

since the western art was able to bring new art styles on the scene just by continuation of byzantine styles; as the Gothic art owes Byzantine art; and early Renaissance artists tried to imitate many expressive techniques and experiences of Byzantine artists in their works. The evolution

of art schools, styles, and trends of later periods cannot be analyzed without studying Byzantine art. For example, Yellow Christ, a Gauguin's artwork can be described as an example of painting rooted in the Byzantine period tendencies which had a new expressing style.

## Conclusion

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Any interpretation or understanding of artworks cannot be possible without studying of the world where they created or belonged. Every artwork expands the boundaries of art, just by establishing its own world.

World of art consists of all the artworks that belong to different cultures and civilizations.

The rise of every prophet announced the creation of a spirit world. The world of Christianity is manifested in Byzantine art, and Christ and the Bible, are the center of the world. The sacred matters are embodied in Christ and his life and the Bible is guidance for interpretation and understanding of the Christian art and life. Aesthetic principles of Byzantine art have been formed based on the shining and spiritual glory of the God.

Byzantine art is a link between the ancient classical and Renaissance periods, and it has a special place in assessing the evolution of artistic traditions. *Although the Byzantine art is aspiritual-religious art, the utilization of previous patterns of Byzantine Empire is obvious in the painting, sculpture, architecture and mosaics of this art across the centuries. Aesthetics of Byzantine art is a combination of incarnations. From the one hand, it is considered as the incarnation of the god's shining and spiritual glory on the face of Christ and on the other hand, it is in the embodiment of the history of Christianity and expressing of the suffering upon the Prophet (Mohammad). These combinations have been represented symbolically in the form of former cultures and arts and light effects and holiness.*

## Endnote

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1. This paper has been published in the journal of Bagh-e Nazar – issue 4 - (pages 72-83) in 2005 entitled “fundamentals of understanding and interpretation of Byzantine art”. Some sections are changed in this after the peer review, and new cases have been introduced entitled “The introduction and analysis of Byzantine art”. The added sections are marked with the italic font.

2. Conquest of light over darkness existed in ancient Iranian thought and belief; as the Izadmehr (Mithra) was the symbol of light and sunlight and the light of divine had overcome the darkness during Zoroastrianism. In the Islamic era, this belief has been interpreted as the radiant nature of Allah. Similarly, Suhrawardi's philosophy of illumination is derived from this thinking.

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A. Mary among the Angels, Church of St. Apolinar.  
Source : Bovini,2006 : 46.



B. Persian miniatures, Source:Kevorkian & Sicre, 2008:137.

Fig. 3. Naturalism in Byzantine Mosaic and Persian miniatures under the inspiration of Mithraic beliefs.

### Connections between Persian Empire and Rome during Parthian and Sassanid Dynasties

Byzantine art had tried to demonstrate divine permanence, constancy, strength, immortality, glory, beauty and light by the use of hard, sustainable, high quality and radiant materials and in some cases by the use of gold and silver and precious stones even in difficult economic situations. Christ as the absolute sovereign of the world is the source, origin, and purpose of this art. *Painting and decoration examples of this period had very close connections with decorative arts of Islamic period of Iran; Arts like miniature and gilding which sometimes have highlighted by European theorists.*

Emphasis on the line in the displaying of shapes is the main characteristic of Byzantine art. Sacred aura and visualizing light in the art had taken from the Bible where Jesus said: "I am the light of the world"; a kind of light which surround everything. *Before the Christian era, there was a halo of light in the Parthian and Sassanid art that relates to izadmehr (Mitra), (the Aryan sun god). Mehr has always appeared in motifs and coins along with a halo or rays of light around his head. Image of Mitra in European temples could be seen in the reliefs of Taq-e Bostan in Iran. During the course of relations between Iran and Rome, Mehr has transferred to the Roman Empire and all the Mithraic thinking, symbols and art had been mixed with Christianity.*

Enhancing the number of personages in arrangements and increasing the brightness of scenes made artworks expressions more attractive. This tendency could be seen in artworks of the twelfth century AD. Displaying personal and individual characteristics, realistic refinements and positional lightings represent humanistic desires of artists in this period.

Byzantine art was a pattern for painters of the era, artists such as Giotto, Duccio, Giovanni, Piero Della Francesca and El Greco were under influence of the art. Byzantine art is a portal that makes possible to understand the western art;

in the artworks of ancient classic artists, and turns into a primitive form.

In Hegel's philosophy book, we read: Symbolic art is shaped based on the type of relationship between tangible body or skin of the artwork and its spiritual content. Hegel assumes the beauty as an absolute shining through the intermediary senses. Umberto Eco, the Italian Philosopher and theorist, born in 1932 argues about principals of medieval aesthetics and art as follows: the era we discuss is famous to be the age of darkness and various contradictions in history; however, philosophers and clerics of that time had an image of the universe in their minds which were full of light and optimism.

