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## A beautiful Christ : materiality and divinity in the earliest Sinai icons

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# *A Beautiful Christ: Materiality and Divinity in the Earliest Sinai Icons*

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The materials used in the production of art are not exclusively technical or functional attributes — they are parts of the object that carry their own important meanings. Materiality, however, had been understudied by art historians until recently. Since Michael Baxandall's publication of the *Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* in 1982, which has a chapter exclusively devoted to materiality, there has been an explosion of interest in materiality within the discipline.<sup>1</sup> Byzantine art history, however, has lagged behind.<sup>2</sup> This paper, then, is a rethinking of the methodologies that we use to study Byzantine icons.

Before this rethinking, I must confess at the outset that my title is mildly misleading, if only for its syntax. This paper will not approach the issues in the order that they are presented. In fact, the subtitle is probably more representative of the argument than the title. This is not to say, that 'a Beautiful Christ' will feature herein. All that this disclaimer is meant to explain is that Christ's beauty neither dictated the materiality nor the 'divinity' of the earliest Sinai icons.<sup>3</sup> Instead, this paper will argue that Christ's beauty is expressed through the interplay of the materiality of the earliest Sinai icons and their underlying theology. If the title is indeed meant to be inverted, then it ought to

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<sup>1</sup> M. Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, New Haven, 1980. For examples of more recent interest in materiality, see: J. Montagu, *Gold, Silver & Bronze: Metal Sculpture of the Roman Baroque*, New Haven, 1989; N. Penny, *The Materials of Sculpture*, London, 1993; M. Baker, 'The Production and Viewing of Bronze Sculpture in Eighteenth-Century England', *Antilogia di Belle Arte* (1996), pp. 144–154; S. B. Butters, *The Triumph of Vulcan. Sculptors' Tools, Porphyry, and the Prince in Ducal Florence*, Florence, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> For exceptions, see: B. Pentcheva, 'The Performative Icon', *Art Bulletin*, 88 (2006), pp. 631–655; E. Ene D-Vasilescu, 'Examples of Application of Some Modern Techniques of Icon and Fresco Restoration and Conservation', *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 4 (2008), pp. 39–48.

<sup>3</sup> The degree to which Christ's divinity could be rendered was at the center of the Iconoclastic Controversy. The depiction of Christ's divinity is thus a problem to which this paper will return.

be done full-stop. Consider first then the last word of the title: ‘icons.’

For the purposes of this paper, an ‘icon’ will be defined as a portrait image painted on wood panels. One reason for this choice, apart from a degree of convention,<sup>4</sup> is that the materiality of mosaics has been expertly treated by Liz James in *Light and Colour in Byzantine Art*.<sup>5</sup> James argues that light and color were prime factors in how Byzantine viewers ‘saw’ their art and that Byzantine viewers saw color differently than we do today. James contends that in Byzantium reflectivity and glitter were more important in seeing, describing, and determining color than hue.<sup>6</sup> Reflectivity of light is given primacy in the Byzantine perception of color.

In the final chapters, James discusses color and its function in icon painting, but she gives very little attention to light and its relationship to icons. She seems to conflate light and color in painting, whereas in her discussions of mosaics light and color are always treated as separate (even if fundamentally interconnected). The glass tesserae of mosaics are, after all, more reflective than a painted icon, but if James’ underlying thesis is to be believed, then it stands to reason that color, regardless of medium, would have been perceived by the Byzantine viewer in terms of luster rather of hue.<sup>7</sup> Put simply, the relationship between light and panel portrait icons is in need of study.

