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**THE ARTISTIC IDENTITY OF A GROUP OF
“PROVINCIAL” PAINTERS IN EPIRUS DURING THE
FINAL PHASE OF POST-BYZANTINE PAINTING**

The diffusion of religious art in the 18th century reflects the prosperity of the Orthodox populations throughout the Balkans, at the same time the ground-breaking ideas of the Enlightenment were spreading throughout Europe. Epirus witnessed an explosion in the production of religious artwork, both mural and portable, during this period. Increased demand for the decoration of religious monuments fostered the ideal conditions for a noteworthy increase in the number of painters active in the region¹. The defining element of these groups of painters was their common background. In addition, the painter's profession was a largely family affair, and workshop members were in most cases first-degree relatives². The painters from Kalarrytes³ Kapesovo⁴, the Katsanochoria, and Chioniades⁵ all became established creators of religious art, decorating numerous churches in Epirus⁶. The painters from the Katsanochoria⁷, who have not as of yet been comprehensively studied, were from Fortosi⁸, Lozetsi, or Korytiani⁹. It is worth noting that they served a very particular clientele, centered around their home region¹⁰.

¹ Regarding the impressive increase in the number of painters during the 18th century in general, see Chatzidakis 1975, 250; Drakopoulou 2008, 10. On Epirus in particular, see Konstantios 1987, 242-246; Kontopanagou 2014, 15-18.

² Konstantios 1987, 242-246; Konstantios 2001, 141-151. Additionally, occasional references in Kalousios 2008, 87-95.

³ Kosti & Kaskanis 2008; Kosti 2008; Kalousios 1992, 77-78.

⁴ Konstantios 2001, 47-52; Manopoulos 2003, 299ff; Kontopanagou 2021b, 313-323.

⁵ Konstantios 2001, 143-144; Bonovas et. al. 2004, 9-12. Regarding the activity of the painters from Chioniades in and around Trikala, see Matzana 2006, 323-330.

⁶ Drakopoulou 2008, 381-385.

⁷ Regarding their names and works, see Manopoulos 2004. The painters from Fortosi were the earliest, with those from the other two villages coming afterwards, Konstantios 1987, 244.

⁸ Manopoulos 2011, 199-202.

⁹ For information on the work of the painters from Korytiani, see Kontopanagou 2021b, 320-323; Stavrakos 2014, 91-93; Kontopanagou 2014, 15-32.

¹⁰ The initial idea for the present study was presented by the author at the International Day Conference «Κατσονοχώρια. Ιστορία-Αρχαιολογία-Μνημεία 27.7.2013». I would like to thank the organisers of that colloquium.

Their art exhibits the maximalist iconographic approach prevalent in the 18th-century Balkans, as is evident in the works of the other prolific Epirote painters' workshop, that of the Kapesovites¹¹. Similarly to the latter, the frescoes produced by the painters from the Katsanochoria incorporate new trends in religious painted art such as, primarily, a plethora of iconographic cycles and new, innovative iconography. However, their aesthetics are noticeably different from those of the Kapesovites; they developed a remarkably decorative, often overstated, style of visual depiction with the use of a bold color palette and sophisticated artistic expressional means¹². The present paper discusses the general context of the art of the painters from the Katsanochoria. Their attempts to differentiate themselves and create a unique artistic identity, which introduced secular folk art in 19th-century Epirus, will be demonstrated through the examination of some of their most prominent works.

