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"The Greatest Revolution in Art": Reinterpreting Roger Fry's Byzantinism

"Sanatta Büyük Devrim": Roger Fry'ın Bizantinizminin Yeniden Yorumlanması

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in formalism throughout the humanities. Within the field of art history in particular, the emergence of a new formalism has been accompanied by a renewed interest in its historical manifestations. The British art critic Roger Fry (1866-1934) is one of those early formalists whose work has moved to the center of attention again. After having long been dismissed for his high modernist fixation on form at the exclusion of meaning, recent studies have shown that Fry's position is more complex and nuanced than has often been assumed. In this article, I will revisit Fry's formalism with a particular emphasis on his lifelong interest in Byzantine art. Although it has widely been recognized that Byzantine art played a crucial role in Fry's theories, and was regarded by him as an important precursor of the avant-garde of his day (most notably the Post-Impressionism of Cézanne), I argue that the nature of his Byzantinism has long been misunderstood. Rather than being merely of formal interest to him, I demonstrate that Fry's interest in Byzantine art is deeply historical, and his Byzantinism is nothing but an attempt to salvage art's spiritual aura in a disenchanted world.

Keywords: Formalism, Roger Fry, Byzantinism, Modernism, Post-Impressionism

ÖZ

Son yıllarda, beşeri bilimler alanında biçimciliğe (formalizm) olan ilgi yeniden canlanmıştır. Özellikle sanat tarihi alanında, yeni bir biçimciliğin ortaya çıkışına biçimciliğin tarihsel tezahürlerine karşı ilginin canlanması da eşlik etmiştir. İngiliz sanat eleştirmeni Roger Fry (1866-1934), çalışmaları yeniden ilgi odağı haline gelen ilk biçimcilerden biridir. Anlamın dışlanmasındaki modernist saplantısı nedeniyle uzun süre göz ardı edildikten sonra, son çalışmalar Fry'ın görüşlerinin genellikle varsayıldığından daha karmaşık ve nüanslı olduğunu göstermiştir. Bu makalede, Fry'ın biçimciliğini, Bizans sanatına ömür boyu süren ilgisine özel bir vurgu yapılarak yeniden gözden geçirilecektir. Bizans sanatının Fry'ın teorilerinde çok önemli bir rol oynadığı ve Fry'a göre zamanın avangardının, özellikle de Cézanne'ın Post-Empresyonizminin önemli bir habercisi olarak kabul edildiği geniş çapta onaylansa da, Fry'ın Bizanscılığının doğası uzun zamandır yanlış anlaşılmıştır. Bu çalışma Fry'ın Bizans sanatına

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olan ilgisinin sadece şekilsel değil tarihsel bir derinliği olduğunu ve Fry'ın Bizanscılığının, büyüsü bozulmuş bir dünyada sanatın maneviyatını kurtarma girişiminden başka bir şey olmadığını göstermeyi hedeflemektedir.
Anahtar kelimeler: Biçimcilik, Roger Fry, Bizans, Modernizm, Post-Empresyonizm

Introduction

Over the last two decades or so, a renewed interest in formalism has emerged throughout the humanities.[1] Especially since the demise of postmodernism, scholars in various disciplines have returned to more traditional ideas that were considered to be long dead and buried. After having been dismissed for decades, formalism, too, is one of those ideas that has recently been resurrected, with scholars from various corners of the humanities now actively promoting a "new formalism" again.[2] The study that is by many considered to be the most representative of this new wave of scholarship is Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015).[3] In this work, Levine offers an expansion of the concept of form to include not merely artistic, but also political forms. Although her work has been criticized for defining form so broadly that it "has lost its defining boundaries and . . . is no longer opposed to any other concepts at all," it is nonetheless indicative of a broader turn to politicize formalism and move analysis beyond the narrow Kantian parameters through which form has traditionally been understood.[4]

This rehabilitation of formalism also left its mark on the art-historical discipline. After David Summers first introduced the term "postformalism" in his book *Real Spaces* (2003), particularly the work of Whitney Davis has been an important catalyst for the reappraisal of form within the discipline.[5] What distinguishes the postformalism of Summers and Davis from the work of their formalist predecessors is that they sought to strip formalism of its metaphysical presumptions and implied universalism, two aspects firmly anchored in the western philosophical tradition.[6] Although both Summers and Davis were primarily concerned with methodology, the return to formalism led, at the same time, to a renewed confrontation with both art's and art history's modernist legacy.[7] This resulted not only in a renewed confrontation with typically modernist

1 See for example: Felski, *The Limits of Critique*; Felski, *Hooked*; Hensley, *Forms of Empire*; Levine, *Forms*; Vadde, *Chimeras of Form*; Clune, *Writing Against Time*; Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms*; Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem*; Nersessian, *The Calamity Form*; Sandra Macpherson, "A Little Formalism"; Serpell, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*; Starr, *Feeling Beauty*.

2 For new formalism, see especially Marjorie Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?". The most sustained criticism on new formalism is to be found in Kramnick and Nersessian, "Form and Explanation." See also the debate on new formalism that followed in response to Kramnick's and Nesessian's article in *Critical Inquiry* 44, no. 1 (Autumn, 2017).

3 Levine, *Forms*. Eva Geulen and Sam Rose, among others, have pointed to the representative character of Levine's work, see respectively Geulen, "'The Primacy of the Object,'" 6 and Rose, *Art and Form*, 160, n.27.

4 Geulen, "'The Primacy of the Object,'" 6. Similar critique has been uttered by, among others, Kramnick and Nersessian, "Form and Explanation," 657–59 and Robert S. Lehman, "Criticism and Judgment," 1115.

5 Summers, *Real Spaces*, 15–32. For Davis' postformalism, see particularly Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture*; Davis, "What Is Post-Formalism?"; Davis, *Visuality and Virtuality*.

6 For further discussion, see Rose, *Art and Form*, 159, n.4.

7 Despite their close relation, I do not mean to suggest that Modernism and formalism are identical, as some have suggested. The Canadian literary scholar Linda Hutcheon once jokingly summarized the situation at the heydays of postmodernism by recounting that if you look up the term "formalism" in a book's index, it will say "formalism: see modernism." Turning then to "modernism," you will find a list with all the examples listed in the book. For Hutcheon, the point was not so much that the two concepts were often treated as identical in postmodernism, but that the concept of modernism even totally eclipsed the meaning of formalism. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*.

concerns such as art's autonomy, aesthetics and aestheticism, but also in a renewed interest in the pioneers of modernism, not in the least Clement Greenberg, whose soaring impact on formalist discourse a new generation of art historians frantically tried to overcome.[8]

Another of these "arch-modernists" whose work recently moved to the center of attention is the British art critic (and painter) Roger Fry (1866-1934).[9] Particularly known for his defense of Post-Impressionism and his groundbreaking study of Cézanne, Fry is often pictured as Greenberg's British, pre-war counterpart. Particularly as a result of his affiliation with Clive Bell, Fry's formalism is often associated with the notion of "significant form."[10] Defined by Bell as the collection of "lines and colors combined in a particular way" designed to "stir our aesthetic emotions," the notion of significant form is typically associated with, what I will come to call, high formalism; that is, a formalism that leaves little to no room for a consideration of anything outside the artwork, and regards the contemplation of its shapes and colors purely as an end in itself.[11]

Despite Fry's misgivings about the notion of significant form, Bell's category provides the framework through which Fry's work has often been understood.[12] As a result, Fry's formalism is still often regarded as an aestheticism that leads away from life, history, and the social world in favor of the disinterested contemplation of form for art's sake.[13] Yet, as I will come to argue, this view is problematic and incorrect. In his study of Fry's work within the context of the so-called Bloomsbury group, on which more below, the art historian Christopher Reed has remarked that the farther Bloomsbury's art and design deviated from the accepted norm of modernism, the more historians have been inclined to understand their work from a narrow modernist framework.[14] It is the same irony that also underlies the scholarly reception of Fry's formalism, including that of his Byzantinism.[15]

8 For Greenberg's impact on formalism, see Rose, *Art and Form*, 67. Publications on Greenberg include Duve, *Clement Greenberg between the Lines and* Jones, *Eyesight Alone*. In relation to contemporary art, see particularly the work of Diarmuid Costello, e.g., "Greenberg's Kant and the Fate of Aesthetics in Contemporary Art Theory." Costello's article is also a good example of contemporary engagement with typically modernist concerns of art's autonomy and aesthetics. See in this context also Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst zur Einführung*. For publications participating approvingly or critically in debate about new formalism: Felski, *Hooked,* Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism,* Lehman, "Formalism, Mere Form, and Judgment", Rose, *Art and Form*.

