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INCARNATIONAL AESTHETICS

*Contemporary and traditional citations from Orthodox saints,
philosophers and theologians on kinds of beauty and artistic responsibility.*

– Uncreated Beauty, Source of all beauty... –

...But the “beautiful” which is beyond individual being is called “beauty” because of that beauty bestowed by it on all things, each in accordance with what it is. It is given this name because it is the cause of the harmony and splendor in everything, because like a light it flashes onto everything the beauty—causing impartations of its own well-spring ray. Beauty “bids” all things to itself (whence it is called “beauty”) and gathers everything into itself. And they name it beautiful since it is the all-beautiful and the beautiful beyond all. It is forever so, unvaryingly, unchangeably so, beautiful but not as something coming to birth and death, to growth or decay, not lovely in one respect while ugly in some other way. It is not beautiful “now” but otherwise “then,” beautiful in relation to one thing but not to another. It is not beautiful in one place and not so in another, as though it could be beautiful for some and not for others. Ah no! In itself and by itself it is the uniquely and the eternally beautiful.... The Beautiful is therefore the same as the Good, for everything looks to the Beautiful and the Good as the cause of being, and there is nothing in the world without a share of the Beautiful and the Good.

– St. Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*¹

Make straight the hearts of Thy servants towards Thine unapproachable Light, O thrice-resplendent Lord, and bestow the effulgence of Thy glory upon our souls, that we may behold Thine ineffable beauty.

– Hymn from the *Parakletike*²

Thou hast created the incorporeal and heavenly Angelic Hosts as mirrors of Thy beauty, O indivisible Trinity, sole Ruler, to sing unceasingly to Thee.

– *Troparion* for the Angels³

God’s only begotten Son shows us his Father’s beauty by presenting himself in his radiant image. First and foremost we see the Son with the eyes of the heart, but also with our human eyes, for he bent down and came down to us.

– St. Cyril of Alexandria⁴

– Matter, Incarnation, Senses –

“I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honoring matter which wrought my salvation! I honor it, but not as God. How could God be born out of things which have no existence in themselves? God’s body is God because it is joined to His person by a union which shall never pass away. The divine nature remains the same; the flesh created in time is quickened by a reason-endowed soul. Because of this I salute all remaining matter with reverence, because God has filled it with grace and power.”

– St. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*⁵

God is known both through knowledge and through unknowing... and touching and sense-perception...

– St. Dionysius the Areopagite⁶

– Symbolism and Anagogy –

The mystery of the incarnation of the Logos is the key to all arcane symbolism and typology in the Scripture, and in addition gives us knowledge of created things, both visible and intelligible. He who apprehends the mystery of the cross and burial apprehends the inward essence of created things; while he who is initiated into the inexpressible power of the resurrection apprehends the purpose for which God first established everything.

– St. Maximos the Confessor⁷

The whole mystagogy is like an icon of a body that lives as Christ taught us, in all of its parts from the beginning to the end; between them there is an order and harmony that guide our thought and vision...

– St. Nicholas Kavalas, *Interpretation of the Divine Liturgy*⁸

...Therefore, it may be said that nature worshipers are alphabetic, and spirit worshipers only are alphabetic. To the mind of the former, things and creatures in the natural worlds represent an ultimate reality, expressed in their forms, colors, functions, and relations. While to the mind of the latter things and creatures are only symbols of a spiritual reality which is the actual meaning and life and justification of those symbols.

– St. Nikolai Velimirovich⁹

To those who know the properties of precious stones, it becomes evident to their astonishment, that none is absent from the number of these... (except carbuncle)... the loveliness of the many colored gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy of meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that by the

grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner.

– Abbot Suger, commenting on the altar of the Abbey Church of Saint Denis, Paris¹⁰

Byzantine art seeks to lift us from the sensible to the intelligible, from what we see with our physical eyes to what is seen by him who has spiritual eyes—that is, from the ephemeral to the eternal. This lifting is called *anagoge*. It uses natural forms and colors, but spiritualizes these elements, changes them from material to spiritual. Forms and colors in Byzantine art become mystical, in order to express the mystical realm of the spirit.

– Photios Kontoglou¹¹

– The Craftsman and the Spirit –

Therefore most beloved son, you should not doubt but should believe in full faith that the Spirit of God has filled your heart when you have embellished His house with such great beauty and variety of workmanship. And lest perhaps you are diffident, I shall unfold clearly and systematically that whatever in the arts you can learn, understand, or devise, is bestowed on you by the grace of the seven-fold Spirit.

Through the spirit of Wisdom you know that created things proceed from God and that without Him nothing is.

Through the spirit of understanding, you have received the capacity for practical knowledge of the order, the variety, and the measure that you apply to your various kinds of work.

Through the spirit of counsel you do not hide away the talent given you by God, but working and teaching openly and with humility, you faithfully reveal it to those who desire to learn.

