

Chrysanthos Voutounos Essay

“Byzantine art is both glorious and humble and Digital Art is glorious and spectacular. My research focuses on these alienated forms of art with renowned representatives such as Photios Kontoglou and Bill Viola looking for bonds. Concentrating on the liturgical and preaching aspects of Byzantine Art I can visualize Byzantine art through a digital prism”. (Artist Statement).

As Photios Kontoglou (1895-1965), painter, iconographer and writer states: “The sweetness of this art is apocalyptic. Men who have need of triviality, cannot find anything other than - would be - rational comments, about crooked feet, unnatural bodies and the such, but how can its deep human content, which is the holy of holies, be weighed with such means? And when they praise it, then they say the worst, idiotic comments, generalities”.

Indeed, Byzantine art has been waived and recoiled into familiar formalism over the years that followed the fall of Constantinople (1453). The traces of Christianity were covered and the glory of Eastern Christendom lost the spectacular appeal to the next generations. Renaissance art was born out of a new, rapidly evolving civilization. Its beginnings can be traced even in Giotto’s (1267 - 1337) work and led to the contemporary art scene. According to Giorgio Vassari, “he made a decisive break with the Byzantine style”. However Byzantine art has been practiced by silent workers having the same curator by their side, God.

How is my work related to contemporary digital arts practice? I am an admirer of the work of Photios Kontoglou who revived Byzantine art in 1930’s, the iconographer who loved Byzantine art and admits about it: “Byzantine art (*techni*) is for me the art of arts. I believe in it as I do religion. I do not deny this, but it even gives me great pleasure when, most of the time, someone uses it as an accusation. Only this art nurtures my soul with its deep and mysterious powers. It quenches the thirst which I feel in the dry desert which surrounds us. Next to Byzantine Art, all other art seems to me light, distracted by many things”.

Back in his time Kontoglou was considered backward, since he was searching the glory of a “forgotten art”. But the revival of Byzantine art in the 20th century has taken place in Europe, America and everywhere this sacred art can find viewers who appreciate and try to “see” its apocalyptic imagery.

At the beginning of 21st century, technology is applied in the arts - digital art. Since I am a practitioner of this new art form which it’s also apocalyptic in its own way I am trying to find ways of combination with Byzantine art which is believed to suffer from formalism.

Iconography means “writing on icon”, not painting, where The Iconographer depicts figures of Saints based on prototypes. Formalism in Byzantine art is not something that really restricts it from evolving but a pioneer artist must think twice before practicing this divine art.

My conscience is clean of any worry of violation of the “rules” of this sacred art and I am satisfied by the outcome of this research. The construction of a physical proskinitari, a miniature of a chapel that keeps some icons and a votive that passersby light and also the creation of a virtual chapel in virtual world of Second life

<http://secondlife.com/> are important aspects of this research that prove the liturgical purpose of Byzantine art by practicing Digital art.

The creation of a digital icon was a challenging work that made me wonder of a possible conflict between Digital and Byzantine art and a monstrosity as a result. The creation of the digital narrative webpage <http://www.proskinitari.com/> that is linked with Seconds life chapel and works as an interactive receiver of online prayers - parakleses also seem to deviate from the formality of the well structured, holy inspired - Byzantine art. The same claim can be raised concerning the creation of the virtual chapel in Second Life.

However the digital icon, Second Life chapel and the interactive website “work” on a digital platform and a different level instead of traditional Byzantine Art. A passerby avatar in Second Life or a user of the internet can send an online paraklesis to the Saints at <http://www.proskinitari.com/request.html> or <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Miniard/100/170/20> . Also a user can know about Saints life. Byzantine art is a preaching art therefore the outcomes of this research are not contrary with the spirit of Byzantine art. The digital icon can be used as a vehicle of the honor paid to “Christ” and his Saints like the icons created with the traditional Byzantine technique. I have to admit that the digital icon is not liturgical in the manner of being worshiped in a real church by pilgrims because the holy tradition should not be disturbed. It’s well structured along centuries.

The research was not made with intentions of making profit. I have gained much along this journey, digital art technical knowledge, valuable knowledge concerning Arts Agency, Arts Spectacle, Web2.0 and many interesting discussions concerning many other topics related to Digital Art. I have also looked into the work of the digital artist Bill Viola and investigated the role and possible impact of virtual environments on human soul and spirituality.

The discussion around Spectacle in Art was very inspiring for setting my own limits and formal rules for my further development as an artist. My art will remain simple and humble like other works of Byzantine art. I will be careful of the spectacle in my art wishing not to exceed my personal limits that I have defined. I will continue the research in this field, Byzantine Art - Digital art connection because I think that this project is an open field for more investigation and a source for valuable understanding of Byzantine art in the digital age of the 21st century. This journey has been also spiritual and is not finished yet. It seems that death is the real ending of this journey and the beginning of a new one. I am very much grateful for my family and friends for their help and support in my efforts and the municipality approval for the construction of Proskinitari in my neighborhood park.

I devote this research to the Saints Raphael, Nikolaos and Irene and wish to glorify their existence in the name of Jesus Christ. A request - paraklesis to them is to mediate to the Lord for offering health and spiritual support in my personal spiritual fight, the people I love and every other perceiver of the preaching messages of Byzantine art and the Christian faith. I wish for every soul to discover God and become an Icon - Image of God and a temple of the Holy Spirit. I hope that Byzantine and Digital art may be ways that will help more people reach this spiritual condition and “see” the apocalyptic truth.