DIONYSIUS OF FOURNA

Artistic Identity Through
Visual Rhetoric

———

by

Mateusz J. Ferens

Etna, California

2015

Table of Contents

Foreword

Scholarship on different aspects of post-Byzantine culture often runs into a problem with terminology.[1] Because the study at hand considers an aspect of identity, one that occupies a particular time and space in post-Byzantine culture, ambiguous terminology must be defined before any discussion of the subject may take place. Three terms appear in this study to define larger and more complicated concepts: first, "post-Byzantine"—a term that is used to define chronological as well as cultural distinctions; second, "visual rhetoric"—a term used to define the aspects of image making that suggest an ideological position; and third, "artistic identity"—a term that is used to define and to encompass the ideological positions that are posited through visual rhetoric.

The term "post-Byzantine" refers to the phrase "Byzance après Byzance" coined by Nicolae Iorga in 1935.[2] It is a term that defines the period between the political termination of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 and the establishment of the Greek State in 1821. When discussing post-Byzantine art, David Talbot-Rice emphasized a

[1] Dimitris Livanios, "The Quest for Hellenism: Religion, Nationalism, and Collective Identities in Greece, 1453–1913," in *Hellenisms: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity from Antiquity to Modernity*, ed. Katerina Zacharia (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2008), pp. 237–269.

[2] Nicolae Iorga, *Byzance après Byzance: Continuation de l'Histoire de la Vie Byzantine* (Bucharest: Institut d'Études Byzantines, 1935), 45–56.

cultural shift brought about by the fall of the empire. He utilized the term "Greek" to distinguish all works produced in the Greek-speaking world after 1453.[3] Both terms, "post-Byzantine" and "Greek," are problematic when discussing art because neither term properly acknowledges aspects of cultural continuity from the Byzantine period.[4] I reference the term "post-Byzantine" to indicate the chronological position of works produced after 1453. Furthermore, I distinguish between the terms "Byzantine" and "post-Byzantine" when referring to aspects of culture and tradition; the former indicates correspondence with the Byzantine convention, and the latter indicates a possible break with the Byzantine convention. Thus, a work of art belonging chronologically to the post-Byzantine period may also be culturally Byzantine. Context will serve to clarify these points. Concerning works of art, I reserve the term "Greek" to indicate generally art produced after the Greek War of Independence (1821–1829).

I use the term "visual rhetoric" to encompass significant aspects of image making in Dionysius's works. This term applies to both graphical and literary works, and it does not distinguish between visual devices such as composition, color, physiological features, or the symbolic and conventionalized usage of such elements. Instead, the term "visual rhetoric" emphasizes Dionysius's use of distinct visual devices to establish or to maintain an ideological position. These visual devices are found in visible

---

[3] David Talbot-Rice, *Icons: And Their History* (Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 1974), 58.

[4] John J. Yiannias, *The Byzantine Tradition after the Fall of Constantinople* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), ix–x.

and extant works, such as frescoes and panel-paintings, and they are also found in linguistic descriptions when these descriptions represent envisioned end-products. The term "visual rhetoric" also refers to aspects of style and the treatment of visual devices when they indicate an ideologically significant choice or preference. By using this term I wish to emphasize the ideological position that Dionysius expressed through his painted and written works.

While "visual rhetoric" stands for distinct visual devices that posit ideological positions, "artistic identity" is a term used here to describe the collective standpoint of these ideological positions.[5] For example, instances where Dionysius claims to have followed the traditions of an artist from the past are forms of visual rhetoric; these are then complicated by instances where Dionysius apparently breaks with his original claim and chooses to follow contemporary models—the two seemingly contradictory forms of visual rhetoric contribute to Dionysius's larger artistic identity. In this way, the

---

[5] Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi Around 1622: The Shaping and Reshaping of Artistic Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 23. The term "artistic identity" encountered in the work at hand is used similarly to Mary Garrard's use of the term. In her publication on Artemisia Gentileschi, Garrard uses the term "artistic identity" to talk about the formation of an identity as it is seen through the artist's work. Furthermore, this term encompasses a contradiction between two forms of self-presentation found in two paintings of Gentileschi that Garrard then explains. I found this very practical use of the term "artistic identity" to fit my needs well. Like Garrard, I focus on Dionysius's identity as it is seen through his work, and I also make use of the term to encompass apparent contradictions in his work.

term "artistic identity" is advantageous because it can be used to define a broad range of rhetorical stances without excluding contradictory elements. Furthermore, the term also encompasses aspects of agency: consciousness of past traditions, knowledge of past and contemporary practices, understanding of canonicity or the conventional usage of artistic subjects, and recognition of the origins of these subjects. Discussions of artistic identity concerning Dionysius rely on the interpretation of visual rhetoric as it is made available through extant works and documented sources. So far, no primary source has been found that directly or deliberately posits Dionysius's ideological position on art and aspects of art making.[6] The subject remains open to debate.