*Medievalist's interest in the light and color had a very simple free-standing and instantaneous nature. Visual art of the time had revealed a knowledge and attention to colors, different from the previous centuries. The art of this era confined itself to the simple and basic colors which had of decisive, distinct and irreversible nature and was the opposite of Sufi nature (being unclear and ambiguous).*

*Basic and common colors in the art of this era which could be seen in the costumes of Mary, Jesus, and the saints were red, azure, blue, white, and sometimes green and black which were used in Mithraic temples coloring throughout the empire of Rome, especially in Rome. Many of these shrines still remain and their trace could be observed in crypts of Churches. Red and azure colors on the garments of Ahouramazda appear on the costumes of Mary and Jesus. The starry blue sky covered by sun motifs on top of the temple altars goes to the wall and ceiling of the church altars. In addition, there are countless examples of signs and other symbols which link the Byzantine art with former arts and cultures. This transformation not only is spread out in Christianity but also in Islamic arts and rituals (Javadi, 2014).*

Byzantine art is an art that reflects the Christian

world. Artists of this era often include deacons and monks who believe in Christianity. The artworks of this era have been investigated in terms of form, content, ideology, history, and in a wide area of mutual interaction between Byzantine art and arts and civilizations of Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Spain, Italy on the one hand, and Armenia, Georgia, the Caucasus, Russia and parts of eastern Europe on the other hand.

The broad pathway of Byzantine art which extends from Rome to Armenia in the north of Mediterranean Sea and coast, suggests that the art has astonishingly crisscrossed the Eastern and Western world. Sicily, Venice, Serbia, the Muslim's world and Macedonian civilization also were in awe of this art.

Imaginary influences of this art on the Islamic art could be seen especially in paintings. However, the Byzantine art also has fostered some Islamic art elements in the course of its evolution.

*Also, some traces of naturalism in eastern arts like Iranian Middle Eastern and Mediterranean arts which were based on their beliefs could be observed in Byzantine art. Byzantine mosaics are specific examples of how it had been influenced by eastern nature, which is inspired by palm trees and flowers, shrubs and meadow of Iranian miniature (Fig.3: A&B).*

Visual symbolic allegorical inclinations in Byzantine art gradually distanced from materialistic visualization of objects and began to incline towards abstract expression. The tendencies towards abstract expression gave its way to natural, three-dimensional, and real visualization of objects and figurines.

Fall of the spiritual world had followed by ushering in the real material world in the art scene. Portraits of Late Byzantine with its realistic refinements set off the Renaissance in the field of art.

*Most excellent examples of Byzantine mosaics can be found in churches and temples of Ravenna, Italy, in terms of naturalism, which are very similar to Persian miniatures.*

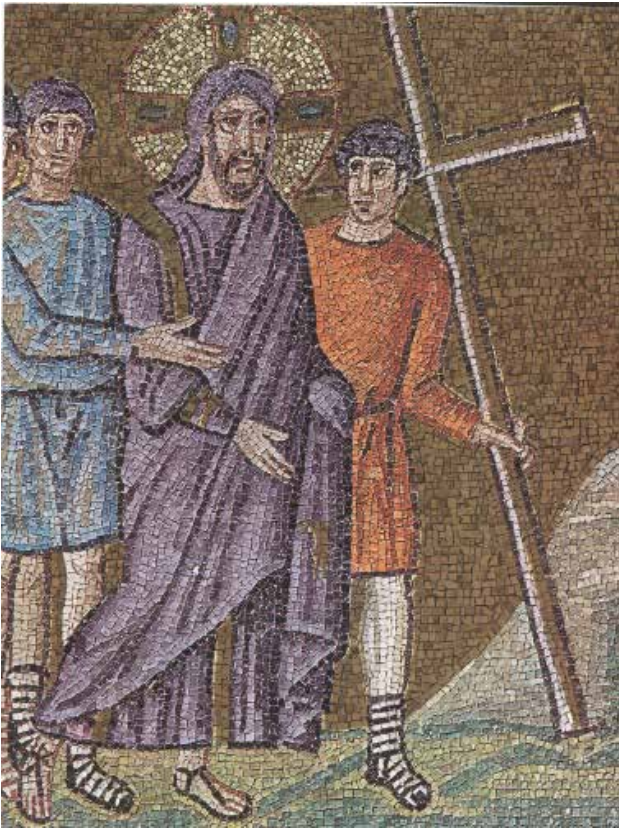


Fig.1. The embodiment of divine glory, splendor and beauty in Byzantine art. Source : Bovini, 2006 : 57.

darkness gets it (verses 1-6). In chapter eight, verses 12 and 13, Jesus said: I am the light of the world and the darkness will not prevent him from seeking. I am the light of the world as long as I am in the world (chapter 9, verses 5). God is embodied in Jesus Christ as a flesh, as the Holy Bible says: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

We saw him full of grace, truth, and glory, the glory befitting to the only begotten of the Father (The Gospel of John, chapter one, verse 14). Bible guides Christian art. Plotinus believed that since the soul is Light, then the shadows and darkness should be avoided in the drawing. His attitude in painting had a massive influence on early painters of the Middle Ages.