9 In this article, I will be mainly concerned with Fry the critic. However, throughout his life, Fry considered himself an artist first, see Bullen, "Introduction: Vision and Design," xi. Recent publications on Fry's role as a critic include Fried, "Roger Fry's 'Formalism'", Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture,* Rose, *Art and Form,* Rubin, *Roger Fry's 'Difficult and Uncertain Science.'*. Here, I'm not considering recent literature on the Bloomsbury Group. The reference to Fry as an arch-modernist is taken from Stair, "From Precepts to Praxis: The Origins of British Studio Pottery."

10 See e.g., Nelson, "To Say and to See: Ekphrasis and Vision in Byzantium," 160.

11 Bell, "The Aesthetics Hypothesis," 113.

12 For Fry's critical remarks on the notion of significant form, see his 1914 review of Clive Bell's *Art* and the concluding essay "Retrospect" in *Vision and Design*.

13 For an analysis, see Rose, *Art and Form*, 29.

14 Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 8.

15 The term "Byzantinism" is not mine but Fry's, see e.g., "The Last Phase of Impressionism," 73.

Although it has long been acknowledged that Byzantine art played an important role throughout Fry's career, the topic has received only scarce attention in the scholarly literature.[16] Yet, when it is touched upon, Fry's involvement with Byzantine art is often reduced to merely a formal concern. For example, in what is the most influential treatment of the topic, the British art historian J.B. Bullen argues that Fry aestheticizes Byzantine art by reducing it to a formal configuration of shape, line and color, thereby untying the icon from its historical roots and situating it within the modernist framework of his own day.[17] However, by reducing Fry's Byzantinism to something that was merely of formal interest to him, we strip his engagement with Byzantine art of the importance it had for him throughout his career. The first thing needed in order to come to a reappraisal of the significance that Byzantine art had for Fry is that we begin to disassociate his formalism not only from Bell's, who referred to the Hagia Sophia as one of the prime examples of significant form, but also from that of Greenberg who gave the doctrine of high formalism its most influential formulation.[18] As recent studies on Fry have shown, his formalism is anything but a narrow concern for form alone.[19] Quite the opposite. Only a quick glance at his theoretical writings will show that Fry was deeply concerned with the artist and his milieu. In fact, as I will argue, form was anything but an empty category for Fry, but as a mediator between viewer and artist, present and past, it was instead packed with meaning.

The goal of this article is to offer a reinterpretation of Fry's Byzantinism that moves beyond the narrow high formalist framework through which his engagement with Byzantine art has often been understood. Starting from a close reading of Fry's contributions that directly or indirectly engage with Byzantine art, I will start by situating Fry's Byzantinism within the broader context of his formalism. Here, I will particularly concentrate on the connection between Byzantine and modern art that is central to Fry's concept of Byzantinism. Next, I will turn to the scholarly reception of Fry's Byzantinism, particularly J.B. Bullen's article "Byzantinism and Modernism 1900-1914" (1999).[20] As a scholar of British modernism with a particular interest in the work of Roger Fry, Bullen is one of the key figures who has promoted a view of Fry's Byzantinism in narrowly formal and aesthetic terms.[21] That is to say that Bullen

16 Although the topic of Fry's Byzantinism is often mentioned in the secondary literature, it has hardly received any extensive treatment. Apart from J.B. Bullen's work, sustained discussions of Fry's Byzantinism are, among others, to be found in Berkowitz, "Bloomsbury's Byzantium and the Writing of Modern Art," Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms,* Green, *Art Made Modern*.

17 Bullen, "Byzantinism and Modernism 1900-14," 665–66.

18 For the influence of Greenberg and Bell on the scholarly reception of Fry's formalism, see Rose, *Art and Form*, 78 and Spalding, "Roger Fry and His Critics in a Post-Modernist Age," 490. For Bell on the Hagia Sophia, see "The Aesthetics Hypothesis," 113.

19 Within Fry scholarship particularly Spalding's *Roger Fry, Art and Life* and the edited collection by Christopher Reed, *A Roger Fry Reader* have been important for redirecting attention. More general studies that had the same effect include Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture* and more recently Rose, *Art and Form*.

20 Bullen, "Byzantinism and Modernism 1900-14."

21 Bullen discusses the work of Fry in his Introduction to *Vision and Design*. Fry's Byzantinism is also discussed in his major work on the Byzantine revival in the 19th and early 20th century, *Byzantium Rediscovered* (2003), but

understands Fry's interest in the Byzantine artwork as a secular Byzantinism that displays a complete disregard for its (historical) context. It is this particular narrative that I would like to question here. By offering a close reading of some of Fry's major texts that implicitly or explicitly deal with Byzantine art, I aim to demonstrate that it is a profound misconception to understand Fry's formalism as a purely abstract concern detached from history and context, a viewpoint that by implication entails a severe reduction of what Byzantium meant to Fry throughout his lifetime. Instead, it is only by attending to the nuances of Fry's formalism, its subtle entanglement with the artist's worldview and emotions, that it becomes possible to understand the importance that Byzantium had for him, and why he considered its art, together with Cézanne's, "the greatest revolution in art."[22]

Byzantinism as Historical Category

When Roger Fry visited Istanbul in April 1911, the critic found himself at the peak of his career. Only a few months before, he had shocked the British art world with his exhibition "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" in the Grafton Gallery in London. After Fry had invented the term Post-Impressionism for this occasion, the exhibition first introduced the work of Cézanne, Gauguin and van Gogh, among others, to a somewhat conservative British audience. Although the exhibition caused a big scandal and the work of the Post-Impressionists was by no means uniformly embraced by his fellow critics, it nonetheless decisively established Fry as one of the most influential and powerful voices in the British art world.[23]

It was no more than a few months later that Fry found himself in Istanbul. Although the plan was to enjoy a well-deserved vacation, work continued with a second exhibition on Post-Impressionist painting already planned for the next year. Virginia Woolf, who herself would later come to refer to the first Post-Impressionist exhibition from 1910 as the moment when "human character changed," captured the spirit of these days in the Ottoman capital particularly well in her biography of Fry:[24]

> It was the first holiday that he had taken for many years [. . .]. He was seeing a new country for the first time in company with friends – the Clive Bells – who were to mean much to him;

since it offers no new material on Fry, I will exclusively concentrate on his earlier "Byzantinism and Modernism 1900-1914."

22 "Art and Life," 19.

23 Christopher Reed writes that the controversy surrounding the exhibition "catapulted his [Fry's] theories to the center of the public arena." Reed, "Forming Formalism: The Post-Impressionist Exhibitions," 1996, 49. Virginia Woolf's biography of Fry reports that he was "amazed and amused" at the general uproar and personal notoriety aroused by his exhibition. However, in a letter to his parents, Fry remarked that he had been the center "of a wild hurricane of newspaper abuse from all quarters over this show," Fry recalls that some critics even implied "that all the pictures . . . should be burned, and that I myself should be offered up upon the holocaust as a propitiation of the outraged feelings of the British public." Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 65–66.

24 Woolf, *The Hogarth Essays: Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, 4.

> he was "filling up gaps" in his knowledge of Byzantine art, and there were all the aesthetic problems roused by the Post-Impressionist pictures and the practical problems roused by the forthcoming show to be discussed.[25]

Woolf's account gives a good impression of all the occupations Fry was engaged in during his stay in Turkiye. Accompanied by the couple Clive and Vanessa Bell, the latter being Virginia Woolf's sister, and the mathematician Henry Norton, the group originally planned to move from Turkiye to Greece and Italy. Unfortunately, their plans were abruptly interrupted when Vanessa suffered a miscarriage and the group, with the exception of Norton, decided to return immediately to England.

At that point, Fry had known the Bells for a little more than a year. Their first meeting was a chance encounter at the train station in Cambridge when all of them were waiting for the train to London. During the ride, Fry and Clive Bell had a passionate conversation about mainly French painting, and Roger informed the Bells about his plans for the exhibition in London. As Virginia Woolf recounts:

> It must have been in 1910 I suppose that Clive one evening rushed upstairs in a state of the highest excitement. He had just had one of the most interesting conversations of his life. It was with Roger Fry. They had been discussing the theory of art for hours. He thought Roger Fry the most interesting person he had met since Cambridge days. So Roger appeared.[26]

On both a personal and a professional level, his meeting with the Bells would mark an important event in Fry's life. It not only formed the basis of his intellectual partnership with Clive Bell, who would immediately come to assist Fry with the organization of the exhibition, but it also led to Fry's inclusion in the Bloomsbury Group: A circle of artists, writers and intellectuals that included, besides Clive and Vanessa Bell, also Leonard and Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster, Duncan Grant, and John Maynard Keynes, among others. Giving him a new social network of like-minded people at personally difficult times, the Bloomsbury Group also provided Fry with the artistic and intellectual environment to further establish his reputation as a critic.[27] In turn, Fry would come to play an important role in the development of the shared aesthetics of the Bloomsbury Group.[28] In fact, the idiosyncratic pairing of Byzantine art and Post-Impressionism in Woolf's account of the trip to Istanbul was exactly the kind of connection that the group would come to promote in later years.[29] Although he was by no

25 Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography*, 169–70.

