

<http://doi.org/10.332.34/SSR.22.4>

Hidden semantics of the painting program in the Church of the Narva Icon of the Mother of God in Narva

Yuliia Khlystun

Narva Museum, Estonia

julittain@gmail.com

Abstract

The article is devoted to the description and cultural analysis of the program for painting the church in honor of the Narva Icon of the Mother of God in the city of Narva, Estonia. The hidden semantics of symbols in the painting of the temple is revealed. Using this church as an example, the author talks about the general laws of constructing a program for painting an Orthodox church. The tradition of constructing a painting program has been formed over the centuries, however, from the point of view of cultural studies, each temple reflects the era in which it was built and painted. The painting of the temple reflects human religious expectations and aspirations. The author emphasizes the original artistic solutions associated with the modern architecture of the church.

Key words: Church painting, Church of the Narva Icon of the Mother of God, temple painting program, sacral art, Orthodox church, culturological interpretation, symbols.

Introduction

According to the Christian understanding of culture, creative activity is one of the purposes of man; he was created to cultivate paradise and preserve it (Gen. 2: 15). One of the definitions of the concept of “culture,” as is known, goes back to the Latin *cultura* – cultivation. Through his ability to create, man becomes like God, and thanks to synergistic creativity, man comes to know Him. This is the main task of church art – to help a person get closer to the Creator.

Church painting, as one of the oldest types of fine church art, in its content is one of the forms of Sacred Tradition. The dogma of icon veneration, adopted in 787, states the need for the Church to offer praise, thanksgiving and petitions to God through His holy images. Theology in relation to art is the basis for an aesthetic value system, the purpose of which is to promote the unity of man with God.

The tradition of splendid decoration of the temple dates back to the Old Testament tabernacle (Ex. 25) and the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, which, at the direction of God Himself, were richly decorated, including images of cherubs, palm trees, fruits and flowers.

Church painting is one of the main ways of decorating a temple, along with icons, but the purpose of painting in a temple is significantly different from the purpose of an icon. The icon obeys its own laws of representation, and it is autonomous, i.e. is not tied to a specific place, while the temple painting is a complex of interconnected plots that opens up as you move through the temple. This complex of interconnected plots is called the temple painting program. When studying church monumental painting, it is necessary to consider all the components of the liturgical space of the temple in synthesis. Only in this way can one understand the language of temple painting and comprehend its deep theological meaning.

Church painting is also called the breath of the temple. The painting, figuratively speaking, is what the walls of the temple would tell us if they could speak. Compared to icon painting, monumental painting is a more dynamic art, directly related to the course of the entire church service.

Church Painting Style

The church in honor of the Narva Icon of the Mother of God (built in the early 2000s on Rakvere Street in the city of Narva (Estonia) and consecrated on May 17, 2003, by Metropolitan Kornily of Tallinn and All Estonia) was painted from 2006 to 2007 by a group of icon painters from Holy Trinity–St. Sergius Lavra. The temple was built in a modern architectural style, in the shape of a “ship” (fig.1). Tripartiteness is present both in its external architecture and in its internal space.



Fig. 1. Church in honor of the Narva Icon of the Mother of God in the city of Narva, Estonia

The Church of the Icon of the Mother of God of Narva is painted in the Byzantine style, characteristic of the Palaiologan period. The Byzantine style of icon-painting is characterized by an emphasis on the internal rather than the external; abstract forms are not inherent in it. The images convey joy, light, the festive mood of Easter; they lack tragedy and even drama. Images painted in the Byzantine style are characterized by contemplation, concentration of the mind,

calmness, lack of dynamism, self-absorption, withdrawal into the inner world. They reflect the divine presence, so they are often motionless, pillar-shaped, or candle-shaped [1].