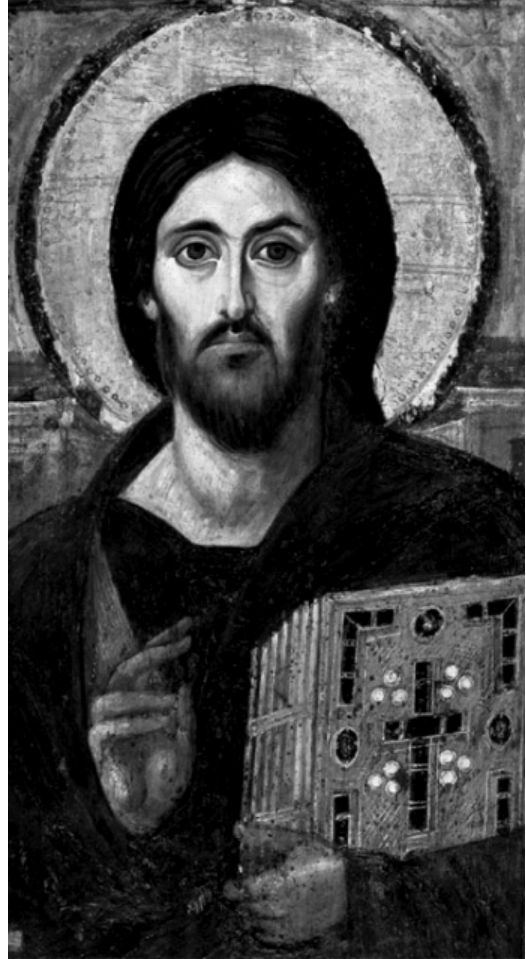


Fig. 1. Icon of Christ (“Canonical” Type), St. Catherine’s Monastery, Sinai, Egypt, Mid-6th Century C.E. (?)

Image Courtesy of the Art History Department, Dartmouth College

<sup>4</sup> Cf. L. Brubaker, ‘Introduction: The Sacred Image’, in: *The Sacred Image: East and West*, ed. by R. Ousterhout and L. Brubaker, Urbana, 1995, p. 3. For more inclusive definitions, see: O. Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium*, London, 1948, p. 5–10.

<sup>5</sup> L. James, *Light and Colour in Byzantine Art*, Oxford, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Cf. J. Gage, *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*, Berkeley, 1993, pp. 58–61; John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism*, Berkeley, 1999, pp. 66–69.

<sup>7</sup> Or, perhaps more accurately, in terms of luster *over* hue.

Continuing backwards through the title, the specific icons on which this paper will focus are, as described in the title, ‘the earliest Sinai icons.’ ‘The earliest Sinai icons’ refers to those icons from the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai in Egypt which have been conventionally dated to the centuries before Iconoclasm. The ‘earliest Sinai icons’ thus refers to nine icons, three of which are now in Kiev. These include: (1) the Canonical Christ Pantokrator icon, (2) the Syro-Palestinian Christ Pantokrator icon, (3) the icon of St. Peter, (4) the icon of the Ascension, (5) the icon of the Virgin and Child with Saints and Angels, (6) The icon of St. John the Baptist, (7) the icon of Sts. Sergios and Bacchos, (8) the icon of the Virgin and Child, and (9) the icon of the ‘Ancient of Days.’ These icons have all



Fig. 2. Icon of Christ ('Syro-Palestinian' Type), St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt, 6th Century C.E. (?)  
Image Courtesy of the Art History Department, Dartmouth College



Fig. 3. Icon of the St. Peter, St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt, 6th Century C.E. (?)  
Image Courtesy of the Art History Department, Dartmouth College



Fig. 4. Icon of the Ascension,  
St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai,  
Egypt, 6th Century C.E. (?)  
Image Courtesy of the Art History  
Department, Dartmouth College



Fig. 5. Icon of Virgin and Child,  
St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt, 6th  
Century C.E. (?)  
Image Courtesy of the Art History Depart-  
ment, Dartmouth College

been dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> centuries by Kurt Weitzmann,<sup>8</sup> and they were chosen both for these proposed dates as well as for their media.

Unfortunately, we do not *know* that these icons were produced in the sixth century. The bases for Weitzmann's dating are the style and the medium of the icons. As far as the former is concerned, Weitzmann argues that these icons — which are all more classical and illusionistic — are of an earlier style.<sup>9</sup> This argument, which is made frequently in Byzantine scholarship, is not beyond critique. Underlying Weitzmann's attributions is a conception that abstraction supersedes classicism, an idea that can be questioned.