26 Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 197.

27 As Frances Spalding writes, the year 1910 "began as an utter disaster." Not only did Fry lose his prestigious position at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, but also his application for the Slade Professorship at Oxford University was rejected. To make matters worse, it was around the same time that his wife Helen was permanently to a mental hospital. Spalding, *Roger Fry, Art and Life*, 123.

28 For the aesthetics of the Bloomsbury Group and Fry's role within it, see Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*.

29 Reed, Bloomsbury Rooms, 85. Woolf herself would be inspired by Post-Impressionism on formal level, particularly

means the first one to draw this connection and was probably inspired in this direction by the German art critic Julius Meier-Graefe, whose two-volume *Modern Art* had appeared in English translation in 1908, the relation between Post-Impressionism and Byzantine art would become one of the cornerstones of Fry's aesthetic theory.[30]

How fundamental the connection between Byzantine art and Post-Impressionism was for Fry, he had already acknowledged in a letter to the editor of *Burlington Magazine* in 1908. Commenting on the negative treatment that the paintings of Cézanne, Gauguin and others had received in the magazine, Fry takes particular issue with the unfavorable comparison with the Impressionism of Monet. In order to counter the "facile assumption" that the work of Cézanne and Gauguin marked a decline in quality that resulted from a "willful mystification and caprice on the artist's part," Fry turns to historical precedent to reconfigure the relationship between Impressionism and Post-Impressionism and install a qualitative difference between the two:[31]

> Impressionism has existed before, in the Roman art of the Empire, and it too was followed, as I believe inevitably, by a movement similar to that observable in the Neo-Impressionists – we may call it for convenience Byzantinism. In the mosaics of Sta Maria Maggiore . . . one can see some-thing of this transformation from Impressionism in the original work to Byzantinism in subsequent restorations. It is probably a mistake to suppose, as is usually done, that Byzantinism was due to a loss of the technical ability to be realistic, consequent upon barbarian invasions. In the Eastern empire there was never any loss of technical skill; indeed, nothing could surpass the perfections of some Byzantine craftsmanship. Byzantinism was the necessary outcome of Impressionism, a necessary and inevitable reaction from it.[32]

As an ardent reader of Wölfflin, Fry takes recourse to a dialectical conception of history in which Impressionism and Byzantinism are no longer seen as singular historical movements, but rather as two recurring episodes that necessarily follow upon one another in the historical development of art.[33] Whereas Impressionism is now seen as a stylistic label that no longer only includes the French painting of Monet and his followers, but also the art of late antiquity, Byzantinism is likewise transformed into a more general category that refers not only to the

in *Jacob's Room, Mrs. Dalloway*, and *To the Lighthouse*.

30 For Meier-Graefe's connection between contemporary French painting and Byzantine art, see *Modern Art*, 1:16. That Fry may have been inspired by Meier-Graefe, see Bullen, "Introduction: Vision and Design," xvi and Nelson, *Hagia Sophia, 1850-1950*, 243, n. 97.

31 Fry, "The Last Phase of Impressionism," 75. At this point, Fry still refers to Cézanne and Gauguin as Neo-Impressionists as he had not invented the term Post-Impressionism yet. In the wake of the first and second Post-Impressionist exhibition, Fry will incessantly come to repeat the same argument that Post-Impressionism does not mark a state of decline. In the introductory text to the second Post-Impressionist exhibition from 1912, for example, Fry will specifically counter the claim that painters as Cézanne, Gauguin and Matisse lack the technical ability to represent nature. Here, as at other places, Fry argues that the problems in evaluating Post-Impressionist art "spring from a deep-rooted conviction due to long established custom, that the aim of painting is the descriptive imitation of natural forms." Fry, "The French Post-Impressionists," 190.

32 Fry, "The Last Phase of Impressionism," 73.

33 For the connection between Fry and Wölfflin, see Binski, "The Reception of Principles of Art History in England."

historical manifestation of Byzantine art, but also to contemporary French painting. Moreover, Fry makes clear that neither the "Neo-Impressionism" of Cézanne and Gauguin, nor the art of their Byzantine predecessors mark a decline in the "technical ability to be realistic." By speaking of an "inevitable reaction," he instead seems to point to the underlying logic of history in which the "Impressionistic" dissolution of form "in the whole continuum of sensation" is necessarily followed by the "Byzantine" reestablishment of mass, line and color as painting's principal formal elements (**ill. 1-2**).[34] He thus goes on to conclude that Cézanne and Gauguin

> are not really Impressionists at all, they are proto-Byzantines rather than Neo-Impressionists. They have already attained to the contour, and assert its value with keen emphasis. They fill the contour with willfully simplified and unmodulated masses, and rely for their whole effect upon a well-considered coordination of the simplest elements.[35]

Rather than marking a decline in quality, Fry draws a hard line between Cézanne and Gauguin on the one hand, and their Impressionist predecessors on the other. By making a qualitative distinction between Impressionism and Byzantinism, he suggests that the work of Cézanne and Gauguin should not be seen as a continuation of Impressionism, but rather as its complete opposite.[36] This spirit is also captured by the name change that Fry proposes here. By shifting his terminology from Neo-Impressionists to proto-Byzantines, Fry draws not only an analogy between Byzantine art and the avant-garde of his own day, as Maria Taroutina observed, but also strongly demarcates the two movements by emphasizing that Post-Impressionism is actually not Impressionism at all.[37]

What follows from all of this is that Byzantinism does not so much function as a formal, but rather as a historical category for Fry. Instead of being just a shorthand for the return of the Byzantine style in modern art, Fry's Byzantinism functions as a critical concept within the history of art. As such, it signifies a more general category that includes Byzantine art and Post-Impressionism as two of its historical manifestations. At the same time, Fry makes clear that Byzantinism marks a rupture in history. As the inevitable reaction on a period of Impressionism, it marks the beginning of a new episode within the history of art that is characterized by the reassertion of formal elements such as line, contour and shape. Although there is thus a formal element to Fry's understanding of Byzantinism, it is important to note that it is explicitly defined as a reaction to Impressionism. In other words, what unites Post-Impressionism and Byzantine art, at this point, is not any optical correspondence between the two. Instead, they are united under the more general rubric of Byzantinism, which is to say that they are first and foremost connected as two historical movements that responded to a period

34 Fry, "The Last Phase of Impressionism," 72–73.
35 Fry, 73.
36 This is why the later term Post-Impressionism better captures the relationship between the two movements. The work of Cézanne, Gauguin and others does not constitute a new (Neo-), but rather an after (Post-) Impressionism.
37 Taroutina, "Introduction: Byzantium and Modernism," 2.

of Impressionism by reasserting their formal elements. It is only by virtue of this quality that Fry refers to the Post-Impressionist painters as "proto-Byzantinists."

When seen from this perspective, the surprising connection between Byzantine art and Post-Impressionist painting in Woolf's account of the trip to Istanbul loses something of its strangeness. Considering the fact that the relationship between the two movements had been long on Fry's mind, it becomes better understandable why he decided to spend his vacation in Istanbul in the midst of his occupations with Post-Impressionistic art. In fact, it is not inconceivable that his ambition to solve the "aesthetic problems roused by the Post-Impressionistic pictures," as Woolf mentioned, was not entirely unrelated to the other goal of "'filling up gaps' in his knowledge of Byzantine art."[38] However, all of this has to remain speculation. While it is sure that Fry visited the Chora Church during his stay in Istanbul, there is, unfortunately, no consensus as to what else he may have seen in Turkiye.[39]

The Emancipation of Form from Nature

Although Fry's letter to *Burlington Magazine* comes a long way in explaining the close connection between Byzantine art and Post-Impressionism in his aesthetics, it only tells part of the story. To get a conclusive view on the importance that their relation had for him, we have to turn to his published lecture "Art and Life" from 1917. It is here that Fry – almost a decade after his letter – draws a tacit connection between Post-Impressionism and Byzantine art that goes to the heart of his aesthetics. After having discussed how the Post-Impressionist painters challenged the "fundamental assumption" that fidelity to nature forms art's primary objective, Fry credits Post-Impressionism for making evident that

> art had arrived at a critical point, and that the greatest revolution in art that had taken place since Graeco-Roman Impressionism became converted into Byzantine formalism was inevitable. It was this revolution that Cezanne inaugurated and that Gauguin and Van Gogh continued . . . the re-establishment of purely aesthetic criteria in place of the criterion of conformity to appearance – the rediscovery of the principles of structural design and harmony.[40]

If Bullen argues that the "cardinal point in Fry is the separation of art and nature," then the implications are nowhere as obvious as here.[41] In this passage, Fry explicitly expands on the

38 In his biography on Clive Bell, Mark Hussey suggests that there might have been a connection. *Clive Bell and the Making of Modernism*, 97. Something similar is suggested by Reed who writes in *Bloomsbury Rooms* that "Fry also said he had long wanted "a nearer insight into Byzantine art," the two ideas were not unrelated. Byzantine precedent played a vital role in his conception of the new art." Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 69.

