'Image-Paradigms' as a Category of Mediterranean Visual Culture

A Hierotopic Approach to Art History

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At the previous Art History congress, in Montreal, I had the honour of presenting a concept of hierotopy, thereby opening up a new field of studies, namely the making of sacred spaces considered to be a particular form of human creativity.[1] The significant phenomenon of spatial icons has been discussed in this context. This phenomenon stands for iconic (that is mediative) images not depicted figuratively but presented spatially, as a kind of vision that extends beyond the realm of flat pictures and their ideology, still dominant in our minds and preventing us from establishing an adequate perception of hierotopical projects.[2] It is crucial to recognise and acknowledge the intrinsic spatial nature of iconic imagery as a whole: in Byzantine minds, the icon was not merely an object or a flat picture on a panel or wall, but also a spatial vision emanating from the picture and existing between the image and its beholder. This basic perception defined the iconic character of space in which various media were interacting. From this point of view, the creation of a sacred space is organisation of concrete spatial imagery that can be considered typologically (that is according to a type of representation and its perception) as something quite similar to Byzantine icons.[3]

This artistic phenomenon, as I have argued elsewhere, creates a methodological difficulty, as it contradicts the basic principle of traditional art history—the opposition of 'image versus beholder'.[4] The relationship between the image and the beholder can be most complicated, yet their structural opposition presents a pivot for all art historical discussions. The most characteristic feature of hierotopic phenomena, however, is the participation of the beholder in the spatial image.[5] The beholder finds himself within the image as its integral element along with various representations and effects created by lights, scents, gestures and sounds.[6] Furthermore, the beholder, as endowed with collective and individual memory, unique spiritual experience and knowledge, in a way participates in the creation of spatial imagery. Simultaneously, the image exists in objective reality as a dynamic structure, adapting its elements according to an individual perception—some aspects of the spatial entity can be accentuated or temporarily downplayed. Creators of sacred spaces kept in their minds the factor of the prepared perception, connecting all intellectual and emotional threads of the image concept into a unified whole.

It is noteworthy that Byzantine 'spatial icons', most unusual in a modern European context, have a typological parallel in the contemporary art of performances and multimedia installations, which have nothing to do with the Byzantine tradition historically or symbolically.[7] What they do share in common is the basic principle of absence of a single source of image, the imagery being created in space by numerous dynamically changing forms.[8] In this situation, the role of the beholder acquires major significance, as he actively participates in the re-creation of the spatial imagery. All the differences of the contents, technologies and aesthetics notwithstanding, we may speak about one and the same type of perception of images.

Recent studies of spatial icons and of hierotopy in general have required serious reconsideration of existing methodology and elaboration of the newly introduced notions, one of which I am going to discuss here. It seems to be of major importance for the understanding of a number of phenomena of Mediterranean art and its fluid borders.

I will argue that in many cases the discussion of visual culture cannot be reduced to a positivist description of artefacts or to the analysis of theological notions. Some phenomena can be properly interpreted only on the level of image-ideas—I prefer to term them 'image-paradigms'—which do not coincide with the illustrative pictures or ideological conceptions and, it seems, may become a special notion and a useful *instrumentum studiorum* that helps to adopt spatial imagery into the realm of our

mostly positivist discourse. The image-paradigm is not connected with an illustration to any specific text, although it does belong to a continuum of literary and symbolic meanings and associations. This type of imagery is quite distinct from what we may call an iconographic device. At the same time, the image-paradigm belongs to visual culture—it is visible and recognisable—but it is not formalised in any fixed state, either in a form of the pictorial scheme or in a mental construction. In this respect the image-paradigm resembles the metaphor that loses its sense in retelling or in its deconstruction into parts. For the Mediterranean world, such an irrational and simultaneously 'hieroplastic' perception of the phenomena could be the most adequate evidence of their divine essence. It does not require any mystic perception but rather a special type of consciousness, in which our distinct categories of artistic, ritual, visual and spatial are woven into the inseparable whole. This form of vision determines a range of symbolic structures as well as numerous specific pictorial motifs; in addition, it challenges our fundamental methodological approach to the image as illustration and flat picture.

