209–1211, 1254 note 35, fig. 1309; 27, lot 167]. We should note that figures of shepherds were depicted in the Nativity compositions of the Byzantine tradition, in the subsidiary episode of the Annunciation to the Shepherds. Nevertheless, it is evident that Permeniatis distanced himself from the Byzantine models and renders the theme in accordance with the current Venetian mode.

Pastoral themes with one or more shepherds and their flock in idyllic landscapes were often depicted in the background of Venetian pictures of the Virgin and Child alone or with saints, painted by Giovanni Bellini, Titian and other artists [25, pp. 63–64]. Details of this kind are often found in Permeniatis’ works of the *sacra conversazione* type, as in his signed painting in the Museo Correr mentioned above [7, pp. 1208, 1209, fig. 1302; 14, pp. 134–139].

The same applies to the Venetian *sacra conversazione* compositions with a principal saint instead of the Virgin at the central place of honor; for example, in Cima da Conegliano’s altarpiece with Saint Peter Martyr between Saints Nicholas and Benedict, from the demolished Dominican church of Corpus Domini in Venice, today in the Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, the

landscape background features a shepherd playing bagpipes amid his flock [29, pp. 190–192]. In Permeniatis' painting with Saint Peter the Apostle between Saints Francis and Dominic, in the Pinacoteca Civica di Vicenza, two shepherds with their flock are depicted in a similar landscape setting [10; 4, pp. 144–147].

These few indicative examples attest to the assimilation of the pastoral mode by Ioannis Permeniatis. Influenced by the intellectual and artistic environment of the Venetian metropolis and through the works of the great Venetian artists this post-Byzantine painter was connected to the classical tradition. The models of Greco-Roman antiquity sanctioned the rise and appreciation of landscape painting in Renaissance art and, more specifically, inspired the creation of a distinctively Venetian pastoral landscape. In Permeniatis' work, the ambivalent Byzantine attitude toward nature, mingling delight with distrust, gave way to pure delight.

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Abstract. The paper examines the influence of the Graeco-Roman tradition on the work of Ioannis Permeniatis, a post-Byzantine painter who worked in Venice, where he was an active member of the Greek Confraternity in 1523. In his paintings features of the Byzantine tradition are combined with elements adopted from Western art, especially in terms of landscape settings. Some elements in particular, such as shepherds and sheep, castles and rustic buildings, leafy trees and atmospheric distances, are typical of the pastoral landscape, which was popular in the Venetian painting of the first decades of the 16th century. The emergence of pastoral painting in Venice was stimulated by the revival of the pastoral poetry of Classical antiquity. Furthermore, classical texts promoted the Renaissance appreciation of the countryside and landscape painting. Ioannis Permeniatis followed popular Venetian models and created his distinctive “delightful landscapes”, thus linking post-Byzantine painting with Renaissance art and classical tradition.

Keywords: Ioannis Permeniatis; post-Byzantine painting; Greek Confraternity of Venice; Renaissance Venetian art; Graeco-Roman tradition; landscape painting; pastoral landscape.

Название статьи. Чудесные пейзажи: элементы греко-римского искусства в работах поствизантийского художника Иоанниса Пермениатиса.

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Аннотация. В статье рассматривается влияние греко-римской традиции на творчество Иоанниса Пермениатиса, поствизантийского художника, работавшего в Венеции. В его живописных произведениях византийская традиция сочетается с приемами, заимствованными из западного искусства, что особенно заметно в пейзажной части его картин. Такие особенности, как характер изображения пастухов и овец, замков и сельских построек, лиственных деревьев и воздушного пространства, типичны для пасторального пейзажа, присущего венецианской живописи первых десятилетий XVI в. Появление пасторальных тенденций в искусстве Венеции связано с возрождением интереса к античной пасторальной поэзии. Античная литература, таким образом, способствовала распространению сельских картин в пейзажной живописи. Иоаннис Пермениатис следовал известным венецианским образцам, создавая самобытные идиллические пейзажи и увязывая, таким образом, поствизантийскую живопись с ренессансной и классической традицией.

Ключевые слова: Иоаннис Пермениатис; Поствизантийская живопись; Греческое духовное братство в Венеции; греко-римская традиция; пейзажная живопись; пасторальный пейзаж.

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