

# The Painting Program of the Orthodox Church as a Key to Understanding the Eastern Christian Picture of the World

Yuliia Khlystun

*Abstract* – Monumental ecclesiastical painting is often perceived either as an interior decoration of the temple or as a «Gospel for the illiterate», since temple painting often contains scenes from the Holy Scriptures. In science, the painting program of the Orthodox church is mainly the subject of study by art historians, while from the point of view of cultural studies and semiotics, it is not sufficiently studied. The function of monumental church painting as an image of the Eastern Christian picture of the world is insufficiently revealed; this article is dedicated to this issue. The purpose of the article is to consider the painting program of the Orthodox church from the point of view of semiotics (cultural codes), to show how it reveals the Eastern Christian picture of the world.

Keywords: Orthodox church – iconography – church painting program – Eastern Christian picture of the world – cultural code

## 1. Introduction

Temple painting is one of the main ways of pictorial decoration of the temple, along with icons, however, the purpose of painting in the temple differs significantly from the purpose of the icon. The icon obeys its own image laws, and it is autonomous, not tied to a specific place, while the temple painting is a complex of interrelated plots that opens as you move through the temple. When studying church monumental painting, it is necessary to consider all components of the liturgical space of the temple in synthesis. Only in this way can one understand the language of church painting and comprehend its deep theological meaning.

Temple painting is also called the breath of the temple. The painting, figuratively speaking, is what the walls of the temple would tell us if they could speak. Compared to icon painting, monumental painting is a more dynamic art, directly related to the course of the entire church service<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Grebennikova, *Monumental Painting in the Space of an Orthodox Church*, in «Bulletin of the Kazan State University», 2008, 3, p. 217.

In the program of the painting of an Orthodox church, iconographic subjects form an ensemble, the purpose of which is not only to fully reflect the spiritual essence of the Christian faith, but also the picture of the world in its Eastern Christian understanding. This means that the church painting program is a kind of cultural code, thanks to which the transfer of spiritual experience to new generations is possible.

## **2. What is the Program for Painting an Orthodox Church?**

The program for painting an Orthodox church, as defined by Maria Georgievna Davidova, is a combination of canonical images, subject to the principle of the spatial and symbolic hierarchy of the temple interior<sup>2</sup>.

First of all, the painting of a temple is the embodiment of a particular program that meets the purpose of the temple (for example, a diocese cathedral, a hospital church, a confessional church, a tomb church, a church with a baptistery, a katholikon – the main church in the monastery complex, a refectory church, etc.).

Considering the program of painting an Orthodox church from the point of view of axiology, we will see that the paintings are in hierarchical subordination, creating the internal liturgical space of the church.

Researcher M.G. Davidova distinguishes three substantive plans for the church painting program, where the first is common to the cross-domed church, and includes a division into the mountainous and valley parts. The 'mountain' occupies the upper dome space (dome and drum) and symbolizes the celestial sphere, and the 'lower' occupies the lower main part of the temple (walls and columns), and means the earthly world. Also, the hierarchical subordination of images takes place when moving through the temple from west to east: from the vestibule to the altar. At the same time, the significance of the depicted plots (events, personalities) will increase.

The very turning of the temple with the altar to the east corresponds to the idea of moving from darkness to light (which in the architectural space of the temple is identical to the movement of the person entering from the narthex to the altar, that is, the movement from west to east).

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<sup>2</sup> Давидова М. Г. Значение термина «программа росписей» для церковного монументального искусства. Вестник ПСТГУ Серия V. Вопросы истории и теории христианского искусства. М., 2015. Вып. 3 (19), pp. 120-129.

The second substantive plan of the church painting program is more specific, it can be associated with the disclosure of the main Orthodox dogmas, for example, about the Trinity, about the Incarnation. Of particular importance to this plan is the dedication of the temple and its purpose.

The third content plan is determined by the specific wishes of the customer (when choosing certain saints, including locally revered saints in the painting program, or when choosing an analogue to follow, etc.).