Very few scholars take up Dionysius's artistic identity as the main topic of their work, yet many of them make sweeping conclusions on this very matter. Identifying Dionysius and his visual rhetoric as traditionalistic or nationalistic are, essentially, attempts at determining his ideological positions on art—his artistic identity. However, such terms are too limiting and too simplistic to describe accurately Dionysius and his work. Taking up the artistic ideologies of Dionysius as the focus of this study, I found it necessary to define new terms of discourse in order to address properly the complexity of the subject at hand. These terms allow for greater linguistic maneuverability without burdening the subject with restrictive language.

---

[6] In contrast, another contemporaneous author and artist, Panagiotis Doxaras, wrote a manual for artists where he clearly stated his ideological position on art. This is discussed in Chapter ıı.

Introduction

The **Hermeneia** *of the Art of Painting*

The Ἑρμηνεία τῆς ζωγραφικῆς τέχνης (*The* Hermeneia *of the Art of Painting*), hereafter referred to as the *Hermeneia*, was completed by Dionysius of Fourna between the years 1729 and 1732.[1] Dionysius, a hieromonk (priest-monk) who lived and operated on Mount Athos and in his native village of Fourna, was both a painter and an author. The *Hermeneia* is a compilation of post-Byzantine artistic traditions and practices structured as a series of instructions for painters and students. It contains three prologues and six sections. The first section provides the reader or student with technical instructions; these include recipes for colors, steps on how to prepare materials for painting, some descriptions of the stylistic treatment of visual elements, and the proportions of the human body. The following four sections deal with the iconographical treatment of religious subjects. Section two describes how to illustrate scenes from the Old Testament. Section three covers the principal events from

---

[1] Emmanuel Moutafov, "Post-Byzantine hermeneiai zographikes in the eighteenth century and their dissemination in the Balkans during the nineteenth century," in *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies,* Vol. 30, № 1 (2006), 69–70. Moutafov explains that the term *"hermeneia"* (interpretation) is borrowed from liturgical language; *hermeneiai* are more than just instructions on painting. Rather, they are renderings of themes and personalities into a sacred pictorial language.

the New Testament. Section four continues with illustrations from the New Testament, starting with the Passion of Christ and the parables; then it describes the Divine Liturgy, and the Psalms, and it ends with eschatological themes—the Apocalypse, the Second Coming, and the Last Judgment. The fifth section describes how to illustrate different feast-days of the *Theotokos* (the Mother of God), the twenty-four stanzas of the *Akathistos* (hymn) dedicated to her, and groups of holy figures, including apostles and evangelists, holy bishops and ecclesiastics, holy martyrs and saints, and the Seven Ecumenical Councils. The final section contains such miscellanea as instructions on how to depict the life of the true monk, iconographical nomenclature, epithets, epigrams, and the appropriate allocation of scenes within the church.

The sources of the *Hermeneia* vary widely and, so far, only a few instructions have been linked to definite sources.[2] Dionysius would have had access to older manuals, to existing paintings in churches on Mount Athos, to liturgical books, as well as to oral tradition, and to the

---

[2] Paul Hetherington, "'The Poets' in the Ἑρμηνεία of Dionysius of Fourna," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 27 (1973), 317–322. The section on the illustration of poets has been linked by Paul Hetherington to a *Triodion* (a liturgical book) published in Venice in 1600.

Ludwig Heinrich Heydenreich, „Der Apokalypsen-Zyklus im Athosgebiet und seine Beziehungen zur Deutschen Bibelillustration der Reformation," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, Vol. 8 (1939), 1–40. The section on the illustration of the Apocalypse Cycle has been linked to woodcuts of Hans Holbein the Younger.

