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## **CULTUROLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAM OF THE REFECTORY CHURCH OF ALL RUSSIAN SAINTS IN THE HOLY DORMITION NIKOLO-VASILIEVSKY CONVENT**

**Abstract.** The article is devoted to the cultural analysis of the peculiarities of the iconographic program of the Church of All Russian Saints, which is the refectory church of the Holy Dormition Nikolo-Vasilievsky Convent, located in the territory of Nikolskoe village, Donetsk region (Ukraine). This article reveals the symbolic meaning of the iconographic narrative orientation in the certain parts of the church and also emphasizes the novelty possibility and acceptability in the iconographic programs of churches built in the early XXI<sup>st</sup> century. The author offers her own basis for the various narrative orientation in the program of the murals in the church in honor of All Russian Saints, the iconographic program of which has not been studied before.

**Keywords:** iconographic program, murals, refectory church, cultural analysis, iconographic painting, church art.

Iconographic painting is one of the oldest types of church art. From the Christian culture point of view, church art appeared while keeping the commandment given to Adam by God to cultivate Paradise (Gen. 2:15). The creation of the church iconographic program is also an art that is regulated by the canons of the Orthodox Church. Most researchers of iconographic painting agree that the basic rules for constructing any iconographic program were formed under the reign of Photius who was the Patriarch of Constantinople in the IX<sup>th</sup> century [3]. The question of any change acceptability made to the iconographic programs of Orthodox churches remains relevant till nowadays. On the one hand, it is necessary to preserve the tradition of iconographic painting, without deviating from its main purpose, while on the other hand, church art should not turn into a craft and stereotyped copying of ancient samples.

Compromises in resolving the issue regarding the iconographic program most frequently can be found in monastery churches. As the researcher O. O. Smolina notes, monastic art is always relevant for the historical period of its creation and is always connected with the solution of socially and / or state significant problems via its narrative, composition and coloration, it also corresponds to the tastes and artistic styles of the era and functions as illustration, education and decoration [2, C. 46].

Let us consider how this is reflected in the church iconographic program, as one of the types of monastic art, using the example of the Church of All Russian Saints, which is a refectory church in the Holy Dormition Nikolo-Vasilievsky Convent, located on the territory of Nikolskoye village in Donetsk region.

The above mentioned church was built by the date of bimillennium of the Nativity of Christ in 2001. It had been painted for several years up to

2007. In terms of its external architectural form, this is a one-nave basilica, the facade of which is decorated with a small bell tower.

Speaking about the choice of the dedication of this church, the cultural processes taking place in Ukraine at the end of the XX<sup>th</sup> century should be mentioned. First of all, this is the desire to realize cultural identity, national independence and cooperation with Western, non-Orthodox countries, as well as the separation of Ukraine from Russia in the cultural, political and economic spheres, the same as the possibility of the final separation of churches, union, etc.

The dedication of the church in honor of All Russian Saints during this period served as a kind of a reminder that the cradle of Holy Russia was Kiev, because it was here where its Baptism took

place. This event is paid special attention to in the program of the iconographic painting of the church, which also emphasizes the special significance of Kiev-Pechersk saints.

The iconographic program of the church was compiled in accordance with the canons of the Orthodox Church and has a theological basis. The internal architecture of the church contributes to the simplicity and integrity of the composition of iconic narratives. The author of the iconographic program of the refectory church dedicated to All Russian Saints is one of the archpriests of the Holy Dormition Nicholas-Vasilev Convent and icon painter Schema-Archimandrite Alipy (Bondarenko) (1947–2013). The program of iconographic painting of this church is unique in many ways and unparalleled among ancient churches.