Of the surviving descriptions of the painting of the temple, the oldest refers to the middle of the ninth century and belongs to Patriarch Photius of Constantinople. In one of his sermons, he described the painting of the new temple built during his reign in the imperial palace. According to this description, Christ the Almighty was depicted in the dome in a medallion surrounded by archangels. In the conch of the altar is Our Lady Oranta. In addition, the temple had numerous images of saints: forefathers, prophets, apostles and martyrs. About the scenes depicting the Gospel events (the twelfth feasts), he did not mention, although they could also be included in the painting of the temple<sup>3</sup>.

It is known that by the middle of the ninth century, a harmonious theological and artistic system of monumental church painting had finally taken shape. In parallel with this, the cross-domed type of the church dominated in Orthodox religious architecture. A strictly thought-out system of painting was consistent with the architecture of the building and formed a single whole with it. It is the architecture of the temple that is of particular importance in the solution of the monumental-pictorial ensemble. Since an Orthodox church is the most 'open', conscious, thoughtful system of meanings and symbols, at the same time it is a complex symbol itself<sup>4</sup>.

For example, the Western theologian Peter Karnatsky (twelfth century) considers the temple as an image of the world. «At the foundation», he wrote, «a stone is placed with the image of the temple and 12 other stones, as a sign that the Church rests on Christ and the 12 apostles. Walls mean nations; there are four of them, because they accept converging from four sides»<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Лазарев В. Н. История византийской живописи. М.: Искусство, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> I.M. Stets, *Symbolism and Architectural and Spatial Environment. Symbolism of the Orthodox Church*, in «Proceedings of the Pskov Polytechnic Institute», 11, 2007, 1, pp. 78-79.

<sup>5</sup> Кудрявцев. М. П., Кудрявцева Т.Н. Русский православный храм. Символический язык архитектурных форм. «К Свету», 17, М., 1998, pp. 65-87.

Hieromonk Dionysius Furnoagrafit (1701-1755) – an Athos painter from Furna, who based on the study of the work of Manuil Panselin and his experience, *Erminia or Instruction in the Art of Painting*, described in his work the system of painting churches of various architecture. About the painting of a *trulnaya* (that is, with domes) church, he writes as follows:

«When you want to paint a trulnaya (dome) church, then draw a multi-colored circle in the sky of the dome, similar to a rainbow that is visible in the clouds during rain, and depict Christ in it blessing and holding the Gospel on his Persians and inscribe: Jesus Christ the Almighty. Draw cherubs and thrones near the circle and write: see, see, see, as I am, and there is no God but Me (Deut. 32, 39). I create the earth and man on it. I have established heaven with my hand (Isaiah 65:12).

Below the Almighty (in the neck of the dome), depict other faces of angels. And among them, to the east, the Mother of God with outstretched hands and write over Her: Mother of God, Mistress of the angels»<sup>6</sup>.

About the painting of the altar, the author of *Erminia* writes: «Inside the altar, in the eastern recess, below the line of the prophets, depict the Mother of God sitting on a throne and holding the Christ Child, and above Her write: ‘The Mother of God is the highest of heaven’. On either side of Her depict two archangels, Michael and Gabriel, interceding. Then, on the same line with her, in the altar and throughout the temple, on the upper parts of the walls depict the Lord’s feasts, the holy passions of Christ and His miracles after the Resurrection»<sup>7</sup>.

### 3. Church Painting Program as a Cultural Code

The cultural code is the key to understanding a given type of culture; these are unique cultural features inherited by peoples from their ancestors; it is information encoded in some form that makes it possible to identify a culture. The cultural code should have the following characteristics: self-sufficiency for the translation and preservation of culture, openness to change, and universality.

Since «the most important foundations of any culture are the sum of a person’s ideas about himself, about the origins and goals of his being in the world, about the world around him and his relationship with God»<sup>8</sup>,

<sup>6</sup> *Erminia, or Instruction in the Art of Painting*, compiled by hieromonk painter Dionysius Furnoagrafit (1707-1733, Kyiv, 1868. Reprinted: 1993), pp. 223-236.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> Андрей Кураев, протоиерей. Дары и анафемы. Что христианство принесло в мир.

the foundations of Christian culture and the Christian worldview should be correlated with the program of painting an Orthodox church.

