

**The Italo-Cretan Religious Painting and The
Byzantine-Palaeologan Legacy**

İtalyan-Girit Dini Resimleri ve Bizans-Paleolog Mirası

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Abstract

This paper introduces examples of late- and post-Byzantine icon painting, while focusing on the style of the so-called Italo-Cretan school. The last phase of the Byzantine painting is a period of novelties both in style and in iconography. It differs from the Comnenian painting of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. New iconographical types appear mainly of Christ as the High Priest, the Virgin Mary as Zoodochos Pege; and the Unfading Rose and/or the Winged Image of St. John the Baptist as the Angel of Wilderness, etc. The masters of the Italo-Cretan school, which was founded on the island of Crete by the end of the fourteenth century, elaborated these iconographies and stylistic elements of the late-Byzantine period. The school remained active for about three hundred years and it represented the last of the centralized artistic movements in the Byzantine and/or Greek-Orthodox painting. Cretan school took its basic artistic inspirations not only from the Palaeologan painting but also from the printed material which was widely circulated at that time, and covered basically the engravings and paintings of the Italian Renaissance as well as of the Mannerist artists such as Marcantonio Raimondi, Giovanni Bellini. Consequently, the school acquired its own artistic means. Among others, the works are considered to be the final stage achieved in the Byzantine painting with artistic as well as some market value. The Greek-Orthodox monasteries carried out large-scale renovation- and restoration programs and in order to pursue these vast projects, the artists of the Cretan school were commissioned. Later, in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the importance of regional and local centers and the wandering painters increased. Illustrative examples of the Italo-Cretan school are also found in the archaeological museums in Turkey in the cities of Antalya, Tokat and Sinop.

Key words: Italo-cretan school, icon, Byzantine, palaeolog, Madre della Consolazione, Antalya.

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Öz

Makale geç Bizans ve Bizans sonrası dönemlere ait Yunan-Ortodoks resim sanatı örneklerini ele almaktadır. Bu çerçevede ondördüncü yüzyılın sonunda Girit adasında ortaya çıkmış olan İtalyan-Yunan resim okuluna odaklanılmıştır. Bizans resminin son döneminde üslup ve ikonografide yenilikler göze çarpmaktadır. Özellikle İsa “Baş Papaz”, Meryem “Hayat Pınarı”, “Solmayan Gül” ve “Çöl Meleği” olarak Kanatlı Vaftizci Yahya imgeleri, tasvirleri karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Girit Okulu devraldığı Palaeolog mirası devam ettirmiş ve geliştirmiş, öte yandan kısa süre içinde kendi resim üslubunu yaratmıştır. Okulun etkisi yaklaşık üç yüzyıl devam edip, onyedinci yüzyıla kadar sürmüştür. Resim anlayışı, üslupsal ve ikonografik özellikleri dikkate alındığı takdirde Yunan-Ortodoks resim sanatının ulaştığı nihai nokta olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Okulun önemli sanatçılarının Yunan-Ortodoks manastır restorasyon ve yenileme projelerinde de görevlendirildiklerini görmekteyiz. Bu büyük ölçekli projelerde sadece duvar resmi, fresk değil aynı zamanda ikonostaslarda yer alan ahşap panelleri de oluşturmuşlardır. Girit Okulu eserleri resme ait, üslup özelliklerinin yanı sıra ekonomik, pazar değerleri ile de öne çıkmaktadırlar. Onyedinci yüzyılda itibaren bölgesel ve yerel merkezler ile küçük atölyelerin ve gezgin ressamların artan etkisi gözlenmektedir. Türkiye’de arkeoloji müzelerinde, özellikle Antalya, Tokat ve Sinop müzelerinde, Girit okulunun üslupsal etkisi altında yapılmış ve özellikle Michael Damaskenos gibi okulun önemli sanatçılarının ikonografilerini yansıtan değerli örneklerle rastlanmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: İtalyan-Girit okulu, ikona, Bizans, palaeolog, *Madre della Consolazione*, Antalya

The Byzantine Legacy

The paper aims to introduce the last significant school of painting, which was nurtured by the Byzantine sources, the so-called *Italo-Cretan* school, whose presence and influence lasted for more than 300 years. Its works are perceived not just as mere objects of veneration but have also high artistic and marketing value. Representative examples are preserved in the museums and private collections in Russia, Greece, Italy and elsewhere. The Greek-Orthodox art as survived in Turkey also provides invaluable examples illustrating the far-reaching influence of the school both stylistically and iconographically.