Reverse perspective is inherent in the Byzantine style in monumental church painting. When it is perceived, what is invisible or in the background becomes most important – that is, the sacred, which is by nature invisible, manifests itself. Thanks to reverse perspective, consciousness begins to capture what cannot be clearly and logically understood. Reverse perspective, which is used in the painting of the church (Byzantine style), emphasizes that in the center, there is a person standing in the church. According to the words of St. Gregory the Theologian, “Man is a great world in miniature”, a “macrocosm” [2].

The church painting program was put together taking into account the general icon-painting canons for drawing up a church painting program, internal architecture, church dedication, and the wishes of the customer; locally revered saints are included in the painting program.

Description Of The Program For Painting The “Heavenly Part” Of The Temple

The “heavenly world” is represented by a dome, a drum, and a flat ceiling. In the center of the dome, there is an image of a cross against the background of three concentric dark blue, blue, and white circles, which can be interpreted as an icon of light, symbolizing the Second Coming of the Savior. The cross itself is a symbol of Jesus Christ and His Sacrifice on the Cross.

The painting of the drum consists of three tiers of images, where those in the upper tier are of cherubs in medallions, those in central tier of archangels, and those in the lower tier depict prophets and forefathers. Due to the peculiarities of church architecture and the absence of “sails”, the area of “paradise” is represented by a flat ceiling, with the evangelists John, Matthew, Mark, and Luke depicted the corners and Archangels Michael, Selaphiel, and Barahiel between them (fig.2).



Fig.2. Painting of the dome and drum in the Church of the Narva Icon of the Mother of God

It should be noted that the painting of this church is distinguished by a large number of images of the Hosts of Heaven (Seraphim, Cherubim, Archangels), which may be related to the theme of the dedication of the church: the church is dedicated to the Most Holy Theotokos, Who is called the “Mistress of the Angels”, “More Honorable than the Cherubim and Incomparably More Glorious than the Seraphim”. Through Her the Savior came into the world. The image of the Most Holy Theotokos in the medallion is also placed in the “upper” part of the church, above the ambo (between the images of the Apostles and Evangelists John the Theologian and Matthew) and represents the icon of the Mother of God “of the Sign” – a particularly revered icon in Narva.

The Archangels Raphael, Uriel, Barahiel and Michael are also painted in medallions in the corners of the ceiling of the central part of the church nave under the choirs. This composition is complemented by images of stars, reminiscent of the event of the Nativity of Christ and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. In the center of the composition is an icon of light, which refers the beholder to the words from the Gospel of Matthew: “Immediately after the tribulation of

those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken” (Matthew 24:29).

One of the architectural features of the altar is the angular rather than semicircular apse and the absence of a conch (a semicircular top). In the center of the apse of the altar is the image of the Savior “The King of Glory” (represented by an icon) surrounded by saints: Saints Basil the Great and Patriarch Saint Tikhon of Moscow are depicted on the right, while Saints John Chrysostom and Hieromartyr Platon, Bishop of Revel, are depicted on the left (fig.3).



Fig.3. Painting of the altar of the Church of the Narva Icon of the Mother of God.

There is some indication here of the transtemporal character of the church: it honors both the saints who lived in ancient times, in the 4th century, and 20th century saints, ones both locally and universally venerated. The Liturgy and the Eucharist carry in our time the same spiritual meaning that they carried in the early centuries of Christianity. Hieromartyrs Patriarch Tikhon and Bishop Platon celebrated the Liturgy composed by Basil the Great and John Chrysostom. Above the Throne, in the center of the altar painting, is the image of the icon of light surrounded by three six-winged seraphim. This is an apocalyptic (eschatological) symbol,

reminiscent of the Second Coming of Christ and the words of the Gospel: “But of that day and hour, knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only” (Matthew. 24:36).

Description Of The Program For Painting The “Earthly Part” Of The Temple

The program for painting the southern and northern walls of the naos was also drawn up taking into account the architectural features of the church: two rows of oblong windows divide these walls into three parts of unequal height.