39 Indeed, it is not even certain if Fry was able to visit the Hagia Sophia while in Istanbul. For contrasting views, compare for example the work of Denys and Reed. Whereas Denys claims that Fry was not able to visit the Hagia Sophia, Reed claims he was. See resp. Sutton in Fry, *Letters of Roger Fry*, 347 n.1 and Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 69. Frances Spalding suggests that Fry may have seen the now destroyed mosaics in the Koimesis Church in Nicaea, which they may have passed on their way from Istanbul to Bursa. Spalding, *Roger Fry, Art and Life*, 147.

40 Fry, "Art and Life," 19.

41 Bullen, "Byzantinism and Modernism 1900-14," xiii.

letter from 1908 by putting the relationship between Impressionism and Post-Impressionism in a broader perspective. The relation between the two is here reconfigured as a conflict between the opposing principles of naturalism and formalism, respectively. Whereas Impressionism conforms to nature, the importance of Post-Impressionism consists in marking a turning point to an art based on entirely different principles. This view is confirmed by one of Fry's lectures in the Grafton Gallery at the time of the first Post-Impressionist exhibition. Although not directly referring to Byzantinism or Byzantine art, the historical dynamic that Fry describes is nonetheless the same. Referring to the Post-Impressionist paintings on display, Fry concludes

> This is the fundamental cause of difference between the Impressionists and the group of painters whose pictures hang on these walls. They said in effect to the Impressionists: "You have explored nature in every direction, and all honour to you; but your methods and principles have hindered artists from exploring and expressing that emotional significance which lies in things, and is the most important subject matter of art. There is much more of that significance in the work of earlier artists who had not a tenth part of your skill in representing appearance. We will aim at that; though by our simplification of nature we shock and disconcert our contemporaries, whose eyes are now accustomed to your revelations, as much as you originally disconcerted your contemporaries by your subtleties and complications.[42]

In line with the historical outlook that Fry developed in his letter to *Burlington Magazine* in which he presented Impressionism and Post-Impressionism as counterparts, the passages above leave no doubt what distinguishes both movements. Whereas Impressionism adheres in its exploration of nature to naturalistic principles, Post-Impressionism is portrayed as a formalism that reestablishes aesthetic criteria for art.

In this respect, Fry's lecture from 1917 forms an expansion of the framework from one decade earlier. What accounts for the significance of Byzantine art and Post-Impressionism in Fry's outlook is that they mark a historical turning point when art emancipates itself from nature and begins to affirm its own formal properties at the expense of its mimetic qualities. That is to say that Byzantinism, as the more general category that includes both movements, marks something akin to a paradigm shift in the Kuhnian sense. It marks the rupture from naturalism to formalism as the historical confrontation between two incommensurable conceptions of art. One of the characteristic features of formalism is therefore that art is freed from nature, as Bullen rightly observed. This does not mean that Fry thinks that formalist art should abhor the representation of nature perse, but rather that it should not be art's main objective.

It is precisely at this point that Impressionism goes wrong. According to Fry, Impressionism marks the logical conclusion of a naturalistic tradition that finds its root in the Gothic movement of the late Middle Ages and from there spreads out to the Italian Renaissance, the Baroque, and beyond. What all these movements have in common is that they take nature as their starting

42 Fry, "The Post-Impressionists," 82.

point. However, it is only with Impressionism that nature is dissolved into pure appearance and the naturalist tradition reaches an endpoint. As Fry observes in "Art and Life:"

> Impressionism marked the climax of a movement which had been going on more or less steadily from the thirteenth century – the tendency to approximate the forms of art more and more exactly to the representation of the totality of appearance. When once representation had been pushed to this point where further development was impossible, it was inevitable that artists should turn round and question the validity of the fundamental assumption that art aimed at representation; and the moment the question was fairly posed it became clear that the . . . assumption that fidelity to appearance was the measure of art had no logical foundation.[43]

In other words, after Impressionism had pushed representation to its extreme until the point that further development was no longer possible, it was up to the Post-Impressionist painters to reaffirm form and establish a different model for art. This development not only applies to the transition from Impressionism to Post-Impressionism, but also explains why Graeco-Roman art inevitably led to Byzantine art. It is immediately after this passage that Fry turns his attention to Byzantine formalism and compares it with the art of Cézanne, Gauguin and van Gogh.[44] What therefore accounts for the significance of Byzantine art and Post-Impressionism is not that they are exemplary of the formalist tradition perse. Instead, both movements mark "the greatest revolution in art" because it is up to them to finally overturn the naturalistic tradition after centuries of domination.[45] As a result, it is only within this historical context that the notion of Byzantinism makes sense for Fry. It signifies nothing less than the historical inauguration of formalism as a new artistic paradigm, one that grounds painting no longer in its adherence to nature, but rather in the "aesthetic criteria" of "structural design and harmony" alone.[46]

Fry's adherence to a historical framework in which periods of naturalism and formalism follow upon each other is one of the constants throughout his career. It underlies not only his critical writings later in life, but also recurs in his pre-formalist essays when he was still working in the tradition of Giovanni Morelli and Bernard Berenson as a connoisseur of mainly Italian Renaissance art.[47] Particularly in his essays "Giotto" (1901) and "Art Before Giotto" (1900) the historical framework of his later critical writings is already firmly in place. As a result, both essays give us a good sense of how deeply Fry's criticism is rooted within an overarching view of history. Moreover, as his first sustained engagement with the topic of Byzantine art, particularly the essay "Art Before Giotto" demonstrates that Fry's interest in the topic does not stem from his critical period, but is anchored in the earlier historical writings.

43 Fry, "Art and Life," 18–19.

44 Fry, 19.

45 Just as the naturalist cycle takes centuries to complete, the formalist cycle also goes through different stages throughout history. In the early essay "Art Before Giotto" (1900) that I will discuss below, it is precisely Fry's aim to trace the development of formalism from late antiquity to the emergence of the Gothic style in France and the art before Giotto in Italy.

46 Fry, "Art and Life," 19.

47 For a discussion of Fry's background in the tradition of connoisseurship, see Rose, *Art and Form*, 25–31.

At the same time, these early writings mark an important difference with the later critical work. As particularly Fry's essay on Giotto shows, the hierarchy between formalism and naturalism is completely reversed in the pre-critical work. That is to say that it is no longer Byzantine, but rather Italian Renaissance art that provides the standards of good art:

> It is difficult to avoid the temptation to say of Giotto that he was the greatest artist that ever lived. [. . .] Starting with little but the crude realism of Cimabue, tempered by the effete accomplishment of the Byzantines, to have created an art capable of expressing the full range of human emotions [. . .] is surely a more astounding performance than any other one artist has every achieved.[48]

In what is a complete inversion of the formalism that Fry will come to defend later in life, he now sees Giotto's work as the greatest revolution in art. In fact, what makes Giotto such a revolutionary artist for Fry is that he managed to overcome precisely the formalism that is here associated with the "effete accomplishments" of Byzantine art. Without much historical precedent, other than the "crude realism" of Cimabue, it was Giotto who first set art on the right naturalist track.

Although Fry's essay on Giotto shows that the historical framework is already in place, it also gives a good indication of Fry's naturalistic, anti-formalist beginnings. This view is confirmed by his essay "Art Before Giotto" from one year earlier. However, as Fry's most extensive treatment of Byzantine art to date, it gives a first hint of the significance that it will later come to have for him. In "Art Before Giotto," Fry concentrates for a good part on the stylistic development of Byzantine art from the late antique mosaics in Ravenna and Rome to its influence in late medieval Italian painting. Sharply contrasting it with the parallel development of medieval art in the West, Fry constructs a narrative of Byzantine art in which the incessant repetition of a limited number of compositional types led, particularly after the Second Council of Nicaea, to an increased technical perfection of the artist, which in turn allowed the artworks to become ever more expressive.[49] Although still deficient when compared to naturalistic art, Fry now writes that Byzantine art is

> one of many proofs that the love of Nature and curiosity about natural forms are not the only things, are not even necessary things, to keep an art alive. A sufficient interest in the elaboration and perfection, of technical methods, an enthusiasm for the display of manual dexterity, and finally a searching study of how to get the deepest imaginative coefficient out of a strictly limited artistic phraseology – these were the antiseptics that kept Byzantine art from going through the same stages of progressive decay as the art of the West.[50]

48 Fry, "Giotto," 144. Returning to the text in 1920, Fry felt the need to offer aa qualification to his negative assessment of Byzantine art. Immediately following upon the word Byzantines, he added the following footnote: "This passage now seems to me to underestimate the work of Giotto's predecessors with which we are now much better acquainted."