<sup>8</sup> K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Icons*, Princeton, 1976. A less detailed catalog was produced eight years earlier. Cf. K. Weitzmann, R. E. Wolf, M. Chatzidakis, K. Miatev, and S. Radojicic, *Icons from Southeastern Europe and Sinai*, London, 1968; M. Chatzidakis and G. Walters, 'An Encaustic Icon of Christ at Sinai', *The Art Bulletin*, 49 (1967), pp. 202–204. For different dates for some of these icons, see: E. Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making: Main Lines of Stylistic Development in Mediterranean Art*, Cambridge, 1977.

<sup>9</sup> Weitzmann, *The Icon...*, passim. Cf. H. Maguire, 'Review of The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Icons. 1: From the Sixth to the Tenth Century', *Speculum*, 53 (1978), p. 426.

Weitzmann's stylistic analysis, however, is of less concern to this paper than his method of dating icons on the basis their medium.

Weitzmann identifies all of these icons as having been painted in encaustic, a technique in which the pigment is suspended in hot wax. Weitzmann suggests that the encaustic technique, which he associates with classical antiquity, was replaced by the tempera technique — in which pigment is suspended in an egg mixture — around the onset of Iconoclasm.<sup>10</sup> According to this logic, any icon painted in encaustic must date before Iconoclasm.

There are two huge problems with this line of reasoning. First, much like his stylistic argument, Weitzmann works from the assumption that encaustic predated tempera and was more popular in classical antiquity. Weitzmann is careful to point out the similarities with mummy portraits from the Egyptian Fayum, but he is equally adamant that encaustic painting was not confined to Egypt. Weitzmann notes that encaustic paint has been found on linen and even marble from the Greek world.<sup>11</sup> He belabors the connection between classical antiquity and encaustic painting when he writes:

“Thus there exists a precedent from classical antiquity for our two encaustic panels with the sacrifices of Isaac and Jephthah's daughter on marble pilasters...”<sup>12</sup>

Weitzmann's assumptions about encaustic and its relationship to tempera, however, have been seriously problematized by Susan Walker's work on the Fayum mummy portraits.<sup>13</sup> Walker has shown both that tempera and encaustic co-existed in roughly equal proportion throughout antiquity and that tempera may have actually been used *before* encaustic in certain contexts (including funerary contexts).



Fig. 6. Icon of St. John the Baptist, St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt, now in Kiev, Museum of Occidental and Oriental Art, 6th Century C.E. (?)  
Image Courtesy of the Art History Department, Dartmouth College

<sup>10</sup> According to Weitzmann the transition to first icon in tempera occurs with the crucifixion icon from Sinai. Weitzmann dates the object to the middle of the eighth century on the basis of stylistic similarities with a fresco (not an icon) executed during the papacy of Pope Zacharias I (741–752) in Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome. For Weitzmann encaustic painting thus replaces tempera painting during Iconoclasm.

<sup>11</sup> Weitzmann, *The Icons ...*, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Cf. S. Walker, 'A Note on the Dating of Mummy Portraits', in: *Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt*, eds. S. Walker and M. Bierbrier, London, 1997, pp. 34–36; S. Walker 'Painted Hellenes: Mummy Portraits from Late Roman Egypt', in: *Approaching Late Antiquity: The Transformation from Early to Late Empire*, eds. by S. S. and M. Edwards, Oxford, 2004, pp. 310–326.