In 1784, Konstantinos, a priest from Fortosi¹³, decorated the church of the Dormition of the Virgin in Alepochori Botsari (fig. 1). Compared to his kinsmen, Konstantinos preferred a rather sparse iconographic program with Christological, Mariological, and Old Testament scenes. He created narrative illustrations of his subjects, and combined various individual episodes within single scenes. His innovations extended to established iconographic types, whose figures he rendered with pronounced, theatrical stances, seen for example in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (fig. 2)¹⁴. In this narrative composition, Lazarus makes a markedly lively gesture while speaking with his companions at the dinner table. The painter's preference for human-centered scenes is particularly evident in the saucer domes in the Bema: A populous group of angels surrounds Christ Emmanuel and the Holy Trinity (fig. 3), resulting in the illusion that the two central subjects and the concentric zones with angels are parts of the same composition. Also noteworthy is the painter's decorative mood, which would become even more pronounced in the following years in the art of the painters from the Katsanochoria, evolving into one of their defining characteristics. Konstantinos depicts the holy figures with bold and starkly contrasting colors, even in scenes of a dogmatic nature. This is especially evident in the use of a rich blue shade for the robes

¹¹ Regarding their artistic principles and primary guidelines, in addition to further bibliography on the painters from Kapesovo, see Kontopanagou 2021a, 21-68.

¹² Indicatively, cf. with the depictions in St. Paraskevi in Patero and the monastery of the Phaneromene in Fortosi (Merantzias 2007, 90).

¹³ Chatzidakis & Drakopoulou 1997, 137; Manopoulos 2004, 33.

¹⁴ On the iconography of this scene, see Mantas 2010, 324-325. On its iconographic variants in the monuments of 18th-century Epirus, see Kontopanagou 2021b, 95-97.

of Christ the Great Archpriest on the central saucer dome of the Bema (fig. 4). Iconographic details and supplementary motifs assume a decorative aspect, and display eclecticizing elements. Two such motifs are especially indicative: the depiction of the water with coils in the scene of Jonah thrown overboard and swallowed by the whale, the spiral tail of Arius and the lush, winding grapevine separating the medallions (figs. 5-6). Nowhere is the meticulous rendering of decorative elements more pronounced than on the iconostasis, the various designs of which are reminiscent of secular folk frescoes (figs. 7-8).

In their prolific oeuvre, the painters from Korytiani took Konstantinos' bold, daring chromatic preferences a step further. The churches in which they worked feature expanded iconographic programs with both established and less disseminated iconographic cycles. The painters «ἐκ κόμης Κορύτιανης» developed a plethora of iconographic subjects on the available surfaces of numerous different architectural types of church. Compared to the work of Konstantinos in the church of the Dormition of the Virgin in Alepochori, these painters appear to have a more advanced conception of how to develop a lavish iconographic program.

A six-member group of painters from Korytiani decorated the church of the Phaneromene in Fortosi in 1787. They are mentioned in the donor inscription: Konstantinos the priest¹⁵, Stergios the priest¹⁶, Nikolaos Plakidas and his son Athanasios¹⁷, and the brothers Christos¹⁸ and Georgios¹⁹. The church is well-known due to the fact that the donor inscription describes in detail the painter that decorated each section²⁰. The explicit division of labor as described in the inscriptional testimony is indicative of this group's professional organization and their confidence in the quality of their work²¹.

In addition to the usual Christological and Mariological episodes, the Katsanoi painters from Korytiani developed complete chapters connected with liturgical requirements. They fashioned expressive, narrative depictions of the Miracles, Parables, and post- Resurrection appearances of Christ,

¹⁵ Chatzidakis & Drakopoulou 1997, 138

¹⁶ Chatzidakis & Drakopoulou 1997, 379,

¹⁷ Chatzidakis & Drakopoulou 1997, 298, 297 correspondingly.

¹⁸ Chatzidakis & Drakopoulou 1997, 459-460.

¹⁹ Chatzidakis 1987, 224; Drakopoulou 2010, 217.

²⁰ Chatzidakis 1975, 252. On this inscription, see Manopoulos 2004, 24.

²¹ It is worth noting that they were only part-time painters, having other means of employment where they lived (Manopoulos 2011, 200). However, work and living conditions do not appear to have influenced the quality of the majority of their works.

events included in the gospel readings of the ecclesiastical calendar and established in iconographic programs. For example, most of the Parables - The Prodigal Son, the Pharisee and Publican, the Wise and Foolish Virgins, the Rich Man and Lazarus- are recited during the Pre-Lenten season (Triodion)²².