Through the spirit of fortitude you shake off all the apathy of sloth, and whatever you commence with quick enthusiasm you carry through to completion with full vigor.

Through the spirit of knowledge that is given to you, you are the master by virtue of your practical knowledge and you use in public the perfect abundance of your abounding heart with the confidence of a full mind.

Through the spirit of piety you set a limit with pious consideration on what the work is to be, and for whom, as well as on the time, the amount, and the quality of work, and, lest the vice of greed or cupidity should steal in, on the amount of the recompense.

Through the spirit of the fear of the Lord you bear in mind that of yourself you are unable to do anything and you ponder on the fact that you possess and desire nothing that is not given to you by God, but in faith, trust, and thankfulness you ascribe to divine compassion whatever you know or are or can be...

– Theophilus the Presbyter, *On Divers Arts*¹²

– Art for Art’s Sake –

Another question, which is worthy of amazement (and that no one has noticed), is the purely aesthetic or historical stance that we hold as regards the living tradition of Orthodox iconography, Byzantine and Modern. It comes from our lack of participation in the tradition. As we do not participate in the spiritual content of the icon, which painting serves, we are left with the painting (art for art’s sake or the history of art). The art-lover and *Kunsthistoriker* take over from the faithful lover of icons. We boast, for instance, how [Greece] is the first country in the world to have a Byzantine museum. This makes us, somehow, pioneers—we imagine—in the scientific branch of Byzantine studies. Truthfully, we should be saddened.

– Zosimos Lorentzatos¹³

It is not only God who can ‘clothe Himself in beauty,’ evil can as well. The devil can transform himself into an angel of light. Indeed, is not beauty linked to the original fall of the most glorious of the angels? “Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou has corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy beauty.” (Ezek. 29:17). Beauty placed beyond good and evil usurps the place of the Absolute, with total indifference towards truth and goodness; and it converts the human soul to its idolatrous cult....

This double-edged nature of beauty—reflected in the double-edged nature of art, whose most immediate and compelling touchstone is beauty—is due to the fact that though it is a divine quality it is also the supreme aesthetic value. It is its aesthetic value, not its divine quality, that the scholastics stress when they describe beauty as *id quod visum placet*, that which pleases when one sees it. For pleasure is symptomatic of aesthetic experience, of things sensibly perceived by means of artistic forms. The soul is not evil: it is by nature pure and immortal. But its vision can be obscured and vitiated... forms and images which in themselves are sacred can be used in a manner that, far from nourishing, actively debase the mind and heart of those who come under their influence....

– Philip Sherrard, *The Sacred in Life and Art*¹⁴



1 St. Dionysius the Areopagite, “The Divine Names,” Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works, Trans. by Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ, 1987, pp. 76-77.

2 Hymn in the Parakletike, as quoted by C. Cavarnos in *Spiritual Beauty*, Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, Belmont, MA, 1995, p. 13.

3 Troparion for the angels, quoted by C. Cavarnos in *Spiritual Beauty*, Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, Belmont, MA, 1995, p. 13.

4 St. Cyril of Alexandria, quoted by Solrunn Nes in *The Mystical Language of Icons*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., Grand Rapids, MI, p. 33.

5 St. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, I:16. SVS Press, Crestwood, NY, 1980. p. 23.)

6 St. Dionysius the Areopagite, quoted by Eric D. Perl in *Theophany*, SUNY Press, Albany, NY, 2007, p. 92.

7 St. Maximos the Confessor, *The Philokalia Vol. Two*, Faber and Faber, London and Boston, 1981, p. 127.

8 St. Nicholas Kavalas, *Interpretation of the Divine Liturgy*, Patrologica Graeca, 150, 372B.

9 St. Nikolai Velimirovich, *The Universe as Symbol & Signs: An Essay on Mysticism in the Eastern Church*, St. Tikhon Seminary Press, South Canaan, PA, 2010, p. 10.

10 Abbot Suger on the altar of the Abbey Church of Saint Denis, Paris, as quoted by S. Bucklow in *The Alchemy of Paint: Art, Science and Secrets from the Middle Ages*, Marion Boyars, London, 2009, pp. 211-12.

11 Photios Kontoglou, as quoted by C. Cavarnos in *Byzantine Sacred Art*, Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, Belmont, Mass, 1992, p. 97.

12 Theophilus the Presbyter, *On Divers Arts*, trans. from Latin by John G. Hawthorne and Cyril Stanley Smith, Dover Pub., Inc, NY., 1979., pp. 78-79.

13 Zosimos Lorentzatos, quoted by Anestis Keselopoulos in *Greece’s Dostoevsky, The Theological Vision of Alexandros Papadiamantis*, Protecting Veil Press, 2011, p. 162.

14 Philip Sherrard, *The Sacred in Life and Art*, Denise Harvey (Publisher), Evia, Greece, 2004, pp. 18-19.