In previous years I have tried to present some reconstructions of particular image-paradigms that existed in the Byzantine world. Among them the image-paradigm of heavenly Jerusalem was the most perceptible, existing in practically every church where the heavenly city was not formally depicted but appeared as a kind of vision, created by various media that included not only architecture and iconography but particular rites, liturgical prayers, the dramaturgy of lighting and the organisation of incense and fragrance. It is clear that the level of sophistication and aesthetic quality of the project were quite different in the Byzantine capital from that in a remote village, but the principle of the image-paradigm remained crucial in the concept of a sacred space. Heavenly Jerusalem was probably the most powerful image-paradigm, but certainly not an isolated one. We may speak about the entire category of Byzantine images neglected for a long time. Some more specific examples, such as image-paradigms of the blessed city of Edessa or of the priesthood of the Virgin, have been recently revealed and discussed.[9]

Now I would like to deal with another characteristic example of the Mediterranean image-paradigms that played a great role in the Jewish, Christian (Byzantine, Latin, Coptic) and Islamic cultures: the paradigm of the iconic curtain, or veil. I would like to demonstrate that the curtain was a powerful vehicle of the Mediterranean culture, definitive of the iconic imagery from the very beginning. It goes back to the prototype of

the Temple veil and to the Jewish and Christian tradition of its theological interpretation.[10]

The first mention of the veil (*paroket*) of the Tabernacle's separating the holy place from the Holy of Holies and screening the Ark and the seat of God indicates that it was a kind of image, 'the skilled work', woven from blue, purple, crimson and linen and embroidered with cherubim.[11] The Jewish tradition perceived the veil as a symbolic representation of cosmos and eternity.

Josephus, writing at the end of the first century AD, stated that the veil, which had been embroidered with flowers and patterns 'in Babylonian work', depicted a panorama of the heavens. He explained that the colours woven together had symbolic meaning: the scarlet signified fire; the linen, earth; the blue, air; and the purple, sea. The veil thus represented the matter, the substance, of the visible creation and the universe.[12] Later Jewish mystic theology suggested that the veil was also an image of the sacred time simultaneously representing the past, the present and the future. The Third Book of Enoch describes how Ishmael the high priest was taken up into heaven and shown all the history of the world on the reverse side of the veil, as on a great screen.

Philo gave the same explanation of the colours of the veil as symbolising the four elements of the world. A crucial point of his interpretation is that the veil was the boundary between the visible and the invisible creation. The world beyond the veil was unchanging and without a temporal sequence of events, but the visible world outside the veil was a place of change.[13] This statement seems to me of great significance for the tradition of icon worship and deserves more careful analysis. Philo not only introduced an opposition between the earthly and the heavenly worlds, but also defined a concept of interaction between these two sacred realms, the holy and the most holy, which belong to different ontological models. The most holy realm, placed beyond the veil and existing outside time and matter, creates the eternal pattern for the changing sacred environment in front of the veil. Some traces of Philo's vision can be found in the Byzantine theology of icons. The holy image, following the curtain paradigm, is not just 'the door to the heavens' (this traditional interpretation seems too simplified), but also the living spatial and transparent boundary connecting two heterogeneous sacred realms. It provides an explanation of the special concept of time and space that we may discover while contemplating icons. From this point of view, every icon could be interpreted as a curtain signifying the boundary of the dynamic space of prayer, and unifying the

beholder and image in a space of unchangeable divine presence.

In the Christian tradition, the tearing of the temple veil (*katapetasma*) at the moment of Christ's death becomes a new source of interpretation.[14] According to Saint Paul's epistle to the Hebrews, the veil is designated the flesh of the Lord: 'The new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain (*katapetasma*), that is through his flesh'.[15] There are some important aspects derived from the Christian vision of the veil. The eternity of Christ, who passed beyond the veil and thus beyond time, has been confirmed. Through the veil torn in two he opened the Holy of Holies and a way to salvation to the faithful. The Temple curtain became an image of his redemptive sacrifice with its liturgical connotations. The veil as the flesh of Christ was one of the most influential and widespread symbols in Christian culture. A theological interpretation of the apocryphal story of the Virgin weaving the Temple veil became a popular theme of early Byzantine hymnography and homiletics, in which the weaving came to be compared with the incarnation of the Logos.[16]

From early Christian times onwards, the veil was perceived as a powerful iconic image having various connotations, ranging from the idea of the incarnation to that of the Eucharistic sacrifice. In contrast to the Jewish tradition, a *topos* of the open curtain was highly emphasised. It seems quite natural, then, that in the period of iconoclasm, the Temple veil became one of the arguments of the icon worshippers presented at the Second Council of Nicaea: 'Thus, this Christ, while visible to men by means of the curtain, that is his flesh, made the divine nature—even though this remained concealed—manifest through signs. Therefore, it is in this form, seen by men, that the holy Church of God depicts Christ'.[17] This vision was incorporated into the contemporary iconography.