Fig. 7. Icon of Sts. Sergios and Bacchus, St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt, now in Kiev, Museum of Occidental and Oriental Art, 6th Century C.E. (?) Image Courtesy of the Art History Department, Dartmouth College



Fig. 8. Icon of Virgin and Child, St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt, now in Kiev, Museum of Occidental and Oriental Art, 6th Century C.E. (?) Image Courtesy of the Art History Department, Dartmouth College



Fig. 9. Icon of Christ as Ancient of Days, St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt, 7th Century C.E. (?) Image Courtesy of the Art, History Department, Dartmouth College

The second and more damning critique of Weitzmann's dating via medium is that Weitzmann did not and could not definitively know the medium used in the so-called 'earliest' Sinai icons. As he notes though, tempera can only be differentiated with certainty through the use of scientific instruments which he did not have with him when he visited Saint Catherine's.<sup>14</sup> He writes:

"A detailed study of the techniques of early icon painting is the province of technical experts... We shall therefore confine ourselves to a few general remarks. Very important in the early phase of icon painting is the technique of heated wax colors that we call encaustic, and we have already noted that without special equipment it cannot always be determined clearly whether wax colors have been used or not."<sup>15</sup>

Although Chatzidakis' restoration does show that the Canonical Christ Pantokrator is painted in encaustic, it does not stand to reason that other similar looking icons are necessarily painted in the same way, particularly if encaustic and tempera are difficult to tell apart.

The similarity between encaustic and tempera in itself ought to destabilize the conventional assumptions surrounding the icons with which this paper is concerned. What are traditionally seen as 6<sup>th</sup> century encaustic icons may in fact be 6<sup>th</sup> century tempera icons or, not implausibly, post-iconoclastic encaustic or tempera icons.<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that it is impossible that the icons in question are not from the 6<sup>th</sup> century and are not painted in encaustic, but it is to say that their date and media cannot be definitively determined.

The implications of this reasoning on conventional Byzantine art history are important. Interpretations of the 'earliest' icons are frequently contingent upon their having been produced before Iconoclasm. Jeffrey Anderson's comparison of the Canonical Christ Pantokrator icon with a 'later' St. Nicholas icon is an exemplar of this trend.<sup>17</sup> In this chapter, Anderson argues that an analysis of icons before and after Iconoclasm will identify different stylistic trends that, he argues, are correlated with changes in symbolic meaning.



Fig. 10. Double-Sided Mummy Portrait, 2nd Century C.E. from Fayum, Egypt, now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford  
Image Courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

<sup>14</sup> It is, in fact, possible to differentiate the two on the basis of the impasto build-up characteristic of encaustic paint. While the thickness of paint applied to an icon's wood panel differs from encaustic to tempera, the underlying thesis that the lustrous effects of the two are extremely similar is not still holds.

<sup>15</sup> Weitzmann, *The Icons ...*, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. A. Levine, *The Problematic of Iconoclasm in Byzantine Art History*, M. St. Dissertation, History of Art and Visual Culture, University of Oxford, June 2009.

<sup>17</sup> J. Anderson, 'The Byzantine Panel Portrait before and after Iconoclasm', in *The Sacred Image...*, pp. 25-44.



Anderson relates these stylistic changes to social and religious changes that occurred between the pre-iconoclastic and the post-iconoclastic periods.

Underlying Anderson's argument is an assumption that what an art history of the icon should be doing is using style to better understand Byzantine social history. This methodological interest in social history through style can be traced back to Robin Cormack's *Writing in Gold* (published in 1985 and not surprisingly subtitled *Byzantine Society and its Icons*).<sup>18</sup> Although strains of this method pre-existed Cormack's book,<sup>19</sup> following its publication (and the prestige of the author is not to be overlooked) scholars were given a template for how to write a social history of Byzantine art. Cormack's approach has done much to advance our understanding of how icons functioned in Byzantine society. Notable examples of the social history of icons since *Writing in Gold* have been undertaken by Hans Belting and Thomas Matthews amongst others.<sup>20</sup>

However, when it comes to the corpus of supposedly pre-iconoclastic icons, social historical approaches *must* presuppose some very basic facts including date, medium, and provenance. How else can the object be placed in its social or historical context? But, as the foregoing discussion demonstrated for the date and medium of the so-called 'early' icons,<sup>21</sup> the *facts* of the discourse are really guesses, and guesses that do not stand up to scrutiny. And if these supposedly pre-iconoclastic icons are post-iconoclastic, how does that change our reading of *all* pre-iconoclastic icons? What the discourse on Byzantine icons needs is an approach that is relatively trans-historical; a method that can deal with all icons in the same way (without interpreting them all in the same way).