Prior to the presentation of the *Italo-Cretan* school, it might be useful to provide an insight into the last phase of the Byzantine Painting. The last two hundred years of the Byzantine painting exhibit variations, vividness and new themes in style and in iconography.¹ Although the main iconographical types remain basically unchanged, novelties were introduced, such as the representation of Christ as the High Priest² (Fig.

¹ Weitzmann (1978) 19.

² Papamastoraki, Τ. Η ΜΟΡΦΗ ΤΟΥ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ-ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΡΧΙΕΡΕΑ, *Deltion* 17 (1993/94) 67-68. The article in Greek, which has a resume in English, deals with typos: The Representation of Christ as the Great archpriest. The iconographical type appears in the course of 14th century. It becomes very popular in the 15th and 16th centuries.



Figure 1. Archangel Michael, first half of the 14th century, Byzantine Museum, Athens (Photo after: Byzantine Museum, 1998, fig. 8)



Figure 2 Synaxis of Apostle, Constantinople, first half of the 14th Century, State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow (Photo after: Faith and Power, 2004, fig. 109)

4), the Virgin Mary as Zoodochos Pege or St. John the Baptist as Angel in the Wilderness. Mosaic icons of the period also show different exquisite craftsmanship.³ (Fig. 5) A painterly and narrating character is observed in the painting from the second half of the 13th century onward. The colour palette expands and compositions reveal rich colour combinations. Architecture and landscape are accentuated and make up an intrinsic part of the compositions. Some stylistic features are as follows: voluminous figures with small heads, expressive facial gestures, hovering garments, which give ultimately the impression of a boneless sweeping body.⁴ (Figs. 1, 2 and 3).

³ Demus (1960) 87-119. Examples are found in the Vatopedi monastery on Mount Athos, in the collections of Dumbarton Oaks, Washington. A well-known example is the Diptych with *Dodekaorton*, dating to ca. 1300-1350, in Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence. Nearly twenty miniature mosaic icons have survived from this period.

⁴ A classical example is the frescoes of the Chora Monastery (1321), Istanbul. Weitzmann (1978) 20; Underwood (1966). Other representative works of the period are the icon of Apostles and Evangelist Matthews, dating to ca. 1295, in Ochrid and a bilateral icon, attributed to the beginning of the 14th century, also in Ochrid. The icon shows the Annunciation and Maria in Typos *Psychosostria*. Moreover, the icon of Synaxis of Twelve Apostles, dating to the same century is preserved in Pushkin Museum, Moscow and exemplify stylistic traits of the late Byzantine painting. See also Lazarev (1995) 189. Exhibition catalog, New York (2004) 178-179, 189-190 also Weitzmann et. al. (1982).



Figure 3. The Evangelist Matthew, Thessalonica or Ochrid, ca. 1295, Icon Gallery, Ochrid, FYR-Macedonia
(Photo after: Faith and Power, 2004, fig. 111)



Figure 4. Christ as High Priest, Second half of the 17th Century, Historical Museum, Moscow
(Photo after: Chatzidakis, M. 1993, fig. 57)

The Post-Byzantine Period

As the western influence on painting gradually became evident from the 15th century onwards, icon production continued in northern- and central parts of Greece, on Peloponnes, on Crete and other Aegean and Ionian Islands after 1453.⁵ Among these centers, the *Italo-Cretan* school played an important role and left a permanent mark.⁶ Out of a total of ca. 300 painters, who were documented until 1453, ca. 100 are considered to be the members of to the Cretan school. Their existence and tradition continued well into the 18th century, and their artists worked also in the monasteries of Athos and Meteora, on Sinai and in Italy, especially in Venice.⁷

⁵ The icon production and centers on Balkans and in Russia will not be dealt with, thus it lies outside the scope of the present paper.

⁶ In the literature, the school is termed differently, however, they all refer to the same school, such as the Cretan school, Cretan-Venetian school etc.

⁷ Weitzmann (1978) 310-315; Rothmund (1985) 102-114; Cormack (1997) 176-177. From 1453 until 1526 ca. 120 Artists i.e. painters are known, who worked on the island in Heraklion.

