



The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium

By Bissera V. Pentcheva

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Today we take the word icon to mean a sign, or we equate it with portraits of Christ and the saints. In *The Sensual Icon*, Bissera Pentcheva demonstrates how icons originally manifested the presence of the Holy Spirit in matter. Christ was the ideal icon, emerging through the Incarnation; so, too, were the bodies of the stylites (column-saints) penetrated by the divine pneuma (breath or spirit), or the Eucharist, or the Justinianic space of Hagia Sophia filled with the reverberations of chants and the smoke of incense. Iconoclasm (726—843) challenged these Spirit-centered definitions of the icon, eventually restricting the word to mean only the lifeless imprint (*typos*) of Christ's visual characteristics on matter.

By the tenth century, mixed-media relief icons in gold, repoussé, enamel, and filigree offered a new paradigm. The sun's rays or flickering candlelight, stirred by drafts of air and human breath, animated the rich surfaces of these objects; changing shadows endowed their eyes with life. The Byzantines called this spectacle of polymorphous appearance *poikilia*, that is, presence effects sensually experienced. These icons enabled viewers in Constantinople to detect animation in phenomenal changes rather than in pictorial or sculptural naturalism.

Liveliness, as the goal of the Byzantine mixed-media relief icon, thus challenges the Renaissance ideal of lifelikeness, which dominated the Western artistic tradition before the arrival of the modern. Through a close examination of works of art and primary texts and language associated with these objects, and through her new photographs and film capturing their changing appearances, Pentcheva uncovers the icon's power to transform the viewer from observer to participant, communing with the divine.

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Editorial Review

Review

“In this, far and away the most ambitious new account of the Byzantine icon, Pentcheva explores the powers and limits of visualization. A book sure to have resonance way beyond its field.” —Joseph Koerner, Harvard University

“The Sensual Icon is a dazzling book, rich in content, brilliant in argumentation, and impressively original. Tracing cross-currents of production, perception, and thinking about the sacred icon within a firm historical context, it proposes a radical reconceptualization of the major form of Byzantine artistic expression.

“A work of flawless scholarship and spirited imagination, The Sensual Icon animates a remarkable artistic legacy and the historical and theological forces that engendered it. Like Hans Belting’s Likeness and Presence, it is destined to guide a whole generation’s view of medieval art.” —Herbert L. Kessler, The Johns Hopkins University

“The Sensual Icon is a major new contribution to Byzantine art history and will be an important turning point in our understanding of the aesthetics and reception of the icon in Byzantium.” —Henry Maguire, The Johns Hopkins University

From the Inside Flap

Today we take the word "icon" to mean "a sign," or we equate it with portraits of Christ and the saints. In The Sensual Icon, Bissera Pentcheva demonstrates how icons originally manifested the presence of the Holy Spirit in matter. Christ was the ideal icon, emerging through the Incarnation; so, too, were the bodies of the stylites (column-saints) penetrated by the divine pneuma (breath or spirit), or the Eucharist, or the Justinianic space of Hagia Sophia filled with the reverberations of chants and the smoke of incense. Iconoclasm (726-843) challenged these Spirit-centered definitions of the icon, eventually restricting the word to mean only the lifeless imprint (*typos*) of Christ's visual characteristics on matter.

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About the Author

Bissera V. Pentcheva is Associate Professor of Art History at Stanford University. She is the author of Icons and Power: The Mother of God in Byzantium (Penn State, 2006).

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