The 'Parousia miniature' from the ninth-century Vatican manuscript of Christian topography[18] provides the most characteristic example, and has been recently discussed by Herbert Kessler.[19] The composition of the Second Coming is actually structured by the Tabernacle, following a 2-part scheme used for the Ark of the Covenant in the Jewish tradition and later in Byzantine iconography. The arched upper part represents the Holy of Holies; the rectangular lower part, the holy place, which is interpreted as a tripartite hierarchy of the heavenly, earthly and underground beings. Christ is represented in the Holy of Holies in the background of a magnificent gold cloth decorated with a trellis pattern filled with fleurs-de-lis. The ornamentation was probably inspired by Josephus's description of the Temple veil embroidered with flowers and patterns. As Kessler has noticed, the same decoration of the veil appeared in the depiction of the entrance to the Tabernacle in other miniatures of Christian topography.

The curtain is at once the background and the major iconic representation, symbolically inseparable from the image of Christ, because, in Pauline and patristic interpretation, it is the flesh of Christ. Through Christ and the Temple veil, the viewer may gain access to heaven, represented by the blue background. This is a visual embodiment of the New Testament's words about 'the new and living way' that Christ opened for us to the Holy of Holies when the veil was torn in two at the moment of the redemptive sacrifice. The idea of the entrance to heaven is emphasised by the Greek inscription above the Vatican Parousia: 'You have my Father's blessings' and, further, according to Saint Matthew, 'Come, enter and possess the kingdom that has been ready for you since the world was made'.[20] The creator of the miniature suggests the fundamental idea of all icons perceived as mediating realms. In this respect, the icon of the 'Christ veil' operates as an ideal iconic image. It is noteworthy that the curtain is closed and open at the same time. The idea of boundary seems crucial, but the possibility of crossing this threshold is no less significant. Open, the curtain is a sign of passage and transfiguration, in which the idea of *theosis*, or deification, is realised as a dynamic process, a dialectic interaction of the holy and the most holy realms with the active participation of the beholder. We may assume that the curtain as a potentially transparent sacred screen can be regarded as a basic principle of iconicity.

It is important to note that the iconic curtain has not received a formalised pictorial scheme in iconography. Most probably, Byzantine image makers deliberately avoided limiting the all-embracing symbolism of the veil to a particular pattern but rather used it as a recognisable paradigm appearing each time in a new form.

The image-paradigm of the iconic curtain has been revealed through real curtains and veils hanging in actual Christian churches. In Syrian sources from the fourth century onwards, there are several testimonies to the use of altar curtains, which were conceived as an interactive system of veils concealing, respectively, the door of the sanctuary barrier, the ciborium and the holy gifts on the altar table. Theologians identified these curtains with the Temple veils—the symbolism is reflected not merely in commentaries but even in the terminology of the church spaces divided by curtains. The evidence of written sources is

confirmed by archaeological data indicating traces of hangings in the Early Syrian sanctuaries.

In one of the oldest Byzantine liturgical commentaries, ascribed to Sophronius of Jerusalem, it is said that the *kosmites* (architrave of the sanctuary barrier) is a symbolic image of the *katapetasma* (Temple veil). Multiple sources mention curtains in different contexts, such as imperial ceremonies or miraculous events in Constantinople. The Byzantine accounts fit well with the contemporary evidence from the *Liber Pontificalis* on the numerous iconic curtains presented by Roman popes to the main basilicas of their city.[21] The most characteristic example is Paschal I (817–24) adorning Santa Maria Maggiore in 822–24.[22] He presented to this church several dozen textiles belonging to different types of decorations (among others 'the clothes of Byzantine purple'); most were for the altar area of the basilica. There were at least three different sets of iconic curtains decorating spaces between columns in the sanctuary barriers. A year later, Pope Paschal added an extra set of iconic curtains representing another cycle: Christ's Passion and Resurrection.

Another group of curtains displayed on that basilica's great beam was connected with the sanctuary barrier's decoration. The most significant among them was 'a great veil of interwoven gold, with 7 gold-studded panels and a fringe of Byzantine purple'. According to Krautheimer, this large veil with seven images displayed beneath the triumphal arch was for the wider central opening of the pergola (barrier)[23]; thus, it had to serve as an actual replica of the Temple veil over the sanctuary door. This great curtain hung in juxtaposition to another placed at the entrance to Santa Maria Maggiore, 'a great Alexandrian curtain, embellished and adorned with various representations'. The two veils engaged in a visual and symbolic dialogue with a third, situated on the same horizontal axis, probably, behind the throne in the opening of the central arcade. It is noteworthy that in many cases the *Liber Pontificalis* indicates the manner of making the curtains, emphasising their being manufactured from four different materials 'of fourfold-weave'. The symbolism of this technology seems quite clear: it connects Roman textiles with the Temple veil that was made of blue, purple, crimson and linen.