49 Fry, "Art before Giotto," 136–37.

50 Fry, 132.

Despite Fry's negative assessment of formalist art during these years, "Art Before Giotto" offers an important qualification to his dismissal of Byzantine art in the essay on Giotto. Credited for keeping art alive in what was otherwise a development of "progressive decay," Fry suggests that Byzantine art is as good as formalist art can get. It is therefore not surprising that when he later becomes an outspoken defender of formalism, Byzantine art will continue to occupy a privileged position within the formalist cycle.

The essays "Giotto" and "Art Before Giotto" give a good impression of the continuities and differences between Fry's historical and critical works. They demonstrate the consistency with which Fry has been insisting on formalism and naturalism as the two dominant principles of art. Moreover, they also reveal that the turning points within Fry's cyclical history are already in place at a very early date. Whereas the essay on Giotto situates the Italian artist at the beginning of the naturalist period, it is in "Art Before Giotto" that Fry points to the apse mosaic of Santi Cosma e Damiano from 526-530 **(ill. 3)** as the point where naturalism has given way to a more formal approach.[51] At the same time, Fry's reserved attitude toward Byzantine art during these years stands in sharp contrast with his work from the formalist period a few years later. As Sam Rose has argued, Fry's early work gives few clues that he would soon become one of the most vocal and influential defenders of the French avant-garde.[52] Rose locates the turning point in Fry's career in the period between 1905 and 1909. Although he points particularly to Fry's "An Essay in Aesthetics" from 1909 as the first fully developed statement of his formalism, it is safe to assume that when Fry referred to Cézanne and Gauguin as proto-Byzantines one year earlier, the formalist framework was already firmly in place.[53] By this time, Fry had already come to his reevaluation of Byzantine art. Moreover, and just as crucially, it is around the same time that Fry's defense of the Post-Impressionist painters adds an extra dimension to his historical framework. Whereas as late as 1905, Fry could still refer to Puvis de Chavannes and George Frederic Watts as the most advanced painters of his time, it was his acquaintance with the work of Cézanne one year later that made him fully aware of the historical significance of the present.[54] After centuries of naturalism, Cézanne showed Fry that a new formalism had finally emerged, and it is this insight, more than anything else, that provides the immediate occasion for his Byzantinism to emerge. It was Cézanne who first showed Fry what his own times and the early days of the Byzantine Empire had in common. It was Cezanne who liberated art from nature just as the Byzantines had done centuries earlier. It is to this particular parallel that Byzantinism refers for Fry. Rather than pointing to a mere formal or optical correspondence between modern and Byzantine art, his concept

51 Fry, 130.

52 Rose, *Art and Form*, 18. In 1894, Fry wrote to his father: The more I study the Old Masters the more terrible does the chaos of modern art seem to me (qtd. in Bullen, "Byzantinism and Modernism 1900-14," 667.

53 Rose, *Art and Form*, 32.

54 Francis Spalding locates the moment of Fry's awakening to work of Cézanne to his visit to the International Society Exhibition in 1906. Spalding, *Roger Fry, Art and Life*, 116.

of Byzantinism is not merely deeply rooted, but also indistinguishable from the historical framework from which it first arose.

Byzantinism and High Formalism

That the concept of Byzantinism functions not as a formal, but as a historical category in Fry's formalism has been insufficiently recognized. More often than not, Fry's Byzantinism is used to indicate a mere formal correspondence between Byzantine mosaics and Post-Impressionist painting. Likewise, Fry's engagement with Byzantine art is often understood as a formal concern. Although we have seen that his essay "Art Before Giotto" dates back to a moment long before he had first heard of Cézanne, the argument has been made that his work reduces the historical meaning of Byzantine art to nothing but a modernist emphasis on form.[55]

This is also very much the sense that one gets from J.B. Bullen's interpretation of Fry's Byzantinism in "Byzantinism and Modernism 1900-14" from 1999. Bullen's article does an excellent job in describing the major role that Byzantine art and Byzantinism played in British art and aesthetics more generally before the First World War. Although he does not concentrate on the work of Fry alone, the British critic nonetheless takes pride of place in Bullen's account. Fry is presented as the central figure around which British Byzantinism revolved during those years, stressing his connections with artists, theoreticians and critics both inside as outside Bloomsbury. The significance of Bullen's work consists not in the least in his emphasis that Fry's Byzantinism was by no means an isolated phenomenon, but participated and developed in a broader artistic and intellectual milieu.

On the other hand, however, Bullen presents a rather stern image of Fry the critic. The image that emerges from Bullen's account is that Fry's Byzantinism was almost exclusively a high formalist concern. Despite (or perhaps because of) the scope of his article, Bullen's account stays very much on the surface, and little effort is made to situate Fry's interest in Byzantine art within the larger context of his formalism. As a result, there is no reference to Fry's historical framework, and only one brief mention of the conflict between formalism and naturalism in his aesthetics. Moreover, by undoing Fry's Byzantinism of its historical dimension, Bullen's account stays at times rather flat, easily skipping over topics that may lead to a more nuanced view. For example, Bullen refers briefly to Fry's engagement with the symbolic value of Byzantine art, thereby tacitly affirming the historical interest that questions regarding content and meaning may have had for him. Yet, Bullen does not develop this point and

55 This is, for example, the point of Nelson, "To Say and to See: Ekphrasis and Vision in Byzantium," 160. On the other hand, the question that Nelson raises in his article is particularly pertinent when it comes to Fry's understanding of Byzantine art. Although I disagree with Nelson that Fry praised Byzantine art for its "significant form," the concern Nelson addresses in the modern reception of Byzantine art, which he calls Mango's Paradox, after Cyril Mango who first articulated the problem, significantly complicates Fry's historical understanding of Byzantine art: "Our own appreciation of Byzantine art stems largely from the fact that this art is not naturalistic; yet the Byzantines themselves . . . regarded it as being highly naturalistic and as being directly in the tradition of Phidias, Apelles, and Zeuxis." Mango qtd. in Nelson, "To Say and to See," 143.

immediately affirms that Fry's involvement with the symbolic value was merely an aberration and by no means representative for his Byzantinism as a whole. He thus concludes that "[t]he dominantly symbolist interpretation [of the French symbolists] was modified in Roger Fry's formalist criticism where the treatment of space and line in Byzantine art was given priority."[56] One page later, speaking of Fry's text "Art Before Giotto," Bullen again stresses that Fry's "attitude to Byzantine art is entirely secular and he hardly develops its symbolic significance [. . .]. In short, he aestheticizes Byzantine art."[57]

This stress on Fry's secular formalism returns in Bullen's discussion of the relationship between Fry's interest in Byzantine art and that of his contemporaries Matthew Prichard and T.E. Hulme. Here, again, Bullen sharply contrasts Fry's interest in the "formal qualities" of Byzantine art with Prichard's and Hulme's more spiritual understanding.[58] At the same time, Bullen refers to Prichard, who explicitly contrasted his own views on Byzantine art with those of Fry. Whereas he himself believed that "art cannot exist alone," and that it has to "attach itself to something with which it reconciles us," he stated that for Fry, art was "quite separate from life, in fact a parallel, rival life, and consists only of works of art."[59] What is interesting about Prichard's remark is his suggestion that art was something entirely autonomous for Fry; that it constituted, as it were, its own universe, completely detached from all other spheres of life.