Saints in medallions are depicted above the upper row of windows - four in each row, but in the center of each row there is another medallion with the image of a six-winged seraphim. This composition is repeated on the northern, southern, and western walls. Among the saints, there are images of especially revered ones: Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, Spyridon of Trimythous, Gregory Palamas. St. Gregory the Great, Pope of Rome, and St. Andrew of Crete are also depicted. It should be noted that St. Basil the Great is portrayed both in the altar and in the naos of the church, perhaps to emphasize his special significance and veneration in this region. Saints Peter, Cyprian, Alexis, and Gregory of Raal are depicted in medallions on the western wall. Most of the saints bear the name Gregory, which is most likely due to the wishes of the patron.

The next row (second from the top) is almost the same height as the windows. This row is also represented by images of saints, but here they are depicted in full height rather than in medallions. Closest to the altar on the northern wall are the Holy Equal-to-the-Apostles Constantine and Helena, opposite them are the Holy Great Martyrs George and Demetrius of Thessalonica, and closer to the western wall of the naos, near the kliros, are the Holy Equal-to-the-Apostles Cyril and Methodius, Enlighteners of the Slavs; opposite them are St. Sergius of Radonezh and the 7th century Saint Vitalius of Alexandria.

Between the windows of the upper row on the northern and southern walls, venerable Stylite Fathers are depicted: venerable Daniel and Symeon on the southern wall, and venerable Nicetas and Alipius (Olympius) on the northern wall. In church paintings, they are most often depicted on columns (pillars), for which there are several complementary explanations: some pillar-saints (for example, Alipius) practised their ascetic feats on columns left over from destroyed pagan churches. From a spiritual point of view, ascetics are likened to a column by

their steadfastness in faith. Saint John of the Ladder said: “He who indulges in pure prayer becomes like an immovable column in his heart” [3].

The feat of the Stylite Fathers presupposes dedication to prayer and contemplation of the whole mind and heart, a complete departure from the world and its temptations, and the voluntary endurance of sorrows. St. Simeon the Stylite, who lived from 390–459, is considered to be the founder of stylite asceticism in Syria. This particular ascetic feat occupies a special place in Orthodox asceticism. The feat of the Stylite Fathers was the highest expression of monasticism.

No less prominent in the iconographic scheme of the Church are depictions of the Most Holy Mother of God. The glorification of the Most Holy Theotokos and the ascension of songs of praise and thanksgiving to Her while the lips remain outwardly silent is reflected in the words of one of the troparia of the canon of the service of the Narva Icon of the Mother of God: “Many locutions and long hymns of praise cannot worthily glorify the greatness of Her who is exalted above the Cherubim and the Seraphim, wherefore it is more fitting for us to love her in silence...” (Canon, Ode 1, Tone 4).

The central part between the upper and lower window rows is occupied by the iconographic composition “Akathist to the Most Holy Theotokos”, represented by six scenes from the earthly life of the Mother of God that are narrated in the akathist, three on each wall. This composition reflects the dedication of the church. The scenes are arranged in this order: the appearance of an angel to the Most Holy Theotokos (“Annunciation at the well”), the Annunciation to the Most Holy Theotokos (“Annunciation in the upper room”), the meeting of the Mother of God with the holy righteous Elizabeth (“Kissing Elizabeth”), the procession of the three wise men behind the star of Bethlehem (“Magi Leaping for Joy at the Star”), the “Adoration of the Magi”, and the “Flight into Egypt” of the Holy Family. The initial phrase of the corresponding kontakion or ikos of the akathist is written next to each scene. For example, near the plot “The Adoration of the Magi” there is an inscription: “The sons of the Chaldees saw in the hands of the Virgin Him Who with His hand made man” (Ikos 5); next to the “Flight into Egypt”, there are words from Ikos 6: “By shining in Egypt the light of truth, Thou didst dispel the darkness of falsehood.” However, we see that not all the motifs of the akathist are included in the painting (fig.4).