The division of the internal space of the temple into 'heavenly' and 'earthly' is reflected both in the architecture of the Orthodox church and in its monumental painting. In the heavenly world there is God, angels, there is no time, because there is eternity. This world has boundless space. In the world down below, it is the other way around: there is time and space is limited.

These two worlds are not independent of each other, they do not just coexist in parallel, but they are connected, firstly, by the Coming of Christ to earth and His departure to the heavenly world, and secondly, angels from the heavenly world come to the earthly world. At the same time, the righteous from the earthly world fall into the heavenly one.

The world below strives to imitate the world above, because it must be perfected. This is emphasized in the monumental painting of the temple: the axiological significance of images increases as you move from west to east (which, as mentioned earlier, is the equivalent of the top).

The earthly world communicates with the heavenly world. In this sense, the internal space of an Orthodox church is a condition, a necessary prerequisite for communication between the earthly and heavenly worlds, and therefore this space can be considered as a semiotic space or semiosphere, in accordance with the definition of Juri Lotman<sup>9</sup>. The space of the temple is characterized by the following signs of the semiosphere: delimitation, heterogeneity, unevenness, binary and asymmetry. The temple is a sacred space and thus it is separated from the outer space. At the same time, the inner space of the temple is heterogeneous in terms of sacrality (the altar and the rest of the temple are more profane). The mountainous and valley worlds presented in architecture and monumental painting reflect the binarity. Asymmetry is observed in the fact that the earthly and heavenly worlds are presented in different proportions: the heavenly world is represented to a much lesser extent than the earthly one.

According to one of the iconographic canons, the temple painting should not be lower than the level of the shoulder of a person standing in the temple, since this space is reserved for people living on earth. In the lower part of the temple, on the walls, a holy *ubrus* (tablecloth) is usually depicted – a symbol of purity.

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Размышления на пороге III тысячелетия, <https://lib.pravmir.ru/library/book/1030>.

<sup>9</sup> J.M. Lotman, *Semiosphere: Culture and Explosion. Inside the Thinking Worlds*, St. Petersburg, Art-SPB, 2001.

The reverse perspective used in the Byzantine-style monumental painting conveys that the center of the painting is a person standing in the temple, and thus participating in the depicted events. Thanks to the reverse perspective, a person standing in the temple has the feeling that they are looking at him (from the walls). This serves as a reminder that the actions, words and thoughts of a person cannot be hidden from the sight of God. This technique helps to turn to one's inner world, which can lead to repentant thoughts. Thus, the temple painting reflects that in the center of the universe in the Christian sense there is a person, a «macrocosm», according to the words of Saint Gregory the Theologian.

The people standing in the temple represent the «militant» church, because they are waging an internal struggle with their passions and vices. The painting of the temple is designed to reflect the church «triumphant»: the Glory of the Lord Jesus Christ and the triumph of the righteous in the Kingdom of Heaven. The triumphant church is not subject to global changes, in contrast to the militant church, where at any moment «many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first» (Matthew 19: 30). In this context, the temple also acts as a place of connection and communication between the two components of the church, therefore it is a semiotic space and a semiosphere.

#### **4. Description of the Program for Painting the Church in Honor of the Icon of the Most Holy Theotokos «Joy of All Who Sorrow»**

As an example, let's consider the program for painting the church in honor of the icon of the Most Holy Theotokos «Joy of All Who Sorrow», which is the main church of the women's skete of the Svyatogorsk Lavra in the village Bogorodichne, Donetsk region (fig. 1).