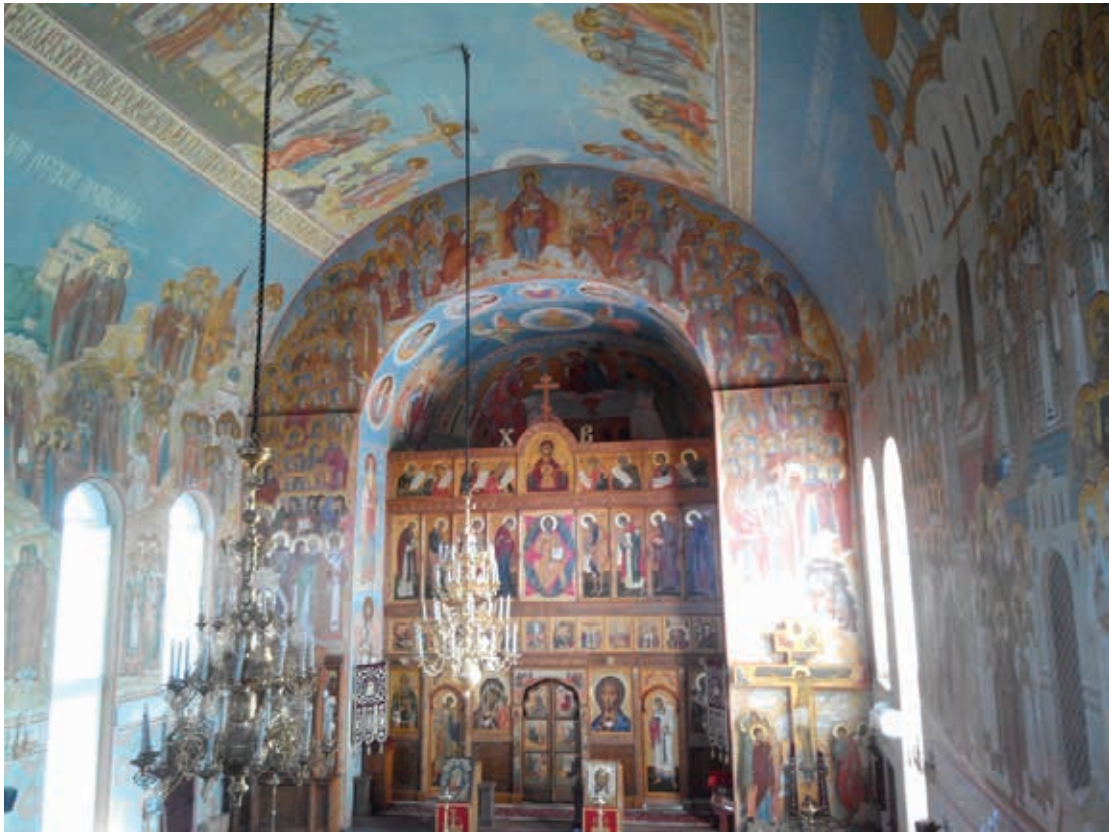


Photo 1.

The first thing that catches the eye at the entrance to the church is the icon depicting the Synaxis of all the Venerable Fathers of Kiev-Pechersk – “Kiev Prayer” with the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary

“Kiev-Pechersk” in the central upper part of the iconographic painting. Saints Anthony and Theodosius of the Caves are bowing to the ground on the right and on the left in front of the image of the

Mother of God. (photo 1). The narrative is written on the eastern pre-altar wall, in the arch of which a four-tier iconostasis is organically inscribed. The author of this iconographic narrative is the founder of the convent, Schema-Archimandrite Zosima (Sokur) (1944–2002). The iconographic painting of the Synaxis of all the Venerable Fathers of Kiev-Pechersk partly differs from the usual one (from the traditional icon): the location of the Venerables of Pechersk has been changed, the Synaxis also includes saints who were glorified at a later time, for example, we can see the fresco of the Holy Martyr Vladimir of Kiev who martyrlly suffered for faith in the XX<sup>th</sup> century.



Photo 2.

Since there is no dome in the church, the “heavenly world” is represented by a vault, which depicts the Passion cycle. The events of the Passion of the Lord are read from the southeastern part of the church in a clockwise direction and end in the northeast. The iconographic painting is carried out in the same order. The scenes of the Passion of the Lord begin with the Agony in the Garden and end with His Crucifixion. It also includes the scenes of Christ taking prisoner, the denial of Apostle Peter, Pilate’s court, the Flagellation, empurpling and putting the crown of thorns, bearing the cross and others (photo 2, 3).

As for the “lower” part of the church, on the northern wall, below the Passion Cycle, there is a

The iconographic painting of this narrative was made by a gifted icon painter Vladislav Yurievich Yushkov (born 1974).