The relationship between art and life is another central concern in Fry's work. In "An Essay in Aesthetics" from 1909, Fry indeed separates the practical and moral from the aesthetic sphere in life. Here, the aesthetic experience is reconfigured as a disinterested judgment in the sense that it does not inspire the person to practical or moral action.[60] As a result, art is defined as "an expression and a stimulus of [the] imaginative life, which is [. . .] freed from the binding necessities of actual existence."[61] This imaginative life is in turn pictured as its own sphere: contemplative, objective, with its own history, far removed from practical matters or issues of morality.[62] However, this separation from actual life and the domain of practical and moral action constitutes a virtue rather than a vice. The imaginative life, Fry writes, "reflects the highest aspirations . . . of which human nature is capable."[63]

In the introduction he wrote for the Oxford edition of *Vision and Design*, Bullen gives a summary of "An Essay in Aesthetics" in which he unpacks the most important of Fry's ideas. In this respect, his introduction forms an important subtext that may help us to understand the broader implications of his views on Fry's Byzantinism. Here, Bullen puts particular stress on the role of the imaginative life in Fry's aesthetics, stressing its importance as a separate

56 Bullen, "Byzantinism and Modernism 1900-14," 665–66.
57 Bullen, 667.
58 This contrast pertains particularly to the work of T.E. Hulme. See Bullen, 674.
59 Prichard qtd. in Bullen, 670.
60 Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics," 32–33.
61 Fry, 26.
62 Fry, 28.
63 Fry, 28.

sphere that does not offer a utilitarian, but "an intuitive, creative, synthesizing view of the physical world."[64] It is this particular view on the world that is expressed by art. As Bullen summarizes Fry's position, art was now "to be judged by the subtlety and power with which it communicated the emotions of the imaginative life. The means by which it did this were formal – movements, lines, and colours. Form . . . he concluded, was the expressive medium of the imaginative life."[65]

Although there is no reason to disagree with Bullen on this score, what he leaves open is the role of emotions in Fry's aesthetics. Although he seems to suggest that form functions as a medium through which "the emotions of the imaginative life" express themselves in art, he unfortunately does not explain what these emotions are or how to understand them. If anything, his characterization recalls Kant's aesthetics, which not only legitimate art as an autonomous domain, but also likewise construct the aesthetic experience as an essentially disinterested, synthesizing and contemplative activity of the mind. This association, moreover, is only strengthened when Bullen continues to explain, in true Kantian fashion, that the apprehension of form does not involve the interference of concepts or other associations of the mind.[66] This observation seems to exclude subject-matter as well. Although Bullen acknowledges that Fry was ambivalent with regards to subject-matter, he continues to stress that much of his criticism "fails to make any allowance for what is actually depicted in that third dimension."[67] By framing Fry's formalism in this particular way, Bullen, consciously or not, pushes Fry in the direction of Greenberg. Just as in Greenberg's modernism, it seems that Fry's aesthetics ultimately adds up to a high formalist position in which the aesthetic contemplation of art serves no other purpose but itself.[68]

If it is true that Bullen understands Fry's aesthetics as a formalism that concentrates only on the work's formal qualities at the exclusion of meaning – be it social, historical, or otherwise – this would most likely be reflected in his account of Fry's Byzantinism as well. And indeed, if we turn to Bullen's admittedly brief discussion of Fry's review of the *Zvenigorodskii Enamels* (**ill. 4**) in the *Burlington Magazine* from 1912, there can be no doubt that Bullen reduces the aesthetic experience from any historical import that it might have had for Fry. Isolating one particular section from the whole review, Bullen is particularly keen on showing that Fry understood the Byzantine enamels first and foremost as a prefiguration of modern art. Whereas

64 Bullen, "Introduction: Vision and Design," xiv.

65 Bullen, xv.

66 Bullen, xvii.. For the connection between Kant and Fry see Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde*, 15; Holt, "Postmodernism," 92; Rubin, *Roger Fry's 'Difficult and Uncertain Science,'* 2. For Kant's notion of aesthetic judgment as judgment without concepts, see Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 20:221.

67 Bullen, "Introduction: Vision and Design," xxiv.

68 David Carrier has argued that Greenberg's Kantianism consists in his adherence to, among others, the following criteria: First of all, the aesthetic is conceived as a distinct source of experience based upon feeling as intellectual comprehension; secondly, the aesthetic experience adheres to the formal properties of the artwork. See his "Greenberg, Fried, and Philosophy: American-Type Formalism," 461. Note how these properties correspond to Fry's understanding of the aesthetic experience as framed by Bullen.

previous generations would still have regarded the enamels as barbaric, as Bullen lets Fry explain, modern art instead taught us to see the "extreme modernity" of their artists.[69] Yet, in the way Bullen frames Fry's review, this modernity is completely taken out of its historical context. Whereas Fry's review returns to an argument first made in "Art Before Giotto" where he highlighted how certain restrictions allowed for the development of form and expression in Byzantine art, Bullen concentrates purely on the outcome of this process. By undoing Fry's stress on the "Byzantine detachment from nature" and its "abstract visual schemata" from its roots in historical scholarship, his review of the enamels can only appear as a projection of a modernist aesthetics on a historical form of art.[70]

The Limits of a High Formalist Byzantinism

If high formalism is the study of form at the exclusion of meaning, as Patrick McCreless suggested, my objection to Bullen's account stems not so much from what he actually says, but rather from what he excludes.[71] In other words, it is not that Bullen is evidently wrong in his treatment of Fry's Byzantinism but rather that he is incomplete. The impression one gets from his article is that Fry was only interested in the aesthetic value of Byzantine art and that his Byzantinism merely entailed a stress on its formal resemblance to modern art. Here, Bullen's discussion of Fry's review of the *Zvenigorodskii Enamels* is a case in point. Whereas Fry's review makes clear that formal analysis stands at the service of historical explication, Bullen turns Fry's formalism into an end in itself. Yet, by stripping Fry's engagement with Byzantine art from its historical dimension, the scope and importance of his Byzantinism is significantly reduced. Precisely by undoing it from its historical roots, Fry's Byzantinism shifts from being a historical to a mere formal category, ultimately resulting in a high formalism that is fully consumed by its own perception of the artwork in the present.

Another important lacuna in Bullen's account is that he leaves the role of emotions in Fry's formalism notoriously vague. In his introduction to *Vision and Design*, Bullen connected the aesthetic experience to emotions by means of the imaginative life but did not explain what these emotions actually were. Interestingly, it is particularly at this point that Bullen is rather critical of Fry in his introduction. Particularly the question of how form triggers particular emotions he calls "the least satisfactory part of his [Fry's] theory."[72] Nor does he mention that Fry is, if not exactly clear, then at least very suggestive on this point. However, by not further developing the role of the emotions – even though this may perhaps not be the most satisfactory part of his account – Bullen strips Fry's formalism from an entire register that gives it meaning. In fact, the expression of the artist and the corresponding emotions that it triggers in the viewer

69 Bullen, "Byzantinism and Modernism 1900-14," 672.
70 Bullen, 672.
71 McCreless, "Formalism, Fair and Foul."
72 Bullen, "Introduction: Vision and Design," xv.

are not only the elements that make the aesthetic experience meaningful in a non-trivial sense, but also make it possible for his formalism to establish a bridge between past and present.[73]

In a sense, these misconceptions about Fry's formalism had already begun in his lifetime. Bullen's account of Fry's Byzantinism draws partly on the accounts of Prichard and Hulme; two contemporaries of Fry who both contrasted his formal understanding of Byzantine art with their own more spiritual take. If anything, this shows how deeply rooted the misconceptions about Fry's formalism actually are. Confirming this impression, the British art historian Frances Spalding warned already in the 1980s that only "[f]ew critics have realized that Fry's writings prove him to have been a most unsatisfactory formalist."[74] However, with the recent resurgence of interest in formalism in the humanities, a renewed interest in Fry has made the historical blind spots of the (post)modernist understanding of Fry's work remarkably clear. What begins to emerge is a new understanding of Fry's formalism that attends to the role of history in his account. As Sam Rose recently argued, Fry's ideas indicate that "attending to and experiencing form could allow one to access the creative activity of its maker. On this view, as close analysis of his model of formalism reveals, careful inspection of the object opens up a prospective link between the present and the past."[75] This view is shared by Whitney Davis in his account of Fry. He understands Fry's formalism as an attempt to realize a psychological communication between the maker in the past and the formalist in the present, countering the postmodernist understanding by arguing that if Fry "really believed that [his formalism] had nothing to show us in the painting beyond simply showing us the painting, it would not exist."[76]

Reinterpreting Fry's Byzantinism

In the final part of this paper, it is my intention to expand on Bullen's article and see what a less reductive view of Fry's formalism means for his Byzantinism. In other words, how does our understanding of Fry's Byzantinism change when we no longer consider artistic expression in purely aesthetic terms, as Bullen does, but come to see it as a bridge that connects the viewer with that what "lies behind the painting's form in the painter's character, experience and culture?"[77]

As we have seen, Fry made the connection between Byzantine art and artistic expression on several occasions. In the introduction to his translation of the French symbolist Maurice Denis's essay on Cézanne from 1910, however, Fry expands on this framework by also including a reference to El Greco and Cézanne:

73 This understanding of the historicity of form in its capacity to establish an emotional bond between viewer and artist is one of the constants in Fry's views on art, informing his connoisseurship at the end of the nineteenth century just as much as his later critical work. See Rose, *Art and Form*, 21–39.

74 Spalding, "Roger Fry and His Critics in a Post-Modernist Age," 490.

75 Rose, *Art and Form*, 32.

76 Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture*, 53–54.

77 Davis, "Formalism as Art History."

> Was it not rather El Greco's earliest training in the lingering Byzantine tradition that suggested to him his mode of escape into an art of direct expression? And is not Cézanne after all these centuries the first to take up the hint El Greco threw out?[78]

Although Fry admittingly only speaks about Byzantine art on a very general level, the connection that he makes is an important one. In fact, the reference to Cézanne adds another layer to the historical dialectic between formalism and naturalism that we discussed in the first part of this paper. By referring to the formalism of Byzantine art and Post-Impressionism as artforms "of direct expression," Fry suggest that Byzantinism allows for a depth and intensity of expression that is not available in the naturalist tradition, thereby allowing the formalist artist to communicate his feelings and emotions directly to the viewer.