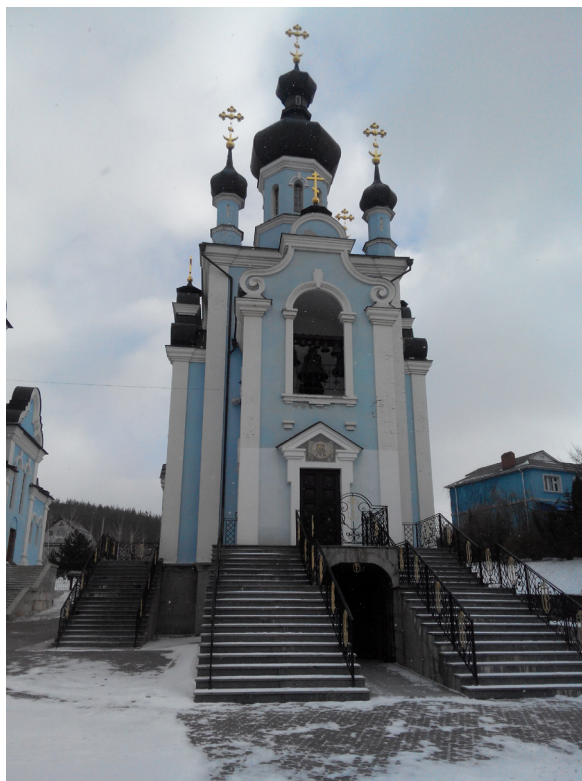


Fig. 1 The church in honor of the icon of the Most Holy Theotokos «Joy of All Who Sorrow» of the women's skete of the Svyatogorsk Lavra in the village Bogorodichne, Donetsk region (early 2000s) (photo by the author).

The church was painted by the icon painter Alexander Chashkin (in 2002-2006), who, together with Metropolitan Arseny (vicar of the Svyatogorsk Lavra), drew up a program for painting this church. This temple was significantly damaged in the summer of 2022 during the invasion of Russian troops into the territory of Ukraine.

According to its internal architecture, the temple is single-domed and painted in the Byzantine style. The 'higher' part of the temple (dome, drum, domed skuf) depicts the gospel picture of the Ascension of the Lord: in the dome of the temple there is the image of Jesus Christ in a mandorla, in the drum there are cherubim and archangels, in the under-dome skufya is the Most Holy Theotokos surrounded by two archangels and eleven apostles (fig. 2). There are four evangelists in the sails (made using



the mosaic technique). In the altar (in the conch of the apse) is the image of the Mother of God of the Sign, below is the image of Christ, the Great Bishop, and the Saints Basil the Great and John Chrysostom, who composed the order of the Liturgy, standing before Him. On the altar wall in medallions are also depicted Saints Nicholas the Wonderworker, Gregory the Theologian, Spyridon Trimifuntsky, Cyril of Alexandria.



Fig. 2 Dome space of the church in honor of the icon of the Most Holy Theotokos «Joy of All Who Sorrow», plot 'Ascension of the Lord'. Painting by Alexander Chashkin (2006) (photo by the author).

In the upper part of the northern wall is the Assumption of the Most Holy Theotokos, below are images of the holy martyrs: Lyudmila, Tatyana, Empress Alexandra, the Monk Martyr Elizabeth; further, in the medallions – the holy royal martyrs-children: Alexy, Olga, Tatyana, Maria, Anastasia (fig. 3).



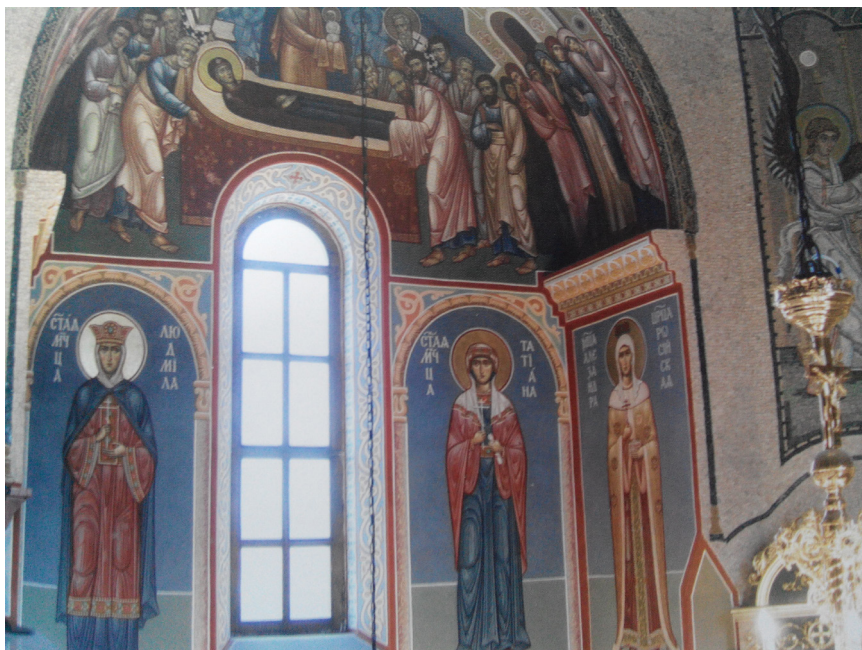


Fig. 3 A part of the painting of the northern wall of the temple: the Assumption of the Most Holy Theotokos, below are images of the holy martyrs: Lyudmila, Tatyana, Empress Alexandra (2006) (photo by the author).