As it is supposed to be in the center of any church iconographic program, there is the dogma of the Incarnation of God, the Divine-human nature of Jesus Christ, which is represented in the refectory by the fresco of the Old Testament Holy Trinity and the scene of the Ascension of the Lord in the conch of the apse. The altar apse contains the scene of the Communion of the Holy Apostles, which corresponds to the iconographic narrative of the mosaic in the altar apse of the Cathedral of St. Sophia of Kiev, the cradle of Ukrainian Orthodoxy.



Photo 3.

fresco of the Synaxis of All Russian Saints (photo 4). A troparion to All Russian saints is written over this narrative in Church Slavonic ornamental script: “As a beautiful fruit of the sowing of Thy salvation, the land of Russia offers to Thee, O Lord, all the Saints that have shone in it. By their prayers keep the Church and our land in deep peace, through the Mother of God, O Most Merciful One” (troparion, voice 8).

On the southern wall of the church there is an image of New Martyrs and Confessors of the Russian Orthodox Church who suffered in the XX<sup>th</sup> century. Above the narrative, there is also a kontakion for the holiday written in Church Slavonic: “Today

the New Martyrs of Rus stand in white robes before the Lamb of God, and with the angels they sing to God the hymn of victory: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and praise, and honor, and power, and strength be to our God unto the ages of ages” (kon-

takion, voice 3). It should be noticed that the depiction of New Martyrs and Confessors of the Russian Orthodox Church is relatively new and is typical for the churches built at the end of the XX<sup>th</sup> and in the XXI<sup>st</sup> century (Photo 5).



Photo 4.



Photo 5.

Liturgical texts are often used as the basis of iconographic programs and depicting of separate narratives. Liturgical texts can reveal the relationship between events captured in monumental painting. So, for example, the relationship between the Passion Cycle and the Synaxis of New Martyrs, as well as the Synaxis of All Russian Saints, is directly emphasized in the canon ikos for All the Saints who

have Pleased God from time immemorial, where the holy martyrs are directly called “the passion of Christ imitated”. That is, the holy martyrs and ascetics by their sufferings imitate the sufferings of Jesus Christ on the Cross. Ideally, the iconographic program of any church should reflect the imitation of the “wordly” life to the “heavenly” and the desire of the “wordly” one to perfection.



Photo 6.



Photo 7.

The Christianization of Rus is depicted on the western wall of the refectory church (photo 6). Since the western wall of the church is considered the least sacred space, it is acceptable there to depict scenes that are not related to the sacred history of the Old or New Testaments. Under the iconography of the Christianization of Rus in the Church Slavonic language the first part of the prayer of Saint Prince Vladimir is written, which he uttered at the holy moments of the sacrament of Baptism of the Russian people: “Great God, who created heaven and earth, look at these new people, and grant them, O Lord, see You, the True God, as if you have led the Christian countries, and establish in them the faith that is right and irrevocable.” Archbishop Averky (Taushev) sees in this prayer the main covenants of Prince Vladimir: the covenant of the knowledge of God and the covenant of the indestructible preservation of faith [5].



Photo 8.

According to one of the rules for making an iconographic program of a church, the narratives written opposite each other must be interconnected. Interpreting the relationship between the images of the “Baptism of Rus” and “Kiev Prayer”, we can mention the following points: baptized at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Kiev Rus as soon as in the XI<sup>th</sup> century bears spiritual fruits, such as the Synaxis of Kiev-Pechersk Saints, among whom there are those fasting, silent, recluses, “hardworking and obedient”, healers and miracle workers. It is also reflected in the words of the troparion to All Russian Saints: “As a beautiful fruit of the sowing of Thy salvation, the land of Russia offers to Thee, O Lord ...” (vs).

The traditional depiction of the Last Judgment on the western wall is absent, but the icon of light, located above the central entrance to the church, under the choirs, recalls the events of the Apocalypse (photo 7). It is a disc of circles of dark blue, blue and white colors, in the center of which there is an image of a chrysmos (one of the symbols of Jesus Christ), while on the right and on the left we can see the Greek letters “alpha” and “omega”, directly referring to the words of Great Judge from the Apocalypse: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last” (Rev. 22: 12–13). The disk is surrounded by 12 white birds, which apparently symbolize the 12 Apostles who spread the light of the Gospel teaching throughout the world. Six-winged seraphims are depicted on four sides of the disc. One of the earliest examples of such an icon of light is found in the mosaics of the mid-V<sup>th</sup> century in the Baptistery of Albenga, in Liguria [1, P. 280].