This paper suggests, following Liz James' example for mosaics (and her book, not coincidentally, is able to cover mosaics produced from the whole range of Byzantine history), that we focus on the materiality of icons. Such a focus can provide important insights into how icons functioned *without* resting upon historical specificity.

A focus of materiality, in spite of the uncertainty surrounding the 'early' icons' media, is not as counterintuitive as it might seem. While we do not know whether the nine icons in question were painted in encaustic, we do know that they were painted in either encaustic *or* tempera. Indeed, the fact that the two media cannot be differentiated without technical analysis suggests that they have virtually the same visual effect.

The visual effect shared by encaustic and tempera is that both are lustrous. The similar visual effects of encaustic and tempera derive from their chemical compositions. The wax

<sup>18</sup> R. Cormack, *Writing in Gold: Byzantine Society and Its Icons*, Oxford, 1985.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. A. Cameron, 'Images of Authority: Elites and Icons in Late Sixth-Century Byzantium', *Past and Present*, 84 (1979), pp. 3–35.

<sup>20</sup> H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Chicago, 1994; Th. Matthews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Princeton, 1998, pp. 177–190.

<sup>21</sup> The same could be said of the so-called Constantinopolitan provenance for these icons; cf. *op. cit.* n. 16.

in the encaustic (which often has oil mixed in as well) and the egg mixture in the tempera both render the media semi-translucent, the result of which is that light can actually enter through the top layer of paint before being reflected back through to the viewer's eye. The result of this phenomenon is that the light reflected back through the semi-transparent top layer of paint is refracted. The refraction breaks any escaping white light into its component parts so that an encaustic or tempera image seems swollen with color. To Byzantine viewers, who would have been particularly attuned to reflectivity and lustre, these icons may have appeared to have been radiating light. Other signifiers within the images such as the gold halos surrounding the figures would have created similar effects. It is probably not trivial that Christ has a halo when he is the major figure in the scene,<sup>22</sup> and where he is not he is depicted *en buste* with his image completely encompassed by a gold medallion.

It is also worth noting that other than the final effect of tempera and encaustic paint, the two do not share very much. Tempera is much easier to work in than encaustic: since the wax must be pliable, encaustic pigments must be very hot when they are applied. Tempera paint allows for more layers of paint because it is a thinner medium. These differences, and others like them, suggest that the reason for choosing tempera over encaustic were functionally rather than symbolic. The working techniques are different enough that it seems relatively safe to assume that it was the *final effect* that these icons were after. The final effect of encaustic and tempera, a lustrous one, provides the connection between the 'materiality' discussed above and the next term from the title: 'divinity.'

Luminosity, as Liz James and many others have noted,<sup>23</sup> was particularly important in Byzantium. Light, following an already well-established tradition in Christianity, was associated with divinity. Thus in *Ecclesiasticus* 23:18-19 of the Old Testament we find: 'For he knows not that brighter than ten thousand times the sun are the eyes of the Most High, which looks on the ways of men, and cast their glance into hidden parts.' And as Jesus famously says in the John 8:12 of the New Testament: 'I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness.'

The association between Christ and light was upheld by the early Church Fathers. Thus Ambrose asks: 'But why should I add that just the Father is light, so, too, the Son is light, and the Holy Spirit is light?'<sup>24</sup> And Clement of Alexandria exhorts:

"For just as if the sun were not, the world would have been in perpetual night, for all the other heavenly bodies could do; so, unless we had come to know the Logos, and had been enlightened by His rays, we should have been in no way different from the birds who are being crammed with food, fattening in darkness and reared for death. Let us

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<sup>22</sup> It is unclear whether this is true of the icon depicting the 'Syro-Palestinian' Christ. See Weitzmann, *The Icons ...*, pp. 26-27 for a discussion of what would have been behind Christ's head.