By defining Byzantinism as the formal art of expression, Fry expands on an argument that he already made ten years earlier in "Art Before Giotto." Here, it was the repetition of a limited number of compositional types that allowed Byzantine artists to perfect their technical skills over the centuries and further develop the material's expressive potential. This in sharp contrast to the naturalist tradition where the goal of an accurate representation of nature prevented the artist to express himself. This correlation between formalism and expression, on the one hand, and naturalism and accuracy on the other, forms one of the touchstones of Fry's aesthetics.[79] Indeed, so central is the idea that naturalism has hindered the artists from expressing themselves that the same idea informs Fry's forays into Islamic art, indigenous art and even children's drawings. Not borne down by the weight of the western naturalistic tradition, it is in these forms of "primitive art" that Fry encounters a whole new register of formal expression that had been unavailable to the European artist.[80] Also in "An Essay on Aesthetics," which is generally regarded as the definitive statement of his formalism, the emotional capacity of formalist art is defended against naturalistic standards of accuracy. Fry concludes that

> [w]hen the artist passes from pure sensations to emotions aroused by means of sensation, he uses natural forms, which are, in themselves, calculated to move our emotions and he presents these in such a manner that the forms themselves generate in us emotional states, based upon the fundamental necessities of our physical and physiological nature. The artist's attitude to natural form is, therefore, infinitely various according to the emotions he wishes to arouse.[81]

78 Fry, "Introductory Note to Maurice Denis, 'Cézanne,'" 78.

79 Reed, "Forming Formalism: The Post-Impressionist Exhibitions," 1996, 49.

80 The notion of "primitive" art is Fry's not mine. However, it should be clear by now that Fry regarded "primitive" art to be anything but primitive. In fact, he praises the art of Cézanne and the Post-Impressionists precisely for their return to primitivism. For Fry's forays into the mentioned art forms, see respectively his review "The Munich Exhibition of Mohammedan Art" (1910), and the essays "The Art of the Bushmen" (1910), "Ancient American Art" (1918) and "Negro Sculpture" (1920), all republished in *Vision and Design*. The essay "Children's Drawings" (1917) has been republished in *Roger Fry Reader*.

81 Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics," 39.

One of the misconceptions, following from an all-too-close association between Fry and Bell, is that Fry is against representation as such. We have also seen that Bullen hinted at this direction, but it cannot be argued that there is any disregard for representational content in Fry's formalism. In fact, in his lecture "Post-Impressionism" at the Grafton Gallery, Fry argues that "a certain amount of naturalism . . . is necessary, in order to evoke in the spectator's mind the appropriate associated idea."[82] On the other hand, however, representation of nature should not be art's main objective. It is a means to an end, not an end to a means.[83] This argument is central to not only Fry's rebuttal of Impressionism but also his defense of Post-Impressionism.[84] As Christopher Reed put it, Fry's defense of the Post-Impressionist painters consists precisely in his emphasis that the ultimate justification of art does not so much seem to rest on the artwork's form, but "on its maker's state of consciousness."[85]

Here, we have arrived at what is the most serious lacuna in Bullen's account, and one of the reasons that prevented him from appreciating the historical roots of Fry's formalism. In short, what Bullen insufficiently realizes in comparing Post-Impressionism with Byzantine art is that Fry does not only advocate the art of Cézanne, Gauguin and van Gogh for their appearance, but also for the emotions their work convey. A crucial aspect of Fry's formalism is his insistence that the artist's original emotions are not merely mediated by form, but can, to a certain extent, also be experienced by the viewer. It is exactly this connection that "An Essay in Aesthetics" seeks to make. After having explained that the formal qualities of order and variety are necessary components of the aesthetic experience, Fry continues:

> But in our reaction to a work of art there is something more – there is a consciousness of a peculiar relation of sympathy with the man who made this thing in order to arouse precisely the sensations we experience. And when we come to higher works of art, where sensations are so arranged that they arouse in us deep emotions, this feeling of a special tie with the man who expressed them becomes very strong. We feel that he expressed something which was latent in us all the time, but which we never realized, that he has revealed us to ourselves in revealing himself. And this recognition of purpose is, I believe, an essential part of the aesthetic judgment proper.[86]

Here, we have perhaps the clearest expression of the ultimate aim of Fry's aesthetics in which he explicitly aligns viewer and artist, present and past. Rather than merely advocating a high formalism that remains trapped within the present, the aesthetic experience entails for Fry a particular emotion that immediately ties the viewer with the artist. In other words, form is not

82 Fry, "Post-Impressionism," 103.

83 Fry rebukes one of his critics in "A Postscript on Post-Impressionism" by arguing that this critic "forgets that art uses the representation of nature as a means to expression, but that representation is not its end, and cannot be made a canon of criticism." Fry, "A Postscript on Post-Impressionism," 97.

84 Fry, "The Post-Impressionists," 82.

85 Reed, "Forming Formalism: The Post-Impressionist Exhibitions," 1996, 52.

86 Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics," 33.

merely something static that we perceive in the present, but is rather a quality of the artwork that transports us back in time, functioning as a mediator between viewer and artist, present and past.

In his article on Fry's Byzantinism, Bullen briefly refers to the Slade Lectures that Fry gave at the University of Oxford in 1911. It is here that we encounter one of the few instances where Bullen directly refers to "the mystical and symbolic" significance that Byzantine art may have had for Fry.[87] Quoting Fry's praise of the "supernatural splendour and the ineffable glory of the divinity" of the figures in the apse mosaic of SS. Cosma e Damiano in Rome, Bullen hints at the extraordinary nature of these statements, pointing to the influence of the more spiritual Prichard whom Fry had met earlier that year. However, rather than an aberration, as Bullen suggests, I argue that Fry's statement is completely compatible with the nature of his formalism. This becomes particularly apparent in Fry's discussion of the mosaics in the San Vitale in the same lectures. Although not discussed by Bullen, they offer a good illustration of how Fry's formalism works and the relationship it seeks to establish with the artist(s). Fry states, for instance, that the saints in the mosaics are "real celestial figures living and moving in a world of their own, as remote as possible from ours but grasped none the less with vivid certitude by the artist who reveals it."[88] Moreover, he notes that Byzantine art optimally provided the artist with a visual language that allowed him to "create figures with the impress of supernatural power."[89]

Although these statements may not seem particularly insightful when it comes to unlocking the iconographical meaning of the mosaics in San Vitale, nor explain the role that may have played within the liturgy, they offer an important insight in the way Fry's formalism actually works. What becomes immediately clear is that form functions for Fry as a portal to the past. It is by carefully contemplating the work's formal qualities that Fry seeks to penetrate the mind of the artist. He refers to the artist's piety ["the vivid certitude"], the artist's vision into a transcendent sphere, "as remote as possible from ours," and his capacity to spiritually "grasp" this world and "revealing" it through the medium of his art. In short, Fry's criticism aims to enter the mind of the artist in order to reconstruct how he transformed his vision, either spiritual or physical, into the material of his art. The reason why Fry can make these inferences is because of the formalist nature of Byzantine art. It is precisely because of its formalistic properties that Byzantine art is able to translate the artist's transcendent vision into material form. Not hindered by the obligation to copy nature, the Byzantine could give his artworks "the impress of supernatural power."[90]

What all of this amounts to is nothing less than a sanctification of form itself. For Fry, there is always already a spiritual element to form. What Bullen refused to mention when he brought up the topic of emotion in his introduction to *Vision and Design* was that "An Essay in Aesthetics" directly aligns the imaginative life with religion. What is crucial here is that Fry draws

87 Bullen, "Byzantinism and Modernism 1900-14," 672.

88 Berkowitz, "Bloomsbury's Byzantium and the Writing of Modern Art," 175.

89 Berkowitz, 175.

90 This is not to suggest that Byzantine style is uniform for Fry. His treatment of Byzantine art in "Art Before Giotto" shows that Fry is aware of its historical and geographical variations.

a parallel between religious and spiritual experience, thereby allowing the Christian experience of the artist to correspond with a more general spirituality in the viewer today. Moreover, he not merely suggests that "the fullness and completeness of the imaginative life" conforms "to an existence more real and more important than any that we know in mortal life," but also forms the true subject-matter of painting;[91] a point that is confirmed by Fry's essay "Blake and British Art" from five years later, where he explicitly states that "[e]motions aroused by form are more intimately connected with our fundamental, spiritual nature than any others."[92]

Returning to Fry's short remarks on San Vitale, it becomes clear that form is not only a bridge that connects the present-day viewer to the historical maker, but also that it is imbued with spiritual significance for Fry. Although the Christian worldview of the Byzantines is no longer available to us, Fry seems to suggest that the artist's mystical vision that originally gave rise to the artwork still is. It is through the apprehension of the work's formal qualities that the artist's revelatory vision can be recaptured as a more general spirituality today. In fact, this is exactly what the aesthetic experience amounts to for Fry. At the same time, it explains why the distinction between formalism and naturalism is absolutely central to his concerns. Whereas naturalism's dependency on nature relegates art's religious meaning to the level of content, leading to a symbolism that captures the transcendent by means of allegory, formalism is able to salvage art's spirituality through the sanctification of form itself. That is to say that whereas naturalism depends on an iconological system of signification in order to render its symbolism meaningful, and is therefore historically contingent, the spiritual character of formalist art is universal and available at all times.[93] At least, if we would have the eyes to see it. As a result, the historical significance of the mosaics of San Vitale does not consist in its subject-matter or iconography for Fry, but rather in its formal qualities. Whereas their subject-matter and iconography bespeak the Christian lifeworld of late antiquity, it is through their forms that that the mosaics still matter and speak to us. They have salvaged the artists' transcendent vision from which they originate. And they are what causes the aesthetic experience as the only means through which we are still able to partake in the artist's glory today.