Fig.4. Painting of the northern wall of the temple

The specificity of this iconographic composition is characterized by an exact correlation to the liturgical text. The Akathist to the Most Holy Theotokos is the only one of all the Akathists included in the liturgy (Lenten Triodion). It is read on the Saturday morning of the 5th Week of Great Lent (the Feast of the Lauds of the Most Holy Theotokos). The Akathist was first used as a theme in monumental painting in Serbia in the 14th century. These are the fresco cycles of the monasteries of Dečani, Marko, Matejče. Most likely, somewhat, this tradition came to Russia from Mount Athos. The most striking example of frescoes depicting the Akathist to the Most Holy Theotokos is in the Cathedral of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos at Ferapontov Monastery. The famous icon painter Dionisii painted the cathedral there in 1502 [4]. Like the church hymnographer and poet who composed the akathist, the icon painter who depicted the plots of the akathist was also striving to follow the spirit and beauty of the hymn as a verbal icon by glorifying the Most Holy Theotokos in pigments.

Since iconography developed in a close relationship with hymnography (the composition of liturgical texts), one cannot help but recall the words of Leonardo da Vinci about the relationship

of these arts: “Painting is poetry which is seen, but not heard, and poetry is a painting which is heard, but not seen. These two arts – you may call both them either poetry or painting – have here interchanged the senses by which they penetrate the intellect” [5].

From the point of view of axiology, the images of saints should be located below the level of painting with the scenes from the life of the Most Holy Theotokos, since this contradicts the general canons of drawing up a church painting program, but this is a vivid example of the case when the architecture of the church exerted a significant influence on the decision of artists in compiling the system of church painting, so as to maximize the use of the space for monumental painting.

The entire lower space of the walls, including the lower row of windows, is taken up by ornamentation. According to the canons of drawing up a church painting program, the painting should not reach the floor level and, ideally, it should not be lower than the shoulder level of a person standing in the church, since this is the place of people living on earth.

Church painting is always “read” from the south wall from the altar in a clockwise direction (may include the western wall), from east to west, and from west to east along the northern wall.

The narthex of the church is painted in a peculiar way. In the “upper” part, creating the illusion of a cross vault, the Lord Almighty and the Old Testament Prophet and Psalmist David are depicted opposite each other; between, also facing each other, are two six-winged seraphim. The Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Daniel are depicted on the northern wall, and the prophets Ezekiel and Moses are depicted on the southern wall (fig.5). On the western wall are Saints Tikhon, Bishop of Voronezh, and Saint Ignatius, between whom a six-winged seraphim is also depicted.



Fig.5. Painting of the narthex in the Church of the Narva Icon of the Mother of God

Early Christian Symbols In The Temple Painting Program

In giving a general description of the painting of this church, it should be noted that it is distinguished by the use of a large number of decorative elements: ornament and various flowers, among which one can distinguish aquilegia, iris, lily, rose, which are symbols of the virtues of the Mother of God in iconography. Aquilegia symbolizes humility, the iris uncomplaining patience of sorrows, the lily purity, and the rose prayer and other virtues [6]. Flowers also adorn the cross in the under-dome space and are used in the decoration of the altar. The choice of a blue background is also related to the theme of the dedication of the church, since blue is considered the color of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In the painting of the church of the Narva Icon of the Mother of God, there is another interesting decorative symbol: a shell. It is found, for example, in the upper part of the walls between medallions with images of saints and seraphim (fig.6). This symbol came to Christianity from antiquity, acquiring a number of new meanings: the shell symbolizes the cave (of the Nativity and Resurrection of Christ) and Baptism. Its two wings signify the connection of the

Old and New Testaments. The image also refers to the gospel parable of the pearl merchant, where the pearl stands for the Kingdom of Heaven: “Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a merchant man seeking goodly pearls: who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:45–46).