I have mentioned just a few examples of the elaborate system of curtains creating a multi-layered structure of sacred screens, dynamic, changing and interacting. We can imagine that Santa Maria Maggiore, as well as other Roman churches, looked much more like a cloth tabernacle than a stone church. A good impression of this imagery can be found in the seventh-century miniature of the Ashburnham Pentateuch[24], representing the Old Testament Tabernacle as a Christian church with the eight different types of curtains arranged as a system of sacred screens. The evidence of the *Liber Pontificalis* allows us to see in this iconographic pattern a reflection of contemporary church interiors, embodying the most powerful image-paradigm, which for centuries played such a great role in the Mediterranean visual culture, extending beyond the fluid borders of the West and East. It was not an illustration of a particular theological notion, although it had several symbolic meanings deeply rooted in Jewish tradition and its Christian interpretation, revealing in every church the imagery of the Tabernacle.

The all-embracing symbolism of the iconic curtain can be found in almost all church decoration, presented on different levels, from a concrete pictorial motif to a general structure. In this connection we should examine the well-known iconographic theme of curtains in the lower register of church walls. Curtains appeared in early Byzantine art (in the murals of the Bawit monasteries and of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome), and they became an established device in the middle Byzantine period. Scholars have suggested different interpretations of this motif. In my view, however, its connection with the Temple veil symbolism seems the most probable. Some new arguments can be provided. The representations of curtains were accumulated in the sanctuary area, while in the naos, plates imitating marble were depicted. On the curtains, represented in the altar of the twelfth-century Russian church of Saints Boris and Gleb in Kideksha, we find a pattern in the form of a candlestick with seven branches, an iconography pointing to the Tabernacle and the Temple service. However, we find the most striking example in the decoration of the mid thirteenth-century upper church of the Boyana monastery near Sofia, Bulgaria. An original inscription that has survived on the curtains in the lower register of the northern wall clearly identifies the meaning of the image: '*kourtina rekoma zavesa*' ('*kourtina*, called the veil'). So, the curtains in the lower zone are not the ornamental margins but an integral part of an ancient symbolic concept that goes back to early Byzantine church iconography. Going a step further in our interpretation, the holy figures above the curtains can be viewed as the images on the veil and beyond the veil, coming from heaven and becoming visible and accessible because the Temple veil was opened forever by the sacrifice of Christ. In this way, the entire pictorial space of the church can be identified with the iconic curtain, as

I have earlier suggested, in the case of Justinian's Hagia Sophia, with the mosaic vaults recalling the ornamental veils, and of Roman basilicas wherein the image of the Tabernacle curtain received a key position at the top of the altar apse.

The imagery that I have attempted to disclose and discuss in this paper leads to an important methodological statement: the iconic curtain as well as some other important phenomena of Mediterranean visual culture cannot be described in traditional terms of art history. They challenge our fundamental methodological approach to the image as illustration and flat picture, being quite distinct from what we may call iconography. The artists, operating with various media including standard depictions, could create in the minds of their experienced beholders the most powerful images, which were visible and recognisable in any particular space, yet not figuratively represented as pictorial schemes. These images revealed specific messages, being charged with profound symbolic meanings and various associations. At the same time, they existed beyond illustrations of theological statements or ordinary narratives. So, this is a special kind of imagery, which requires, in my view, a new notion of image-paradigms. The introduction of this notion into contemporary art history, and humanities in general, will allow us to acknowledge a number of phenomena, not only 'medieval' and 'Mediterranean', which define several symbolic structures as well as numerous concrete pictorial motifs. We still do not have adequate terminological language to use with image-paradigms, but it seems clear that beyond image-paradigms our discussion will remain foreign to a medieval way of thinking and any analysis would be limited to merely the external fixation of visual culture.

NOTES

1   Alexei Lidov, 'Hierotopy: The Creation of Sacred Spaces as a Form of Creativity and Subject of Cultural History', in Alexei Lidov (ed.), *Hierotopy: The Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, Indrik, Moscow, 2006, pp. 32–58.