In addition, these painters regularly included scenes connected with the liturgical period of the Pentecost in their works: the miracle of the Healing of the Paralytic, Christ and the Samaritan Woman at the Well, and the Healing of the Man Born Blind, recited on the three consecutive Sundays after Easter²³.

It is worth noting that the painters exhibit a preference for alternating cool and warm colors in the monument under examination. The intensity of their color palette is especially evident in the garments and background decorative motifs (figs. 9-10).

The painters' pluralistic preferences are even more evident in the depiction of episodes from the Old Testament, in which they have included secondary details. Notable examples in the Phaneromene in Fortosi are the narrative compositions of Adam and Eve Eating the Forbidden Fruit and their Expulsion from the Garden of Eden: the viewer's attention is drawn to the rich, decorative flora and the serpent coiled around the tree of knowledge (fig. 11). Here the Genesis cycle has been rendered in a circular arrangement with God the Creator at the center of the saucer dome. The painters' trademark overstated decorative elements and bold chromatic choices are on display in the multi-colored concentric rings on the saucer domes (fig. 12). The combined bold colors, agitated garments, and clouds with stylized shading, all contribute to their imaginative visual compositions. However, it is worth noting that in their later works the painters Konstantinos, Stergios, Christos, and Ioannis²⁴ seem keen to avoid bold colors and movements, instead exhibiting milder visual preferences. Ten years after the church of the Phaneromene in Fortosi, they worked on the church of the Nativity of the Virgin in Thesprotiko, Preveza (fig. 13). Here, despite adhering to similar iconographic types in the saucer domes, they distanced their art from the "daring" compositions of the Phaneromene in favor of more conservative schemes²⁵. However, both churches exhibit the fundamental principles of their art: pluralism,

²² Triodion, 139ff. On the position of these scenes in the iconographic program of churches, see Mantas 2010, 333-335.

²³ On the diffusion of these subjects in iconography in relation to the gospel readings of the ecclesiastical calendar, see Gkioles 2009, 37-39.

²⁴ Chatzidakis 1987, 338.

²⁵ On the work of the painters in Thesprotiko, see Kontopanagou 2010, 344-346.

a narrative mood and an insistence on the decoration of backgrounds, garments, and secondary elements within the compositions. It is clear that by including iconographic details they aim to comprehensively decorate all available architectural surfaces, for example in the “In Thee Rejoice” scene on a saucer dome in both of the aforementioned monuments²⁶. In confirmation of their skill, the painters under examination managed their iconographic subjects with flexibility and professionalism, creatively altering and rendering similar iconographic types on disparate architectural surfaces. Thus, despite the repetition of iconographic structures, each monument displays a unique end result. A salient example is the depiction of the Feeding of the Multitudes in the conch of the Diaconicon in the monastery of Vyliza, painted by Konstantinos, Stergios, and Christodoulos²⁷. A few years later in Thesprotiko²⁸, these painters utilized the same iconography to depict the subject in different architectural conditions, adapting the composition to the concave surface of a pendentive.

Also of note in the works of the painters from the Katsanochoria is the enrichment of the iconographic décor with liturgical, doctrinal, and confessional subjects²⁹. In keeping with the trends of their time, they did not limit their art to the most prevalent iconographic cycles. A prime example is the depiction in the conch of the Prothesis in the Phaneromene in Fortosi³⁰, a conglomeration of three subjects commonly painted in this position: The Descent from the Cross, the Lamentation, and the “Enthroned Above, Entombed Below”, a scene inspired by the litany of the Holy Saturday matins (fig. 14)³¹. The accompanying inscription, “Τῶν ἀγγέλων ὁ δῆμος κατεπλάγει ὀρώων Σε”, also drawn from the hymnology of the Passion³², emphatically reveals the

²⁶ Merantzias 2007, fig. 214.