Its style differed from the painterly approach of the Palaeologan period. Fine graphical contours dominated the works, while illustrating faces with certain dryness and rigidity. It may be termed as “*academic*” as it was based on rigid rules and prescriptions.⁸ On the other hand, customer’s taste and preferences played a decisive role while generating their works.⁹ Soon in the 16th century, the painters of the Cretan school dominated and overshadowed the works of the newly emerging regional, local ateliers. Their models then were widely disseminated by these regional artists.

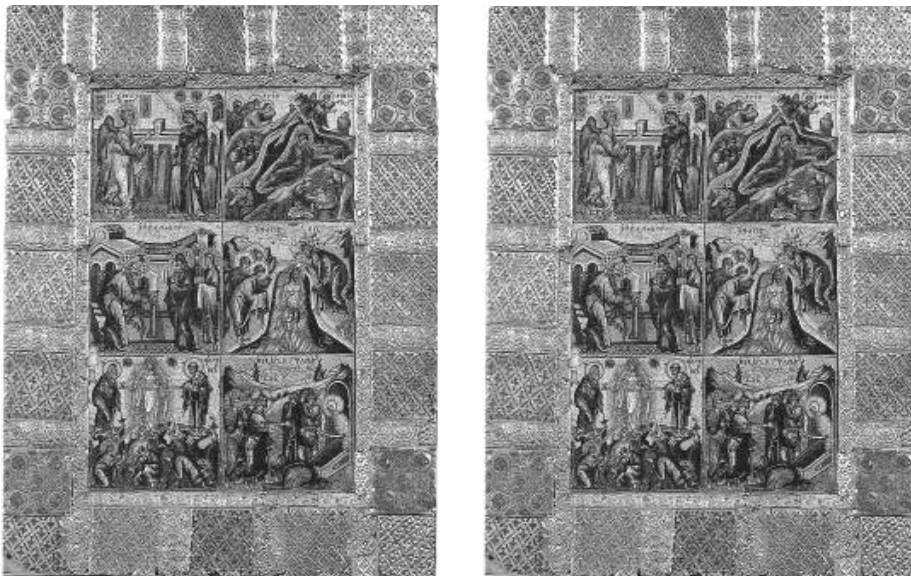


Figure 5. The Twelve Feast Cycle, Dodekaorton, Constantinople (1300-1350), Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence
(Photo after: Faith and Power, 2004, fig. 129)

The Italo-Cretan School

The major figures in the early years of the school in the 15th century were Angelos Akotantos (active in 1458-1450, in Heraklion), with his brother John Akotantos.¹⁰

⁸ In this context, the adjective “*academic*” refers to the rigidity and inflexibility in painting achieved through the technical perfection.

⁹ Cormack (1997). To be mentioned is the amount of icons in certain *Maria typus* supplied in order to meet the demand.

¹⁰ Gouma-Peterson (1991) 153. Angelos Akotantos introduces elements of contemporary western art in a decent way. It is documented that John Akotantos was the mentor of prominent painters such as, Andreas Ritzos. His painting handbooks serve for the latter generations extensively. Chatzidakis (1993) 5.



Figure 6. The Nativity, 15th century, former Volpi collection (no. 62), Peratikos collection, London (Photo after: Faith and Power, 2004, fig. 100)



Detail, Figure 6



Figure 7. The Winged St. John the Baptist, by Angelos, Mid-15th century, Byzantine Museum, Athens (Photo after: Byzantine Museum, 1998, fig. 28)

Nikolas Philanthropenos (active in 1375-1440), born in Constantinople, worked as mentor on the island in Heraklion. Andreas Ritzos¹¹ (Fig. 11) (active in 1451-1492) belonged to a painters-family and from 1420 until 1571 the three generations took

¹¹ Gouma-Peterson (1991) 153. A well-known example is the panel painting in typus the Virgin Mary of Passion. Ritzos painted for the Monastery of St. John on Patmos two large sized icons of the enthroned Virgin and Christus.

an active part in the shaping up of the art scene in Heraklion. Among them, his son Nikolas Ritzos (active 1460-1507) and his grandson Maneas (1528-1571) are outstanding painters of the *Italo-Cretan* school.