2   Alexei Lidov, 'Spatial Icons: The Miraculous Performance with the Hodegetria of Constantinople', in Lidov, *Hierotopy*, pp. 349–72; 'The Flying Hodegetria: The Miraculous Icon as Bearer of Sacred Space', in E Thunoe & G Wolf (eds), *The Miraculous Image in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance*, 'L'Erma' di Bretschneider, Rome, 2004, pp. 291–321; 'Leo the Wise and the Miraculous Icons in Hagia Sophia', in E Kountura-Galaki (ed.), *The Heroes of the Orthodox Church: The New Saints, 8th to 16th Century*, Institute for Byzantine Research, Athens, 2004, pp. 393–432; 'The Miracle of Reproduction: The Mandylion and Keramion as a Paradigm of

Sacred Space', in C Frommel, G Morello & G Wolf (eds), *L'Immagine di Cristo dall' Acheropiita dalla mano d'artista*, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticano, Vatican City, Rome, 2006, pp. 17–41.

3   For this phenomenon, see Alexei Lidov, 'The Creator of Sacred Space as a Phenomenon of Byzantine Culture', in M Bacci (ed.), *L'artista a Bisanzio e nel mondo cristiano-orientale,* Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, 2007, pp. 135–76; and 'Spatial Icons'.

4   Lidov, *Hierotopy*, pp. 40–3.

5   Lidov, 'The Flying Hodegetria', pp. 319–21; Lidov, 'Spatial Icons', pp. 355–7; Nicoletta Isar, 'The Vision and Its "Exceedingly Blessed Beholder": Of Desire and Participation in the Icon', *RES: The Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 38, 2000, pp. 56–72.

6   For some recently discussed characteristic examples, see Annemarie Weyl Carr, 'Taking Place: The Shrine of the Virgin Veiled by God in Kalopanagiotis, Cyprus', pp. 388–408; and Elka Bakalova & Anna Lazarova, 'The Relics of St Spyridon and the Making of Sacred Space on Corfu: Between Constantinople and Venice', pp. 434–64, in Lidov, *Hierotopy*.

7   Nicoletta Isar, 'Vision and Performance: A Hierotopic Approach to Contemporary Art', in Lidov, *Hierotopy*, p. 465.

8   Nicoletta Isar, 'Chorography (Chôra, Chôros, Chorós)—A Performative Paradigm of Creation of Sacred Space in Byzantium', in Lidov, *Hierotopy*, pp. 59–90.

9   Alexei Lidov, 'Heavenly Jerusalem: The Byzantine Approach', in B Kuehnel (ed.), *The Real and Ideal Jerusalem in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Art*, Center for Jewish Art, Jerusalem, 1997–98, pp. 341–53; 'The Miracle of Reproduction'; 'Holy Face, Holy Script, Holy Gate: Revealing the Edessa Paradigm in Christian Imagery', in AR Calderoni, C Dufour Bozzo & G Wolf (eds), *Intorno al Sacro Volto. Bisanzio, Genova e il Mediterraneo*, Marsilio Editori, Venice, 2007, pp. 195–212.

10 For recent discussion of this tradition, see Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy*, T & T Clark, London, 2005.

11 Exodus 26:31; 36:35.

12 Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 3. 6. 4; 3. 180; *War of the Jews*, 5. 211–14; 5. 212–13.

13 Philo, *Questions and Answers on Exodus*, 2. 91.

14 Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45.

15 Hebrews 10:19–20.

16 Nicholas Constas, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity*, Brill, Leiden, 2003, ch. 6.

17 JD Mansi (ed.), *Sacrorum consiliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, 13:340.

18 Biblioteca Vaticana, Vatican, Vat. gr. 699, folio 89 recto.

19 Herbert Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, PA, 2000, pp. 60–87.

20 Matthew 25:34.

21 J Croquison, 'L'iconographie chretienne à Rome d'après le "Liber Potificalis"', *Byzantion*, no. 34, 1964, pp. 577–603; R Petriaggi, 'Utilizzazione, decorazione e diffusione dei tessuti nei corredi delle basiliche cristiane secondo il Liber Pontificalis (514–795)', *Prospetiva. Revista di storia dell'arte antico e moderna*, no. 37, 1984, pp. 37–46.

22 *Le Liber Pontificalis*, text, introduction and commentary by L Duchesne, vol. 1, Editions E de Boccard, Paris, 1981, pp. 60–3; R Davis, *The Lives of the Ninth-Century Popes (Liber Pontificalis): The Ancient Biographies of Ten Popes from A.D. 817–891*, trans. and commentary by R Davis, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1995, p. 27.

23 R Krautheimer (ed.), *Corpus Basilicarum Christianorum Romae*, vols 1–5, Vatican City, Rome, and New York, 1937–77, 3. 52.

24 Ashburnham Pentateuch, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, cod. Lat. 2334, folio 76 recto.