

7-2014

Book Review: Katherine Marsengill, Portraits and icons: between reality and spirituality in Byzantine art. Byzantios, 5. Turnhout, Bropols 2013.

Jelena Bogdanović
Iowa State University, jelenab@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch_pubs



Part of the [Architecture Commons](#), and the [Slavic Languages and Societies Commons](#)

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch_pubs/16. For information on how to cite this item, please visit <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Architecture at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Architecture Publications by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

Book Review: Katherine Marsengill, *Portraits and icons: between reality and spirituality in Byzantine art*. Byzantios, 5. Turnhout, Bropols 2013.

Abstract

In this thought-provoking and controversial book, which develops from her prize-winning doctoral dissertation from Princeton University (2010), art historian Katherine Marsengill examines multiple and complex relations between portraits and holy icons in Byzantine art.

Disciplines

Architecture | Slavic Languages and Societies

Comments

This book review is from *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 107 (2014): 253–292, doi:[10.1515/bz-2014-0011](https://doi.org/10.1515/bz-2014-0011). Posted with permission.

Katherine MARSENGILL, Portraits and icons: between reality and spirituality in Byzantine art. *Byzantios*, 5. Turnhout, Brepols 2013. 463 p., 115 figures (86 color and 29 b-w presented as a graphic insert at the end of the book). ISBN 978-2-503-54404-5.

In this thought-provoking and controversial book, which develops from her prize-winning doctoral dissertation from Princeton University (2010), art historian Katherine Marsengill examines multiple and complex relations between portraits and holy icons in Byzantine art. The icon (from Greek εἰκών, *eikon*, literally “image”) is most often understood as the sacred image that the Byzantines venerated because it stood for the presence of God. However, here, by starting with the secularized premise that “icons and portraits were conceptually the same” (p. 5) Marsengill suggests that the icon developed from Graeco-Roman artistic traditions and essentially remained an artistic form of portraiture from the late antiquity, which overlapped with the emergence of Christianity, until the end of Byzantium. Moreover, she suggests that this continuity rather than break in portraiture as an art genre can be observed in post-Byzantine periods by examining funerary portraiture, in particular. The case in point are the so-called *parsunya* (парсуны), a unique type of Russian stylized memorial portraits of the seventeenth century that often portrayed important personalities by combining recognizable artistic features of icons and physiognomic features of Christ and the saints, as known from icon paintings, with a high degree of individuality and life-like fidelity associated with modern portraiture, despite the fact that many of these *parsunya* were not painted from life (pp. 255–258). Indeed, she highlights that even if “both [icons and portraits] were considered portraiture ... their representation and how they were perceived by viewers varied.” (p. 5) In this book, in particular, Marsengill attempts to micro-layer various visual representations of a wide range of individuals that were not saints, and to relate their socio-historical hierarchy to the spiritual hierarchy of Byzantine Church and hence also to examine the complex cultural and theological perceptions that guided the reception of such images. Her claim is that such “in-between’ portraiture” (p. 14) of prominent individuals also can be classified as icons because the elevated social positions of the portrayed enabled others in their communities to ascend spiritually, who in turn venerated these images as icons (pp. 5–6). This book is also “iconoclastic” as it critiques current art history scholarship on icons, which focus on their perceived sacredness, authority, and power, as well as on their veneration. She argues that these views either disengage from the examination of portraiture as closely related to holy icons as an art form, or relegate portraiture to specialized, typological studies of the so-called donor, funerary, or imperial portraits.

This sizeable book starts with the introduction (pp. 1–14), which summarizes the theme and major outline of study, and is then divided into four thematic chapters (each but the first chapter followed by a brief conclusion) – “The Portrait and the Icon” (pp. 15–104); “The Monumental Portrait and the Icon” (pp. 105–182); “The Panel Portrait and the Icon” (pp. 183–258); and “Bodies and Icons” (pp. 259–294) – and closes with a succinct conclusion (pp. 295–300), which highlights the major points of Marsengill’s research and calls for further art historical studies on portraiture in Byzantium.