<sup>23</sup> D. James, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, 1998; Gage, *op. cit.*, no. 5.

<sup>24</sup> Ambrose of Milan, 'On The Holy Spirit', I, 14, trans. R. J. Deferrari, in: *Saint Ambrose: Theological and Dogmatic Works*, Washington, D.C., 1963, p. 86.

admit the light, that we may admit God. Let us admit the light and become disciples of the Lord... Hail, O God."<sup>25</sup>

More generally, Irenaeus writes: 'For [God] is rightly called all-embracing Mind, but unlike the human mind; and most justly called Light, but Light in no way resembling the light we know.'<sup>26</sup> Origen continues in *The Principles*: 'The only-begotten Son, therefore, is the glory of this light, proceeding inseparably from [God] Himself, as brightness does from light, and illuminating the whole of creation.'<sup>27</sup> Augustine also comments on the indivisible, infinite light of God in his *Soliloquies* when he writes: 'O God, intelligible Light, in whom and by whom and through whom all those things which have intelligible light have their intelligible light.'<sup>28</sup>

The equivalence between light and God continued in Byzantium where Gregory of Nysa argued that 'God is light, the highest light, from which any other light though it seem exceedingly bright, is but a slight effluence and a radiance exceeding downwards.'<sup>29</sup> Pseudo-Dionysus also wrote: '[God] is the Cause of harmony and splendor in all things, flashing forth upon them all, like light, the beautifying communications of its original ray.'<sup>30</sup> From Late Antiquity through Early Byzantium, textual evidence clearly indicates that the divine was meant to be associated with light.

If light was associated with divinity, then how were the icons *not* in violation of the Old Testament's second commandment and concerning idolatry? After all, the theology of icons mandated that the painted image could not claim to circumscribe Christ's divine nature. The icon was a depiction of the divine *made flesh* — i.e., Christ Incarnate — and this image was supposed act as a *conduit* to the divine, not as a representation of the divine itself. So, how can we reconcile the fact that an image, that was incapable of circumscribing divinity appeared to be radiating light, which in Byzantium would have necessarily conjured up associations with the divine?

This question can be answered in two parts. The first part draws again on the term 'materiality.' Although somewhat tautological, the very fact that Christ could be depicted meant that he had a physical form and consequently had a human nature.<sup>31</sup> The material-

<sup>25</sup> Clement of Alexandria, 'Exhortation to the Greeks', XI, in: *The Anti-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A. D. 325*, eds. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, vol. 2, New York, 1903, p. 203.

<sup>26</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, 'Against the Heresies', II, 13.4, in: *The Anti-Nicene Fathers ...*, p. 374.

<sup>27</sup> Origen, 'De Principiis', trans. H. Crouzel and M. Simonetti, in: *Traité des Principes*, vol. 1, Paris, 1978–1984, nr 2, p. 93.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine of Hippo, 'Soliloquies', I, 2, trans. G. Watson, in: *Soliloquies and Immortality of the Soul*, Warminster, 1990, p. 25.

<sup>29</sup> See n. 34 below

<sup>30</sup> Pseudo-Dionysus the Aeropagite, trans. J. D. Jones, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, vol. 4, Milwaukee, 1980, nr 10, p. 142.

<sup>31</sup> Such an interpretation, while consistent with the Nicene creed, was only fully worked out in the 451 C.E. Council of Chalcedon with the introduction of the concept of the *hypostasis*.

ity of the icon thus reflects the materiality of Christ's body. In this reading, the allusions to light made through the material of the icon would have married Christ's divine nature to his human nature. From a viewer's perspective, the icon would appear to have some source of light radiating from the image of Christ. Thus, Christ's divinity would have appeared to be *behind* his image — i.e., behind his human nature. In this interpretation, Christ Incarnate became the conduit to his own divinity symbolized through the light that appears to come from behind him, such a reading mirrors perfectly the theology of the icon explicated above whereby the image depicted serves a conduit to the divine.

