

COLOR AS AN EXPRESSIVE INSTRUMENT OF THE ICON

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Ця наукова робота присвячена дослідженню проблеми колористики ікони. Проаналізовано зміст, роль і основне призначення кожного із кольорів, використовуваних художниками-іконописцями для написання ікон.

Ключові слова: іконопис, символіка кольору, мистецтво, християнство, Київська Русь.

Icon has been an essential attribute of Christian church for many centuries. It keeps playing an important role in functioning of a church as a religious institution and a center of spiritual life. Iconostasis is a part of every Christian temple, which means that icons are recognized as sacred pictures and a part of ritual.

Ancient Greek word εἰκών means “picture”, “image”, which the word “icon” is originated from. Its meaning for every Christian can be expressed in a quote by Fathers Gregory the Great and St. John Damascene. They said that the icon was the Gospel for the illiterate. It is impossible to understand it without the knowledge in history of iconography and painting style, texts of Scripture, religious literature, immersion in the cultural heritage of past generations. Symbols and colors will help to see the icon as a revelation of God, to penetrate into its theological dimension [3].

Surely, the issue of coloring have been raised and researched in the past and nowadays. This topic was approached by many famous and not-so philosophers and scholars. However, it is wrong to state that this problem is completely solved, that is why it remains topical.

The icon as a painterly or rarer relief image of gods, saints and other supernatural creatures at once was not accepted and recognized by believers. Iconography as a picture of Jesus Christ, Holy Mother and other characters of Old and New Testaments and history of Church on bread, iron, canvas has its own interesting history of development. According to historians, iconography emerged in the end of I century. First icons are claimed to be created by the brush of evangelist Luke. Specific themes for icons and rules for creating them were fixed in acts of VII Encumencial Council [5].

Byzantine philosophers Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, John of Damascus and Theodore Studite made the biggest efforts to promote the icon and establish iconographic canons. Bible states, that a man was created in the image of God. This helped them to justify the way to picture gods and saints on the icons,

because now man’s corporeal appearance was recognized as an expression of divine spirituality.

Christian philosopher Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who were mentioned earlier, was first to put theoretical thoughts into a question of color connecting light colors with the light that comes from God. He expressed this idea in his treatise “Corps Areopahitykum”. He strongly believed that the main color is gold, which is “illuminated by the environment of heavenly kingdom, the sign of God himself”, white is the most luminous, clean color, purple is typical for the King and Lord of earth and heaven, red color is ambiguous [2].

At first, in VI century, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite’s studies did not raise an interest and did not influence practical iconography, but then after iconoclastic era the situation changed significantly. “Corps Areopahitykum” was not only carefully studied, but was also used by iconographers. This is exactly what happened in Kyivan Rus’, for example [6, p. 25].

During next centuries artists carefully followed the principles of traditional iconography. One of them is the symbolism of colors. Every shade has its own meaning. With their help it becomes possible to empower the meaning of the image by saying a bit more, than traditional painting techniques can. The symbolism of colors is conditioned and self-willnessless [5].

Characterizing the color of icons, it is suitable to underline its conventionality. The color does not belong to the object, its surface and form. The main task of the color is to “open the world of spiritual essence in physical space; express the idea of the man himself, the intensiveness of inner life, illumination by the godly light” [5].

The detailed analysis of iconographic pictures demonstrates the use of different color pallets. This is not accidentally, since every color is a symbol. In existing hierarchy of colors the main role was played by gold or yellow color, which symbolized the heavenly kingdom.

The iconography researcher Eugene Trybetskiy once aptly said: “no matter how wonderful other sky colors are, the gold of Sun is the color of colors and miracle of miracles. Other colors are in its subordination as if they would create an order around it. The hierarchy in our iconography forms around “the sun that never goes down”. There is no rainbow color that would not find a place in a picture of God’s glory. Just one color out of all – gold, sunny – symbolizes the center of godly life, and others – its surrounding. One God that “glows like the Sun” is the source of kingly light. Other color that surround Him express the nature of those celebrated creatures in heaven and on earth. All of them form His live handless made temple” [9].

The special place that was occupied by yellow-gold color was not an accident. Golden background of icons and mosaics, halos around saints’ heads, golden clothes, details and attributes of pictured persons (bowls, candlesticks, lamps) were meant to symbolize the environment of heavenly kingdom, cleanliness and sanctity of the pictured figures.

The important role in iconography was played by purple color, which is a blend of red and blue, azure or violet, depending on the shade of purple that was needed. It was used to picture people of godly or royal origin. So Christ’s purple chiton (long shirt without sleeves) symbolized his godly origin, himation (clothes made of rectangular fabric to wear over the chiton) was blue, because Christ became human. Holy Mother’s colors of clothes contained somewhat different, opposite meaning – mafory (women’s outwear) was purple and chiton was blue or green [6, p. 25].