By investigating ancient religious books, we can find out that the light<sup>2</sup> has always overcome the

darkness in Christian art. According to the statement, vignette and iconic pictures are rarely seen in Christian art. The spaces and places embodied in the artworks of this era are often full of light, sanctity and order. Also, the portraits are appeared with serenity and tranquility emanating from the emersion of sacred objects in Christian art. Harmony, discipline, rhythm and balance, all are based on sacred geometry which present order and unity to the world. The overall structure of Byzantine art has been established in the aura of the sacred and spiritual issues. *Anything we are dealing with as Christian thought and consequently Christian art throughout history are in fact the beliefs and rituals before Christ which have been followed strongly in the Roman Empire till 4th century AD. Early Christian art and architecture were developed based on Mithraic thinking* (Javadi, 2014); (Fig. 2).

Symbolic art explores the ideal perfection; in other words, it associates with the ideal perfection and tries to embody the infinite. To achieve this purpose, the artist utilizes symbolic expression to imply the infinite. At this point, the artistic expression is a mean to guide the audience to a spiritual understanding of the transcendent and metaphysical truth. Therefore, it avoids mastery, precision and refined forms of expressions seen



Fig. 2. Light prevails in Christian Art . Source : Heck, 2007: 94-98

## Introduction

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According to Herbert, “Byzantine art is a term that has never been properly defined”. Byzantine era is one of the most important historical periods and for that reason known as the same as medieval art. Byzantine art has portrayed a universe whose entirety belongs to the realm of God. On the other hand, Classical art standards do not belong to such a universe since the sense of selfishness, personal instincts and emotions are alien to this kind of art. Such cases have always been rejected to enter the world of religious art.

Eleven centuries of Byzantine art history and its influence on Russia and Greece represents the capabilities and profound functions of this art, so that the noblest masterpieces of this period in terms of perfect color Symbolism, visual structure, artistic maturity and mastery of picture refining could be found from the seventh to the twelfth century. Any artwork should be analyzed

and examined based on its context value; otherwise (considering values outside of the work context) understanding, interpretation, and analysis of the artworks will be disrupted and a valuable art may seem as decadent art. In general, artworks are interpreted in two ways: structural and historical.

In structural interpretation, the context or the artwork and its internal relations are emphasized. Everything develops inside of the artwork and the way and style of the expression guides the interpretation to the aesthetic facets and meaning implication. Structural analysis is a synchronic method. In the historical interpretation, the social and historical situations in which the artwork was created are considered as the basis of interpretation and analysis of the artwork. Historical analysis is a diachronic method.

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## Preface

Byzantine art has been associated with the church step by step, both in the beginning of its initial steps in the near east and in its gradual development in the Mediterranean region. *According to historical evidence and architectural monuments, we can guess when and how the churches are established on the remains of Roman temples. First churches emerged in the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. Prior to that, Christianity was worshiped and promoted secretly in the underground temples and tombs.*

*Mithraism, the most common ritual throughout in the Roman Empire and the official religion of the court, had many dark secret cavernous temples to comply the religious beliefs to be worshiped in such places.*

*Thus, the early churches were the same as Mithraic temples and gradually it was a template to build the first basilica in a cruciform and later in rectangular form; in terms of shape, color and*

*composition church decorations were also derived from former temples.*

*“Jensen” acclaims that the basilicas were affected by Pagan temples (Janson, 1981: 169, 168).* The presence of transcendental facets in pictures distances the visual expression method of meaning from pure naturalism and objectivity and it causes a symbolic feature (character) in art visualization technique to emerge. Religious art reveals a feature of sacred art containing all aspects of the universe motion and rhythm of cosmic order (Fig. 1).

Such forms of expression and embodied meanings could be implied by referring to the text that religious art is derived from. The opening chapter of the Gospel of John states: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and all things were created through him and nothing existed without him.

It was life in him, and the life was the light of human and the light shines in the darkness, and the

# An Introduction to the Byzantine Art<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

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Byzantine art belongs to Christendom. Christendom characteristics are reflected in all artworks of this period. Any interpretation, criticism, and review of the artworks of this era will be solely possible by understanding of the world to which they belong. Christianity is centered over the Bible and God's word. Emergence or rising of the Christ is the origins of Christendom. God's words have revealed a universe whose entirety belongs to the divine mercy, glory, light and beauty. Byzantine art is based upon a deep understanding of the Christianity. The inner theme of the Byzantine art is the presence of sanctity in picture and their interpretations regarding the sanctity. *However, the Christian art and culture developed years after the advent of the Prophet of Islam and the secret spread of Christianity; and its architecture and decorating are based on Mithraic temples. The symbols of pre-Christian culture are also evident in the paintings and high reliefs.*

## **Keywords**

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Byzantine, religious art, lighting, aesthetics, Mithraic symbol.