Conclusion

Although it is now difficult to share Fry's conviction that the formal properties of the artwork offer unproblematic access to the mind and vision of the artist, the recent resurgence of interest in his work demonstrates that certain aspects of his formalism may be worth being salvaged. In this paper, however, it was not my intention to defend Fry's formalism, but rather to offer a more nuanced account of his Byzantinism than this topic has so far received. If

91 Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics," 26–27.

92 Fry, "Blake and British Art," 157.

93 Iconological as distinct from iconographical. I am referring here to the third level of meaning in Panofsky's interpretative scheme. See Panofsky, "On the Problem of Describing and Interpreting Works of the Visual Arts," 479.

anything, I hope to have made clear that Fry's Byzantinism should not be seen as a formal, but rather as a historical concept. A concept, moreover, that is intimately tied to Fry's own historical moment. Although the historical dialectic between formalism and naturalism is already detectable in his early historical writings, it takes his discovery of Cézanne to make him aware that a new formalist cycle had finally emerged. His notion of Byzantinism is inextricably tied to this realization. As a result of this, Byzantinism stands not only for the emergence of a new formalism, but also for the unique opportunity to rekindle art's spiritual essence after centuries of naturalism.

It is within this constellation that the role of the critic becomes all the more important. Although the history of art will take its inevitable course, it still depends on a cultured audience to rightly understand its development and to activate art's role in society. Although Fry would later come to admit that he had hopelessly failed in this respect, he no doubt saw it as his responsibility to teach the public not only how to understand, but, above all, how to see the visual arts.[94] This utopian belief that art's spiritual essence also harbors a transformative power for society is central to Fry's formalism. For him, form is always already a portal to something beyond the artwork, we only need the eyes and spirit to recognize it. By apprehending the formal qualities of art, the viewer is partly able to recreate the emotion or vision that originally inspired the artist in the present. It is this particular quality that the transformative power of both Byzantine and Post-Impressionist art consists of.

The central role that Byzantine art will soon come to play in the Omega Workshops of the Bloomsbury Group bespeaks this ambition. Founded by Fry, the Omega Workshops was an art and design studio where a group of artists created designs, partly inspired by Byzantine art, that were later to be utilized for social purposes.[95] Yet, an even better sense of the spiritual and transformative implications of his Byzantinism can perhaps be gathered when we finally return to Fry's vacation to Turkiye in the Spring of 1911. After having spent almost a week in Istanbul, the company moved on to Bursa, which immediately made an incredible impression on Fry:

> I think it's the most beautiful place I was ever in. Up above is Olympus all snow covered with red and purple sides, then this town of mosques and muddle scrambling down into a plain which is all dotted with pale golden and silver poplars and below seas of almond blossom.[96]

As Frances Spalding recounts in her biography of Fry, during their short stay in Bursa, where Vanessa would eventually suffer her miscarriage, Fry made several sketches of the city and its landscape that he would later, back in England, rework into large paintings.[97] Perhaps the most ambitious of these is his *Turkish Landscape* from 1911 (**ill. 5**). As Christopher Reed observed, the painting evokes in its faceted brushstrokes not merely the art of Cézanne, but

94 Reed, "Introduction: A Roger Fry Reader," 1–2.
95 For the Omega Workshops, see Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*.
96 Fry qtd. in Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 71.
97 Spalding, *Roger Fry, Art and Life*, 144.

also alludes to Byzantine mosaics in the ways it creates the illusion of depth through the recession of flat patterns receding into space. Moreover, in order to reinforce the connection with Byzantine art, Fry gave the painting a hand-painted frame, that with its brown and golden squares evokes the effect of the decoration that borders the depicted scenes in the Chora Church (**ill. 6**).[98] That Fry self-consciously aspired to the level of Byzantine and Post-Impressionist art did not remain unnoticed by his contemporaries. When the work was first exhibited in a one-man show in 1912, the critic Robert Ross, who had one year earlier been very critical of Fry's involvement with the Post-Impressionistic exhibition, was soon to liken Fry's work to that of the Post-Impressionists, remarking at the same time on its "Byzantine" origins: "Alone, probably of all the Post-Impressionists, French or English, Mr. Fry has actually been to Constantinople in order to obtain a new Mosaic dispensation for art."[99]

Christopher Reed has argued that *Turkish Landscape* is exemplary for Fry's ideal of a proto-Byzantine Modernism, and I tend to agree.[100] If anything, the painting realizes the emancipation of form from nature, which is the defining feature of Fry's Byzantinism and has been one of the central concerns throughout this paper. What started from Fry's astonishment with the Turkish landscape is here sublimated into a celebration of form in which matters of representational accuracy are subordinated to the formal demands of the composition.[101] It is in this way that Fry seeks to recapture his original vision of the landscape and present it to the viewer. Not so much a vision of natural landscape, but rather as a palette of colors, shapes and lines that amount in the eye of the painter to an almost mystical experience. At the same time, however, Fry's painting does the Byzantine icon all over again, albeit in contemporary form. Testifying as much to his fascination for the Turkish landscape as well as to his encounter with Byzantine art, the painting's sharp outlines filled with flat areas of gold-brownish color are reminiscent of the mosaics that Fry had seen in Istanbul and possibly elsewhere.[102] Recreating both of these experiences for the viewer, Fry's painting hovers between present and past, landscape and icon, Cézanne and Byzantium as the ultimate expression of what his Byzantinism amounts to.

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98 Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 69.
99 Ross qtd. in Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 69.
100 Reed, 69.
101 Spalding, *Roger Fry, Art and Life*, 147.
102 Spalding, 147.

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Illustration 2: Paul Cézanne, Mont Sainte-Victoire, ca. 1902–6, Oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Source: https://www.metmuseum.org.

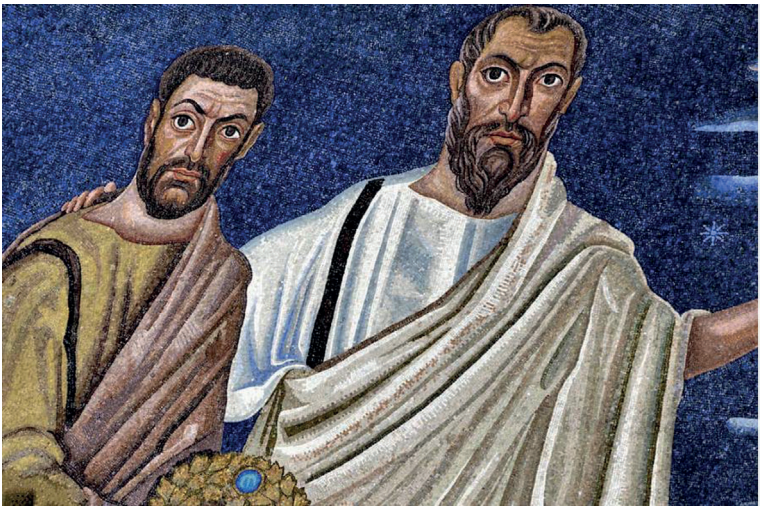

Illustration 3: *Second Coming of Christ* (detail), 526-30, Mosaic, Basilica di Santi Cosma e Damiano, Rome. Source: https://www.wgu.hu.

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Illustration 5: Roger Fry, *Turkish Landscape,* 1911, Oil on canvas. Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Source: Reed, Bloomsbury Rooms, 70.

Illustration 6: *Theodore Metokhites Presenting a Model of the Chora Church to Jesus Christ*, 1320, Mosaic, Kariye Camii, Istanbul, Turkiye. Source: https://www.wikiart.org.