²⁷ On the painters Konstantinos, Stergios, and Christodoulos, see Chatzidakis & Drakopoulou 1997, 138, 379, 459 and on Giannis, Chatzidakis 1987, 338.

²⁸ The pendentives in the Nativity of the Virgin in Thesprotiko display subjects from the Public Life of Christ, among which the painters have included the Feeding of the Multitudes. On this church and this particular depiction, see Kontopanagou 2010, 345-346.

²⁹ Theologically and dogmatically themed iconographic subjects were widely diffused in the 18th century, reflecting the theological issues of the period. Already from the 17th century, the various local Churches of the Balkan peninsula began developing relations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, while unitarian trends also developed, Podskalsky 2005, 264-268, 270-276, 432-439, 446-449.

³⁰ Merantzias 2007, fig. 207.

³¹ Vafiadis 2003, 17-233. The depictions of the subject in Epirus exhibit a noteworthy freedom in the reception and development of the initial iconographic base. Indicative examples, see in Kontopanagou 2021b, 37-38; Merantzias 2007, 86-87; Chouliaras 2007-2008, 118.

³² These are drawn from benedictionals recited during the Holy Saturday matins, Triodion 446.

Divine Passion and its redemptive effect on the faithful. The painters were clearly familiar with the liturgical texts of the Holy Week, inscribing the depiction with the verse they considered to be most relevant³³.

A subject established as a separate iconographic cycle in 18th-century Epirus³⁴ by the painters from Kapesovo³⁵ and subsequently included in the works of the painters from the Katsanochoria is that of the Ecumenical Councils³⁶. While not often part of their iconographic programs, in contrast to the Kapesovites³⁷, when the painters from the Katsanochoria decide to include this cycle the result demonstrates their mastery of their trade. In the church of the Phaneromene, the seven Ecumenical Councils have been illustrated on the two lower registers of the dome drum, and constitute a single iconographic chapter with vivid theological and spiritual connotations. The theological, doctrinal, and aretological subjects on display were widely diffused in scholarly and ecclesiastical circles during the 17th and 18th centuries. Philosophical treatises of an educational nature discussed issues of ethics and doctrine. These works were broadly disseminated³⁸. The subject of the Ecumenical Councils is connected with the Assumption of Christ³⁹, the Finding

³³ The differing iconographic interpretations with liturgical and hymnological content are connected with the painters' efforts to comprehend the deeper meanings and symbolisms of the depictions. Regarding the variations and interpretations of the hymnological texts, see Vafiadis 2003, 219-223.

³⁴ The Ecumenical Council cycle, widespread during the 18th century, was also included in the iconographic programs of numerous Athonite monuments, see indicatively Tsigaras 2003, 269-271.

³⁵ On the depiction of this iconographic cycle in churches dated to the final two decades of the Ottoman period, see Kontopanagou 2021b, 248-256, in which relevant examples.

³⁶ The iconographic cycle of the Ecumenical Councils is also mentioned by Dionysius of Foura, Papadopoulou 1997, 171-174.

³⁷ This iconographic cycle has been included in the Phaneromene in Fortosi (1787) and the Nativity of the Virgin in Thesprotiko (1793), Kontopanagou 2010, 346.

³⁸ Collections of sermons, interpretations of the Apocalypse, and doctrinal treatises on the interpretation of the Seven Mysteries were widespread, Podskalsky 2005, 65-266, 458-459. The influence of these philosophical works on post-Byzantine religious painting is limited. The depiction of the Credo was more widely diffused, Rigopoulos 1998, 215 ff. A portable icon of the early 19th century that vividly depicts a confession scene is also included among works of an aretological and didactic nature, Konstantios 2004, no. 176.

³⁹ On the iconography of this scene, see Gkioles 1981, 198; Varalis 1990, 161-176, in which additional bibliography.

of the Holy Cross⁴⁰, the Hospitality of Abraham, and the Seven Mysteries (fig. 15)⁴¹.