But if divinity cannot be circumscribed, how is it that the icon—even if the light appears to be behind the figure depicted — can appear illuminated? Would that not indicate that the icon is in some way encapsulating (or trying to encapsulate) Christ's divinity? The answer to this question, and thus the second part of the answer to our larger question, is that the light that appears to be radiating from these icons *is* divine light; however, it is divine light *transmuted* through Christ. Such an argument, which was repeated by early Church Fathers and later iconophiles alike, was profoundly influenced by the Neo-Platonic philosophy of Plotinus.<sup>32</sup> Writing in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, Plotinus made two distinct contributions to the theology of Christ's dual nature and, as a consequence, to the theology of the icon.

The first has been expertly treated by Jaś Elsner in *Art and the Roman Viewer*. According to Elsner, Plotinus provided the philosophical foundation for 'mystic viewing,' which 'is predicated upon the assumption that in the mystic experience the dualism of subject and object can be transcended into neither subject nor object and yet is simultaneously both.'<sup>33</sup> In the image of Christ, Christ's divinity can be *absent* since the divine cannot be circumscribed but it can also be *present* since Christ is the divine made flesh. In the context of the icons considered here, to depict Christ in his divine nature was heretical since divinity could not be rendered materially, but to depict Christ *without* his divine nature was equally heretical. The materiality of these icons and their luminescent effects would have thus appealed to mystic viewers who would have seen Christ's divinity as present with his human nature without depicting his divine nature.

The true cynic (or iconoclast) may still maintain that depicting any semblance of divine light is depicting the divine in *some* form and is thus heretical. Plotinus' second contribution to Christology, and to Trinitarianism in general, is his theory of Emanation, which provided the basis for dealing with this critique.<sup>34</sup> Plotinus argued that there was a supreme,

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<sup>32</sup> A. Grabar, 'Plotin et les Origines de l'Esthétique Médiévale', *Cahiers Archéologique: Fin de l'Antiquité et Moyen Age I*, Paris, 1947, pp. 15–36; P. A. Michelis, 'Neo-Platonic Philosophy and Byzantine Art', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 11 (1952), pp. 21–45.

<sup>33</sup> J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity*, Cambridge, 1995, p. 90. In his discussion, Elsner deals with a mosaic icon — the 6<sup>th</sup> century Transfiguration Apse from Sinai—which is not unrelated to the icons upon which this paper focuses.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. A. H. Armstrong, "'Emanation" in Plotinus,' *Mind* 46 (1937), pp. 6–66.; L. P. Gerson, *Plotinus* New York, 1994, pp. 15–41.



Fig. 11. Apse Mosaic of the Transfiguration,  
St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt, 6th Century C.E. (?)  
Image Courtesy of the Art History Department, Dartmouth College

transcendent 'One.' The One constantly emanates (parts of) itself, yet it never diminishes just as the Trinity is three separate entities that are all undiminished parts of God. The example that Plotinus used to illustrate the operation of the One was the sun and its rays (i.e., 'light'), which, as primary sources above illustrate, became a leitmotif of early Christian and Byzantine theology.

Following Plotinus, the light that seems to be radiating from Christ in these icons need not necessarily be the light of God. Rather, the emanation of light from God was transmuted by the Logos as well as by the intercessory figures, like those depicted on four of the six icons. The Sts. Sergios and Bacchos icon best exemplifies this point since the halos of the two martyred saints overlap — i.e., share their light — with the central, floating, and higher figure of Christ. The divine presence of the intercessors is granted by Christ who, in turn, derives his "divinity" from God whilst he was made flesh.

The light that these icons would have appeared to have been radiating thus refers to the undiminished ray of the divine as it appeared in its worldly form. By this logic, Christ was not shown as divine; he was depicted as he appeared Incarnate, but his radiance pointed to the 'rays' of divinity emanating from his divine nature *through* his human nature.