In the upper part of the southern wall, opposite the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary – the Nativity of Christ, then – especially revered saints: Saint Blessed Prince Dimitri Prilutsky, Saint Martyr. Patr. Tikhon, Saint Rights. John of Kronstadt. In the medallions opposite the holy royal martyrs-children are images of Saint Martyr. Faith, Hope, Love and their mother Sophia.

The walls are dominated by images of saints, whose way of life should be imitated by the nuns of the skete. For example, Saint Euphrosyne and Eudoxia of Polotsk are painted full-length on the north side, Saint Anthony and Theodosius of the Caves are painted on the south side. On the kliros is an image of the Intercession of the Most Holy Theotokos. On the western wall is the image of Jesus Christ in a medallion, on both sides of which the archangels Michael and Gabriel are depicted, which serves as a reminder of the Last Judgment (fig. 4).



Fig. 4 The western wall of the church: the image of Jesus Christ in a medallion, on both sides of which the archangels Michael and Gabriel are depicted by Alexander Chashkin (2006) (photo by the author).

Consequently, when compiling the program for painting this temple, the general canons of building iconographic plots, the dedication of the temple were taken into account (the images of the Most Holy Theotokos are found both in the conch of the apse, and in the under-dome skufya, and on the kliros; the main background of the painting is blue, which is considered the color of the Most Holy Theotokos and symbolizes Her ever-virginity<sup>10</sup>); the purpose of the temple as the main temple of the Lavra skete was taken into account – the images of the saints make up a significant part of the paintings.

The program of painting the temple in honor of the icon of the Most Holy Theotokos «Joy of All Who Sorrow» reflects that the Orthodox Church equally honors both the ancient martyrs and ascetics, and the saints who lived and suffered in the twentieth century. Thus, the saints who have been glorified in recent times are given the same glory as those who were glorified by the church several centuries ago.

<sup>10</sup> *Secrets of the Canonical Icon. Theology of Clothing*, available at: <https://www.pravmir.ru/tajny-kanonicheskoy-ikony-bogoslovie-odezhdy/>.

## 5. Conclusion

Considering all the above facts, in the context of culturologists, the term «painting program» of the temple can be given the following definition. The program for painting an Orthodox church is a complex of interconnected iconographic plots, the location of which is determined according to their axiological significance in the Christian hierarchy in projection on the architectural features of a particular church.

According to this definition, the programs of church murals are identical in their structure, since they obey the general laws (canons) of construction, but can be quite peculiar in content within the constituent parts of a given structure. The uniqueness of each particular temple painting program is determined not so much by the unique features of the architecture of this temple, but by the choice of especially revered saints and subjects of the Sacred History by the compilers of the painting program.

The painting program of an Orthodox church reflects the picture of the world in its Orthodox understanding, that is, it displays the interior space of this church as a separate image of the world, but at the same time, this world is only part of the entire «triumphant church» (the heavenly, earthly church is called «militant»), since it cannot include absolutely all existing iconographic plots (Old and New Testaments, church history), images of all glorified and unglorified saints, heavenly powers. The «militant» church is called so because people (members of this earthly church) are at war with their passions, are subjected to temptations, daily make a spiritual choice in the direction of virtue or sin. The «triumphant» church is the church where the power of Jesus Christ triumphs, His victory over death and over sin. An Orthodox church combines the «militant» and «triumphant» churches. The program of the painting of the Orthodox church is designed to display the church «triumphant», the clergy and parishioners of the temple are the «militant» church.

Since the temple is a place of communication between the heavenly and earthly worlds, a place of communication between the church militant and the church triumphant, it can be considered as a semiotic space, that is, a semiosphere.