George Kakavas, *Dionysios of Fourna (c. 1670–1745): Artistic Creation and Literary Description* (Leiden: Alexandros Press, 2008), 56–60. Kakavas discusses a number of major subjects in the *Hermeneia*, and he links them to possible sources found on Mount Athos.

current ideas of his time through possible correspondence with other artists and scholars or through personal experience. It is likely that Dionysius had access to one or more technical guides published in the West or some knowledge of their content, because several words in the *Hermeneia*, especially in the technical section, are derived from Italian or German. Large parts of the iconographical sections were likely appropriated from Western sources as well; the absence of certain subjects from the Byzantine and post-Byzantine artistic repertoires suggests that these were modelled after foreign examples. While the *Hermeneia* contains many sources of various origins, some of them Western and others Byzantine or post-Byzantine, it bears some resemblance to Western technical guides; its general structure, for example, parallels Cennino Cennini's *Il Libro dell'Arte*.

With regard to content, the *Hermeneia* belongs to the variety of painter's manuals that were already widely used by artists in the Ottoman Balkans. These consisted of technical manuals, also called *hermeneiai*, and pattern-books. However, the structure of Dionysius's *Hermeneia* is unique. The six sections that the *Hermeneia* contains can be more broadly grouped into two categories—the technical and the iconographical. These categories of instruction had never before been combined into a single volume. Because of this, Dionysius's *Hermeneia* became the most extensive and complete treatise on artistic practices in the Orthodox Christian culture. It is due to this quality that copies of the manuscript became vastly popular in many artistic workshops throughout the Balkans and in other artistic centers, including Jerusalem, Russia, and the Slavic countries that adhered culturally to

Byzantine artistic traditions.[3] It was, and is to this day, primarily used as a practical source for artists.

While Dionysius integrated a wide range of sources into his manual, his audience was much more distinctive. The *Hermeneia* addresses painters' apprentices—to "all you pupils of diligent painters"—and it was intended to be a practical manual for use by artists and their students in the workshop.[4] Dionysius makes no distinction between a lay or monastic audience. While most copies of the *Hermeneia* were found in monasteries, monastic workshops, even on Mount Athos, were open to both lay and monastic painters. Apprenticeship typically lasted for only one year, and no demographic of the circulating students is certain, though they would undoubtedly have been Orthodox Christians. In either case, the approach to art would have been similar for both the lay artist and the monastic. Lay artists at that time would adhere to similar standards of piety and conduct as clergy and monks.[5] It was expected, as a nineteenth-century artist's manual prescribes, even for married artists to lead semi-monastic lives, and they, similarly to monks supervised by abbots, might have had supervisors assigned to them from the local clergy.[6] Therefore, the *Hermeneia* was likely intended for an audience with high moral standing and with close connection to the ecclesiastical system of the Orthodox Church. Taking into account the diverse positions on art that were maintained by different

---

[3] Kakavas, *Dionysios of Fourna*, 56–60.

[4] Paul Hetherington, *The 'Painter's Manual' of Dionysius of Fourna* (Redondo Beach: Oakwood Publications, 1989), 2.

[5] Moutafov, "Post-Byzantine hermeneiai zographikes," 72.

[6] Ibid.

groups within the Orthodox Church itself, Dionysius's *Hermeneia* does not appear to be an accusatory statement against opposing artistic ideologies; in no part of the *Hermeneia* does Dionysius urge his reader to abandon other practices. Instead, he addressed those artists and students who already maintained similar religious and moral convictions to his own but were in need of direction. In other words, Dionysius seems to have aimed at the artists or students caught in-between differing artistic ideologies, and he calls upon their religious convictions for like-mindedness in matters of art making.

Since its appearance in Western scholarship in the late-nineteenth century, the *Hermeneia* has, until relatively recently, been regarded as the key element to the general conformity of Byzantine art. Byzantine artists were, typically, very conscious of their traditions, but the perception that these artists worked under a strict code and rigid rules is no longer accepted. Having been regarded as the missing explanation for Byzantine artistic tradition, the great excitement that the *Hermeneia* generated in the late-nineteenth century was misplaced. However, the manuscript continues to feature prominently in much of the scholarship concerning various aspects of Byzantine and post-Byzantine art. The *Hermeneia* is an indispensable source of Orthodox Christian iconography and of Byzantine and post-Byzantine technical practices. Furthermore, the manuscript has recently taken a central position in scholarship on eighteenth-century culture and tradition in Ottoman Greece. Today, a discussion of post-Byzantine artistic culture would be virtually incomplete without mention of Dionysius and his *Hermeneia*.