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Novel Features of Marian Iconography in Russian Art in the Post-Byzantine Context: The Icon of the Virgin Hodegetria from the Ferapontov Monastery

This PhD project examines the process of creating new iconographic formulae of the Mother of God representation in Russian art in the late XV – XVI century. The time frame discussed is generally defined by scholars as the Post-Byzantine period. Throughout the epoch, intellectual and cultural life across the territories of Christian states was undergoing certain transformations affected by the fall of Constantinople in 1453. This circumstance caused an increased Byzantine current in the art sphere of different Christian states including Orthodox countries and also Western Europe, especially Italy. Accordingly, works of religious art created during this period often demonstrate a blending of Byzantine and Western artistic forms commonly supposed to be incompatible. Naturally, Russian culture was also involved in this process of cross-cultural exchange, as evidenced by new variants of the Holy Virgin representation (such as the Georgian Theotokos type, the Konevskaya Mother of God type, the Virgin of Kazan type etc.) that emerge in Russian iconography at this time. The proposed research aims to explore the multifaceted and complex phenomenon of interaction between divergent artistic traditions by analyzing the concrete examples from Russian art which prove to be directly relevant to the topic.

In this respect, the Icon of the Virgin Hodegetria from the Ferapontov Monastery (c. 1502, now in the State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg) which is attributed to the Russian icon painter Dionisy and his workshop is certainly a case in point. This icon displays a remarkable combination of conventional principles of the Old Russian painting and specific iconographic elements which were normally employed by West European artists, notably by Italian painters. Particularly, such prominent iconographic details as the raised hand of the Virgin Mary or the body representation of the Christ Child that simulates a three-dimensional image of the human body and natural lively movement can be best paralleled by solutions frequently found in Italian artworks. Moreover, the sort of garments depicted in the icon is not entirely typical for traditionally Russian ancient images. Yet, although initially this depiction may seem to be reminiscent of the Italian Renaissance, an overall iconographic analysis demonstrates that this composition also includes many elements connected to the Byzantine artistic practice. A comparative survey reveals that such iconographic features as the compositional framework, colouristic details and nature of the relationship between the Virgin and the Christ Child in this icon have a certain correlation to the Byzantine icons of the XII – XIII century (e.g. tessellated icon of the Virgin Hodegetria from Saint Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, late XII – early XIII century).

Therefore, exploration of these aspects may contribute to a deeper understanding of various interconnections between Russian, Byzantine and European pictorial traditions.

All in all, the goals of the study are the following. To begin with, it is necessary to reveal the factors that underlie the phenomenon of borrowing and assimilation of various pictorial forms and motives within different artistic traditions. Furthermore, it is essential to clearly recognize the adaptability of certain artistic practices to differing historical, cultural and confessional contexts. Finally, the very mechanism of the selection process needs to be thoroughly investigated.

To address these problematic issues, a developed analytical methodology is required. First of all, the comparative analysis of iconographic features of the artworks originating from different geographical and cultural zones is considered to be one of the basic methods in this study. Besides, the context-oriented approach, which implies taking into consideration of historical, cultural or religious facts, is supposed to play a key role in this research.