On the one hand, the painters studied and used the Palaeologan repertory, style and iconography; on the other hand, they introduced and modified elements and/or motives from the corpus of Western Europe. They soon were able to develop their own refined technique and acquired a distinguishing solid character. General attributes of these strongly stylised and hybrid¹² paintings could be given as;

1. the symmetrically and geometrically ordered drapery of the garments.
2. a technical perfection in colouring and in the overall painting that is achieved through the plain, even surfaces.
3. the use of parallel fine white lines, particularly on faces. (Fig. 6)



Figure 8. Madre della Consolazione, by Nikolaos Tzafouris, second half of the 15th Century Paulos Kanellopoulos, Collection, Athens
(Photo after: Faith and Power, 2004, fig. 94)



Figure 9. Mary Hodegetria with adoring angels, 16th Century, by Michael Damaskenos, Hellenic Institute, Venice
(Photo after: Chatzidakis, *Icônes*, 1962, fig. 27)

Iconographically, they depended upon the Italian models and patterns to certain extent as in the case of *Madre della Consolazione*, witnessed since the 1500s.¹³ This

¹² Chatzidakis (1993) 5f.

¹³ Chatzidakis (1993) 21; Baltoyanni (1994)



Figure 10. Apostles Peter and Paul, 16th Century, by Michael Damaskinos, Hellenic Institute, Venice
(Photo after: Chatzidakis, *Icones*,



Figure 11. Apostles Peter and Paul, 16th Century, by Michael Damaskinos, Hellenic Institute, Venice
(Photo after: Chatzidakis, *Icones*,

iconographical type of the Virgin appears to have been established after the middle of the 15th century, and possibly by the Cretan painter Nikolaos Tzafouris. (Fig. 8) During the second half of the 15th century, popularity and demand of icons painted in *maniera greca* increased. The clients were mainly from Crete, Venice and from elsewhere in Europe.¹⁴ In the 16th century, Greek-Orthodox monasteries undertook significant renovation- and restoration programs and in order to pursue these vast projects artists i.e. painters were employed.¹⁵ An example is the Cretan monk Theophanes Strelitzas¹⁶ (died in 1559), who carried out the wall paintings of the church of Hagios Nikolaos Anapafsas, on Meteora in ca. 1520, he later contributed to the painting of frescos of the Stavronikita monastery, on Mount Athos, (1527-1558) and of the Great Lavra. He painted also at least twelve icons for the renovated iconostasis.

¹⁴ Gouma-Peterson (1991) 154; Cormack (1997) 167-168.

¹⁵ Gouma-Peterson (1991) 156.

¹⁶ Chatzidakis (1993) 15f. The works basically the engravings of Marcantonio Raimondi (ca. 1475-1534) and Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1430-1516) were sources for Theophanes. Gouma-Peterson (1991) 156; see also Chatzidakis (1969/70) 311-352. Theophanes Strelitzas was a productive painter whose influence lasted until the 17th century, and his works served as models with reference to their iconographical and stylistic features.



Figure 12. The Winged St. John the Baptist, ascribed to Michael Damaskinos (1555-1591), Church of St. Matthew of Sinai, Heraklion, Crete
(Photo after: Faith and Power, 2004, fig. 241)

It is the 16th century that the western influence on the works of the Cretan artists became more visible. The intensive circulation of prints and engravings of the Renaissance and Mannerist painters expedites the process. The Cretan painters copied and adopted mostly the works of Marcantonio Raimondi and Giovanni Bellini, eventually the stylistical elements from the West prevail in their paintings. An illustrative Cretan painter of the phenomenon is Michael Damaskinos (active 1570-1591). His works, though occasionally signed, are strongly influenced by the contemporary Italian painting (Fig. 9, 10 and 12) and currently are preserved in museums and private collections on Crete, Corfu, Patmos, in Athens and Venice, where he also spent some of his time. The last years of the *Italo-Cretan* style, which survived well into the 17th century, could be best observed and studied in the works of the painters Emmanuel Tzanes (active 1655-1690) (Fig. 15) and Emmanuel Lambardos (active 1593-1647) (Fig 18).