The first chapter, “The Portrait and the Icon,” provides an historiographical overview of scholarship on Byzantine portraiture in relation to the studies of icons. Marsengill sides with the scholars who propose the development of icon from Greco-Roman portraiture and argues that “portraits did not disappear with the rise of holy icons” (p. 79). According to her, both icons and portraits as representational art remained to be imbued with various levels of “countenance” (pp. 16, 90–91), which is in primary sources written in Greek marked as χαρακτήρ, or what we also today know as “character,” which goes beyond mere physical description to include person’s spirituality and individuality. Marsengill argues that Byzantine icons as idealized and “spiritualized portraits” influenced the “iconization” of portraits of non-saints, by cultural replacement of the perception of one’s physical features with those related to personality and spiritual features (pp. 52–53, 103).

In her second chapter that considers monumental portraiture as set within larger monumental programs of Byzantine churches, Marsengill provides the discussion about hierarchical organization of interior church decoration that followed religious and socio-political hierarchies of the Byzantine world. She then focuses on a series of case studies that examine numerous portraits of religious figures such as bishops, monks and nuns, civic figures, and imperial figures, which all intermingled variously among saintly figures. Contextualized examination of selected case studies include portraiture in churches of Ravenna, in the galleries of Constantinopolitan Hagia Sophia, the church of St. Demetrios in Thessaloniki, Hosios Loukas in Boeotia, St. Catherine’s on Mt. Sinai, together with additional examples from Coptic Egypt and a few examples of Byzantine-rite churches in Slavic lands, with the focus on medieval Kiev and Russia as well as Serbia. Marsengill highlights that the inclusion of these non-saintly monumental portraits of historical figures, which were not necessarily church donors or votive portraits, provided a palpable and visible understanding to the beholders about earthly links with the spiritual world.

While analysis of monumental portraiture mostly relies on evidence from painted and mosaic programs of well-known churches themselves, the third chapter on panel portraits expands by their re-contextualization based on pri-

mary sources of various kinds. Remarkable is the analysis of funerary portraits that adorned tombs of important individuals, such as the famous reference to a now-lost, twelfth-century portrait of Byzantine Sebastokrator Isaac Komnenos (1093–after 1152) and his imperial parents, or less-studied examples of portraits of Sebastokrator Constantine (d. ca. 1275) and his son Michael, mentioned in the poems by Manuel Philes (pp. 232–238). To these illustrious Byzantine examples, Marsengill adds references to extant examples of funerary portraits in stone and textiles from later periods and preserved in Cappadocia and the Balkans in the territories of medieval Bulgaria, Serbia, and Moldavia.

Based on her open methodological approach that allows for “flexible boundaries between icons and other kinds of sacred portraits” (p. 13), Marsengill’s final chapter on bodies and icons focuses on the ways the veneration of icons influenced and transformed visual perceptions of portraits. By taking into consideration, for example, the case of Neophytos of Cyprus (1134–1214), an hermit who was during his life-time venerated by the faithful as a living saint, Marsengill analyzes Neophytos’s “icon-like” presence during his monastic lifetime as well as the content, meaning, and location of several portraits of Neophytos that he himself had commissioned in the frescos of his cave complex, all of which served to impress upon beholders and pilgrims fluid notions of painted and living icons and spiritual links between earthly and spiritual realms (pp. 280–283).

This substantial book on Byzantine portraits and icons is commendable for the extensive use of the latest editions and translations of primary and secondary sources written in numerous ancient and modern languages and which are painstakingly devised from multiple disciplines in addition to art historical works to include various theological, philosophical, historical and literary studies. Marsengill’s comprehensive treatment of portraits that cannot be only and simply called “donor” or “imperial portraits” and that belong to both Constantinopolitan and wider circles under Byzantine cultural domain is exemplary. Such juxtaposition of well-known and rarely examined examples provides an impressive springboard for further refined studies of both portraiture and icons in the Byzantine world.

Jelena Bogdanović, PhD: 146 College of Design, Department of Architecture, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011, USA; jelenab@iastate.edu