The confessional subject of the Ecumenical Councils is connected with the Epiphanies, lending further weight to the triumphal nature of the dome decorations. The inclusion of the aretological composition of the Seven Mysteries lends an ethical-didactic aspect to this iconographic chapter. It is worth noting that the subject has not been positioned at random, as it follows the Hospitality of Abraham, a prefiguration of the Divine Eucharist⁴². This embellishment was not repeated in any of the painters' other works, although it does serve to demonstrate their resourcefulness and dexterity in developing iconographic subjects.

Another impressive aspect of the church under examination is the decoration of the saucer vault of the south aisle with scenes from the Apocalypse (fig. 16)⁴³. The vision of John with the Candlesticks (Revelation 1, 10-20) decorates the dome of the saucer vault: the sharp sword of the Word of God emerges from the mouth of an elderly figure. Seven candlesticks stand before him, while the terrified John has been illustrated in the foreground. The depiction of the scene with the Ancient of Days at the center is a reference to Durer's widely disseminated version⁴⁴. Four more scenes from the Apocalypse frame the central subject: First is the veneration of the Elders, an episode from the second scene (Revelation 4, 1-11 and 5, 1-14), in which

⁴⁰ Regarding the iconography of the depiction and its iconographic development, see Stavropoulou 1994, 475-485; Vocotopoulos 1994: 257-265.

⁴¹ Regarding this particular depiction, see Karalis 2019, 98-99.

⁴² Schrenk 1995, 55-58. Mantas 2001, 188-189.

⁴³ In contrast with the West, where theological thought was heavily influenced by Revelational texts, the Book of Revelation was not widely disseminated in the East. Regardless, beginning in the mid-16th century, the influence of numerous Western apocalyptically themed depictions began to spread in the East. It was during this period that the Athonite monasteries of Docheiariou and Dionysiou were decorated with twenty-one eschatological subjects drawn from Revelation. Variants of these cycles were included in other monasteries over the following years, and scenes from Revelation were included primarily in the exo-narthexes of churches, Huber 1995, 46-49, 95-251.

⁴⁴ Durer's model is copied here. It was widely disseminated through copper engraving and also influenced the works of Theodoros Poulakis, Rigopoulos 1979, pl. 86, fig. 95. The portico of the refectory in the monastery of Dionysiou (terminus post quem 1553) exhibits a different iconographic type, with the figure of Christ instead of God at the center. Huber 1995, 60, 113. Regarding the scenes and their arrangement in the refectory of the monastery, see, Toutos & Foustieris 2010, 260-261.

twenty-four praying elders surround the throne of God offering their crowns⁴⁵.

This is followed by the triumphal episode of the Veneration of the Lamb by the palm bearers of all nations from the sixth scene (Revelation 7, 9-17)⁴⁶. The apocalyptic episode of the fall of the beast (Revelation 19, 11-21)⁴⁷, in which the “Faithful and True” rider leads the armies of Heaven to victory over the demon is particularly impressive⁴⁸. The narrative concludes with the depiction of the twenty-first scene (Revelation 21, 1-27). The final apocalyptic scene is connected with the New Jerusalem - “And there came unto me one of the seven angels ... and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the lamb’s wife ... and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem...” (Revelation 21, 9-12)⁴⁹. The imposing, supernatural figure of the Ancient of Days at the center of this composition and the selection of these particular episodes⁵⁰ both indicate influences from Western copper engravings of the 16th and 17th centuries⁵¹, an element that demonstrates our painters’ knowledge of and dependence upon models drawn from contemporary copper engravings that repeated earlier depictions⁵².

The painters from the Katsanochoria were on the opposite end of the spectrum from the “academic” trends of 18th-century art. They relied upon the fundamental principles of post-Byzantine art, especially the iconographic tradition of the region in which they were active. However, they diverged from it in numerous cases, adopting novel artistic means. They depicted holy events, didactic, theological and doctrinal subjects with clarity and an accessible visual language. Furthermore, they espoused narrative expressional means and depicted them with a directness necessitated by the demands of

⁴⁵ In western copper engravings the elders usually bear harps and offer incense, while their crowns float among clouds, Huber 1995, 60, 86, 114-119, fig. 33.