Having fully explained the paper's subtitle, the conclusion will turn to my title: 'A Beautiful Christ.' Like color, the Byzantine conception of beauty was far different from our own. As Dominic Janes has documented in his book *God and Gold in Late Antiquity*, light — and in

particular divine light — was associated with beauty.<sup>35</sup> By alluding to Christ's divine nature, and by doing so through visual effect related to light, the images of Christ in the icons here discussed — and perhaps in all icons — become images of a beautiful Christ.

A 'beautiful' depiction of Christ, however, has theological implications in its own right. Beauty, or in Greek *kalos*, had associations of both physical beauty and of moral beauty. By depicting divine radiance and beauty, both forms of beauty — physical and moral — would have necessarily been called to mind. What's more, the physical and the moral beauty of the Logos were reflections of the beauty of the divine archetype. It is in part for this reason that the many early Church Fathers wrote of Christ as beautiful.

For example, Clement of Alexandria wrote: '...our Savior is beautiful to be loved by those who desire true beauty.'<sup>36</sup> And a century later, St. Basil referred to Christ's image as one of 'inexpressible beauty.'<sup>37</sup> These fathers and others like them were drawing upon a biblical tradition that also associated God's beauty with his morality and fairness. Thus the author of Psalm 44:5 wrote: 'With thy comeliness and thy beauty set out, proceed prosperously, and reign. Because of truth and meekness and justice: and thy right hand shall conduct thee wonderfully.'<sup>38</sup> The image of a beautiful Christ, in accordance with the theology of the icon, would have thus directed the viewer's recognition of a physically and morally beautiful signifier (i.e., Christ's human nature) to a physically and morally beautiful signified (i.e., Christ's divine nature).

This paper has attempted to extend Liz James' argument from *Light and Color in Byzantine Art* to panel portrait icons. These icons in their very materiality would have communicated a glittering, radiant light to Byzantine viewers which, when coupled with the other signifiers on the picture plane, likely would have conjured up associations of divine light. Through this visual effect, Byzantine artists were able to depict *both* of Christ's natures. Moreover, the depiction of Christ's divine nature through references to divine light would have qualified the images of Christ in these icons as 'beautiful.' And, like the luminescence of the medium itself, the multivalent meaning(s) of 'beauty' in Byzantium would have further tied Christ's human nature to his divine nature.

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<sup>35</sup> Janes, *God and Gold*. See also Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, II

<sup>36</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, II, 5, *The Anti-Nicene Fathers ...*, 351.

<sup>37</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, IX, 22, trans. David G.K. Taylor, *The Syriac Versions of The Du Spiritu Sancto by Basil of Caesarea*, Leuven, 1999, p.37.

<sup>38</sup> Some argued for an ugly Christ, also drawing on biblical sources, but they were a minority. Cf. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 50, trans. L.W. Barnard, *The First and Second Apologies*, New York, 1997, p. 57; Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies*, III, 19.2, *The Anti-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, Volume 1*, eds. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, New York, 1903, 449; Hippolytus, *Answer to the Jews*, trans. G. D. Dunn, *Tertullian*, London, 2004, p. 102; Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, XVIII, trans. J.H. Waszink and J.C.M. van Winden, *De Idololatria: Critical Text, Translation and Commentary* (Leiden, 1987), p. 61.

This argument, in theory, can be extended to all icons. Icons continued to be painted in either tempera or encaustic throughout Byzantium. The increased use of gold later in Byzantine history could be read as another, perhaps even more successful way, to imbue icons with the presence of divine light. The materiality of panel portrait icons — even if this materiality is in very important ways a complicated matter — can provide a transhistorical method for their study. Much more work needs to be done, especially with the primary Byzantine sources, but this aside, is it all that surprising that the materiality of panel portrait icons, like the theology justifying their production, turns out to be a conduit of its own — a conduit to immaterial light?