As stated above, the printed material, mostly printed engravings and black and white or coloured paper icons, gained popularity, and their circulation has been intensified in the 16th and 17th centuries. These so-called paper icons are

produced in the workshops and ateliers in Istanbul, Venice, Vienna, and Leipzig and in the monasteries on Mount Athos.¹⁷ In the following century, the transformation and expansions in the world economy and consequently the emergence of a new middle class with their respective taste and preferences also altered the nature of icon production. Meanwhile, as a replacement for a central school and/or movement, etc. various regional, local ateliers in small towns and villages of Chalkidiki, Epirus, on Peloponnes and elsewhere were developed. Moreover, the number of itineraries i.e. the wandering painters, had already increased considerably in the second half of the 18th century.¹⁸

¹⁷ Papastratos, D. *Greek Orthodox Religious Engravings, 1665-1899*. Athens 1990.

¹⁸ Tourta (1991) 235-252.

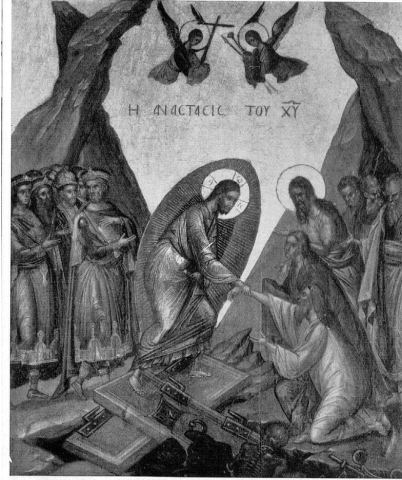


Figure 13. *Anastasis*, 16th Century, by Michael Damaskinos Hellenic Institute, Venice
(Photo after: Chatzidakis, *Icônes*, 1962, fig. 43)



Figure 14. *Anastasis*, Inv. No. 34.2.82, Museum, Antalya
(Photo taken by Sercan Yandım with the permission of Antalya Museum, 2001)



Figure 15. *Synaxis of Archangels*, Emmanuel Tzanes, 1666, Byzantine Museum, Athens
(Photo after: Byzantine Museum, 1998, fig. 75)



Figure 16. *Synaxis of Archangels*, Museum, Inv. No. 23.2.82, Antalya
(Photo after: Photo taken by Sercan Yandım with the permission of Antalya Museum, 2001)



Figure 17. The Winged St. John the Baptist, 16th century, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

(Photo after: Chatzidakis, M. 1993, fig. 14)



Figure 18. The Evangelist John with his secretary Prochoros, 1602, by Emmanuel Lombardes, Hellenic Institute, Venice

(Photo after: Chatzidakis, Icônes,

They were especially coming from Macedonia and Epirus and were commissioned for a wide range of activities such as the paintings of iconostasis, covering of the wall-and ceilings with frescoes in the churches and also in the monasteries, especially in Thessaly, on Mount Athos, in Peloponnes, and on the Aegean and Ionian islands.¹⁹ These painters sought their inspirations mostly in the Byzantine tradition and post-Byzantine popular, i.e. provincial art.

Conclusion

In the course of the 16th century, a considerable demand for the panels made in *maniera greca* had already begun and flourished mostly by the large-scale commissions of the Greek-Orthodox monasteries. The Cretan painters initiated also some of the minor, local centers on the Aegean islands from the 17th century onwards, the well-known examples of which are Anthonios Skordilis on Milos, Seriphos, Siphnos and Chrystodoulos Kallergis on Mykonos. The Italo-Cretan school and its influence survived until the 18th century and by then they were active on Peloponnes and in Epirus and their works attracted patrons and donors with different origins. Their works were sent to Cyprus, Patmos, or as far as to Sinai.

¹⁹ Gouma-Peterson, Th. The Survival of Byzantinism in 18th Century Greek Painting, in: *Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin*, vol. 29 (1971) 11-61; Tourta (1991) 235-252; Clogg (1992) 57.

In the archaeological museums in Turkey, there are demonstrative examples of both the iconographical models and stylistic features put forward by the Cretan painters. Two representative panels, both of which are from the archaeological museum in Antalya, could be presented. First one is the icon showing Descent into Limbo, *Anastasis*, which resembles the *typus* provided by the painter Michael Damaskenos and/or his closest artistic circle (Figs. 13 and 14). Second one is the icon of Synaxis of Archangels, an iconographical type that became very popular in 16th and 17th centuries (Figs 15 and 16). However, the general character of Greek-Orthodox religious painting in the 18th and 19th centuries became dominantly local and provincial, at the same time *Byzantinising*.

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