⁴⁶ The depiction in the Phaneromene includes the primary iconographic elements of the scene: the palm leaf-carrying and venerating secular representatives, the lamb at the center, the angels and the symbols of the four evangelists at the four corners: Huber 1995, 63, 138-139.

⁴⁷ Huber 1995, 83, 224-229.

⁴⁸ A defining iconographic trait of the subject is the “sword of the Word of God” that emerges from the mouth of the Christian rider.

⁴⁹ Huber 1995, 94, 238-243.

⁵⁰ The painters from Korytiani had different preferences and displayed a more overtly conservative iconographic approach in their works on Mt. Athos, Tsigaras 2003, 226-247.

⁵¹ There are evident thematic and iconographic similarities with the works of Merian (1630): Huber 1995, 84-94.

⁵² A similar iconographic interpretation of the subject is observable on an 18th-century portable icon from the Byzantine Museum, Konstantios 2004, 206, no. 173.

their period, a time of tectonic socio-political shifts that heavily influenced the “demands” of the donors and the environment in which the painters lived and worked.

Bibliography Acronyms

DChAE Deltion of the Christian Archaeological Society
ChAE Symposium on Byzantine and post-Byzantine Art.

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

ΚΑΤΕΡΙΝΑ ΚΟΝΤΟΠΑΝΑΓΟΥ

Η ΚΑΛΛΙΤΕΧΝΙΚΗ ΤΑΥΤΟΤΗΤΑ ΜΙΑΣ «ΕΠΑΡΧΙΑΚΗΣ»
ΟΜΑΔΑΣ ΖΩΓΡΑΦΩΝ ΣΤΗΝ ΗΠΕΙΡΟ ΚΑΤΑ ΤΗΝ
ΤΕΛΕΥΤΑΙΑ ΦΑΣΗ ΤΗΣ ΜΕΤΑΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΗΣ ΖΩΓΡΑΦΙΚΗΣ

Η πλούσια παραγωγή ζωγραφικών έργων, φορητών και μνημειακών, τον 18ο αιώνα στην Ήπειρο, εκπροσωπείται από πολυμελή συνεργεία ζωγράφων, τα οποία συνδέονται στην πλειονότητα των περιπτώσεων, με συγγένεια πρώτου βαθμού. Οι Καλαρρυτινοί, οι Καπεσοβίτες, οι Κατσάνοι και οι Χιονιάδτες ζωγράφοι καταξιώνονται στον χώρο της θρησκευτικής ζωγραφικής διακοσμώντας μεγάλο αριθμό μνημείων. Σύγχρονοι ερευνητές ασχολήθηκαν με το θέμα της οικογενειακής επαγγελματικής συγκρότησης των ομάδων αυτών, όπως και με την ταύτιση των ζωγράφων (ο αείμνηστος Δ. Κωνστάντιος, η αείμνηστη Ε. Δρακοπούλου, Κ. Κοντοπανάγου, π. Γρ. Μανόπουλος κ.ά.). Οι Κατσάνοι ζωγράφοι, με την καλλιτεχνική παραγωγή των οποίων η έρευνα έχει δώσει μέχρι τώρα αποσπασματικές πληροφορίες, κατάγονται από το Φορτώσι, το Λοζέτσι ή την Κορύτιανη. Η συγκεκριμένη μελέτη διαμέσου αντιπροσωπευτικών έργων τους καταδεικνύει τις βασικές εικονογραφικές αρχές των ζωγράφων και την προσπάθεια να διαφοροποιηθούν εικαστικά, δημιουργώντας μία προσωπική καλλιτεχνική ταυτότητα, η οποία θα αποτελέσει και την αφετηρία της κοσμικής ζωγραφικής στην Ήπειρο τον 19ο αιώνα.