The use of purple was common not only to picture the main Christian figures – Christ and Holy Mother. It was also appropriate to perpetuate the lords on earth, who fulfilled God’s will and baptized countries and nations. Among them was Roman emperor Constantine or Volodymyr the Great. Picturing these figures in purple or dark-red, brune (blend of red and brown) symbolized kingly origin and God’s grace towards them [6, p. 25].

Red color had two opposite meanings. On one hand, it was a color of godly energy, life-giving strength and glory. In this meaning it was used for picturing the saint warriors, for example, saint George, Theodore Stratilat, Ivan the Warrior, Demetrios and others. On the other hand red colors also belonged to saint martyrs (men and women), who shed their blood in in the name of faithfulness to Christ. However, Christ himself was often pictured in red (murrey) instead of purple, emphasizing sheer truthfulness of his embodiment and bloodshed for the sake of humanity’s salvation [6, p. 25].

Other colors also have symbolic meanings, because all of them are luminous and they set the definite icon’s lexicon up. The closer the color is to the gold, the bigger is the role of it in the icon and the deeper the meaning is.

Victor Bychkov emphasized, that white color has played an equal role of symbol of God’s light, cleanliness and alienation, unlike modern European painting. Saints on icons and murals are pictured in white clothes, newborn Jesus is also dressed in white in the composition “The Birth of Christ” and “The Entombment”. Black color is the opposite, it symbolizes the end, death. In icons it is used to picture a cave – the symbol of grave or hell [8, p. 80].

Blue color symbolizes the sky like it is seen from the earth. Picturing the sky, artists often use concentrated blue color – so-called umber. Blue and green colors in icons, mosaics or murals symbolize everything natural not in negative, but in positive light. Ancient people did not enter the space, however, intuitively guessed that the Earth is blue. Carpets of meadows and woods gave them green color that pleases the eye of everyone, even those, who are indifferent to the beauty [6, p. 25].

This way Byzantine iconography represents rich color palette that was used to create the pieces. Although painted icons at first can seem too bright, every color has its own symbolic meaning and its own place. There are other rules that suggest the importance of symbols. For example, it is prohibited to mix the colors in order for them to remain clean.

The symbols of colors, palettes and figurative sense tested in Byzantine art, became the base for sacred expression in Kyivan Rus. Mykhailo Alpatov, the researcher, strongly believed, that Ancient Rus iconography is a big and complicated kind of art. It is not enough to only admire clean, bright colors in order to understand this art. Ancient Rus artists inherited Byzantine tone painting with somewhat faded, sometimes exquisitely dull tones that expressed penitential mood. Certain reprobation of this color palette caused attempts to adopt something of their own. Ancient documents present the list of icon artists’ favorite colors. Among them were ocher, cinnabar, tank, emerald and others. In fact, the range of colors of ancient painting is quantitatively greater. Next to clean, open colors there are also lots of intermediate ones with different brightness and saturation. Among them are shades of red and violet, beautiful by themselves, sometimes nameless colors that are impossible to describe by word. Colors that glow, shine, shimmer, ring, sing and bring a great joy are only seen by man’s eye [1, p. 56].

So iconographers paid lots of attention to the color. Often the color showed the essence and ideological basis of the picture. Ancient Rus artists coped well with the language of color and managed to use it in order to express feelings. This way they tried to awake different emotions of the audience by using the corresponding colors picturing Holy Mother with the baby on her lap. Tenderness, affection, appealingness; greatness, dignity, that are expressed in the figure of Maria Oranta from Sophia of Kyiv [7, p. 45].

Creative skill of Ancient Rus artists is also common for the icon “Annunciation”. It pictures one of the most important Bible stories – when archangel Gabriel brought “good news” for Maria that she would soon give birth to God’s son. Anonymous author of the picture managed to create the piece of unbelievable beauty. The color palette of the icon is noble and exquisite at the same time. Virgin Mary is dressed in traditional blue chiton and purple mafory, but the colors are more natural, richer. To the opposite, colors of the archangel are transparent, luminous – shades of yellow, red, green, brune. They are united by gold background that underlines the meaning of the event pictured [4].

This way, color as an expressive instrument plays an important role in iconography. It helps to picture main Bible themes with different paints. Without color it would be hard to imagine the figure of Christ, Virgin Mary, apostles, evangelists, other saints and

their religious being. Along with that the meaning of color is clearly defined.

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