Fig.6. Painting of the upper part of the northern wall of the Church of the Narva Icon of the Mother of God

Conclusion

In analyzing the program of painting the church of the Narva Icon of the Mother of God from a theological point of view, several aspects should be highlighted:

1) the movement through the church from the porch to the altar (from west to east) symbolizes the movement from the Old Testament to the New Testament, from the predictions of the Old Testament prophets about the birth of the Messiah to the Gospel teaching, which was

spread throughout the world by the Apostles and Evangelists, the Saints, the Enlighteners who were Equal-to-the-Apostles, and Venerable Fathers;

2) the dedication of the church to the Most Holy Theotokos is clearly reflected in the program of its painting (which is typical for most churches painted in the 21st century): the frescoes incorporate scenes from the Akathist to the Mother of God and depictions the Old Testament prophets who foreshadowed the birth of the Savior from the Virgin; the prophet David is written in the “upper” part, which emphasizes its axiological significance, perhaps because the Mother of God was of “the lineage of David”; the dedication is marked with a blue background and the use of other symbols of the Mother of God;

3) a special place in the painting is taken up by the theme of the Second Coming of Christ, as indicated by icons of light surrounded by heavenly hosts in the altar, in the dome, and in the “upper” central part of the nave;

4) the church painting program includes locally venerated saints (Martyr Platon, Bishop of Revel; St. Gregory of Raal);

5) the painting of the altar and the space under the dome are connected by the theme of the Incarnation, the Coming into the world of the Savior, about Whom the prophets wrote and Who will come to judge the world at the end of time; the theme of the dedication of the church unites not only the dome and the altar, but also the rest of the church space.

Church painting can thus represent an image of the world, which can include history (Sacred history, the history of Church and country, the creation of the world and its end), can symbolically convey the structure and hierarchy of the world, carry the Gospel and reflect the history of salvation by the Word. The painting is a kind of “book” from which a person receives food for the mind and heart. It plays not only a decorative, or even an instructive function, but, above all, a salutary one, since a person who comes to the church himself becomes party to certain events in sacred history. The church painting program is a complex of interrelated iconographic subjects and is constructed according to the principles inherent in the organization of cultural space (for example, architectonicity, hierarchy). It is influenced by the architecture of the church, its dedication, the wishes of the patron, the previously created model chosen for imitation, the spiritual and artistic atmosphere, local traditions and the cultural and historical situation. As a result of these factors, there are numerous options for original iconographic and

artistic solutions. Ultimately, to this day, it is the program of church painting that first arose in Byzantium which serves as a model for the monumental art of Eastern Christian churches.

References

- [1] Popova, O. S. *Puti vizantiiskogo iskusstva* [Paths of Byzantine Art]. Moscow: Gamma-Press, 2013. 460 pp.
- [2] St. Gregory the Theologian, Homily 45. Quoted from: Svt. Grigorii Bogoslov. *Tvoreniia* [Works], Vol. 1. Holy Trinity–St. Sergius Lavra Press, 1994 [reprint]. p. 665.
- [3] “Chudo v khonekh: ikony” (“The Miracle in Chonae: Icons”). URL: <https://infocom-m.ru/inzhenernye-sistemy/chudo-v-honeh-ikony-portal-divnoe-diveevo.html> (accessed 26.07.2022).
- [4] “Akafist” [“Akathist”]. *Pravoslavnaia entsiklopediia* [Orthodox Encyclopedia], Vol. 1, pp. 371–381. URL: <https://www.pravenc.ru/text/63814.html> (accessed 29.07.2022).
- [5] Dundas, Judith. *Sidney and Junius on Poetry and Painting: From the Margins to the Center*. Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2007. p. 214.
- [6] Markova, N. “O simvolike tsvetov v klassicheskom iskusstve” [“On the symbolism of flowers in classical art”]. URL: <https://www.liveinternet.ru/users/astrahanka/post222001997/> (accessed 03/22/2022).