Another version of the icon of light can be seen on the kliros (photo 8). According to one of the Byzantologists, A.M. Lidov, the “luminous” disk can be interpreted as the most important theologically articulated symbol of the Divine cosmos, which is based on the emanation of the triune light [1, P. 280]. All God pleasers were honored with the vision of Divine light. This is also evidenced by the liturgical texts. For example, in one of the troparions

of the canon to All the Saints who have Pleased God from time immemorial there is a prayer appealing to the Mother of God, where it is said: "... make honoured of both eternal life and the light of God, which will be seen by all who have pleased" (Canto 4).



Photo 9.

At the entrance to the church holy reverend men and women are depicted: on the right we can see Monk Anthony the Great, Monk Arseny the Great and Monk John Climacus with scrolls in his hands (photo 9), on the left there is Holy Martyr Saint Photinya, Protomartyr Thekla and Venerable Syncletica of Alexandria (photo 10). A strict ascetic life, a struggle with passions, search for God and desire to please Him are the main things that unite them. Below the images of the Saints, the ubrus is traditionally depicted as a symbol of purity. This is partly due to the fact that the iconographic paintings should be at a certain height and should not touch the floor. The frescos of these Saints from both sides at the entrance to the church may mean that it is impossible to approach God without a preliminary struggle with the passions, and the movement in the church from west to east is a symbol of movement from hell to heaven. The altar is always facing east: "And the Lord God planted paradise in Eden in the east" (Gen. 2: 8).

On the left of the western part of the church there is one of the unique images of the Most Holy Theotokos "Abbess of the Convent", created as a resemblance

of the icon "Abbess of Holy Mount Athos" (photo 11). This image serves as a reminder of the invisible stewardship of the Mother of God towards the convent. This is the place for prayer of the Mother Superior (hegumena) of the convent during the service.



Photo 10.

Also in the western part of the church, in niches under the choir, in medallions, there are holy men written on the right from the south, and the holy Myrrh-Bearing Women on the left from the north (photo 12, 13). Above the entrance to the stairs leading to the choir there is the Image of Jesus Christ Not Made by Hands.

The kliros is painted in a peculiar way: on the southern wall there is an iconographic composition "Christ the True Vine" or "Christ the Grape Vine" (one of the symbolic names of Christ, based on the words of the Gospel: "I am the true vine, and My Father is the winegrower" (John 15:1). The icon of Christ Pantocrator is surrounded by a vine, in the branches

of which the apostles are depicted (photo 14), which also reminds of the following Gospel words: “I am the vine, and you are the branches; whoever abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit, for without Me you

can do nothing” (John 15: 5). Grapes in Christian iconography are the personification of the wine of life and immortality, also symbolizing sacrifice, since wine is associated with blood.



Photo 11

On the north wall there is Blessed Andrew, Simeon the Stylite and Daniel the Stylite (photo 15). Among the murals on the kliros there are also the images of the Holy Song-Writers- the reverends

Romanos the Melodist, John Damascene, Kosma Mayumsky and others (photo 16). Traditionally, these saints are considered the heavenly patrons of church singers and reciters.



Photo 12.



Photo 13.



Photo 14.

The iconostasis is represented by four tiers of icons: this is a local row, a festive row, Deisis and a row of prophets (photo 17). A number of forefathers are absent from the iconostasis, but they are depicted in medallions in the vault above the solium.

The deep meaning of the presence of the iconostasis in an Orthodox church is revealed in the



Photo 15.

works of priest Pavel Florensky: "... the material iconostasis does not replace the iconostasis of living witnesses and stays not instead of them, but only as an indication of them in order to focus the worshipers on them. The focus of attention is a necessary condition for the spiritual vision development" [4, p. 141–142].



Photo 16.

It should be noted that while working on the frescos of the church, icon painters do not set themselves the goal of creating a masterpiece or conquering the worshipers in the church with their skill. Analyzing the peculiarities of monastic art and culture, the researcher O. O. Smolina emphasizes that "art should play a service role here, it acts as a conduc-

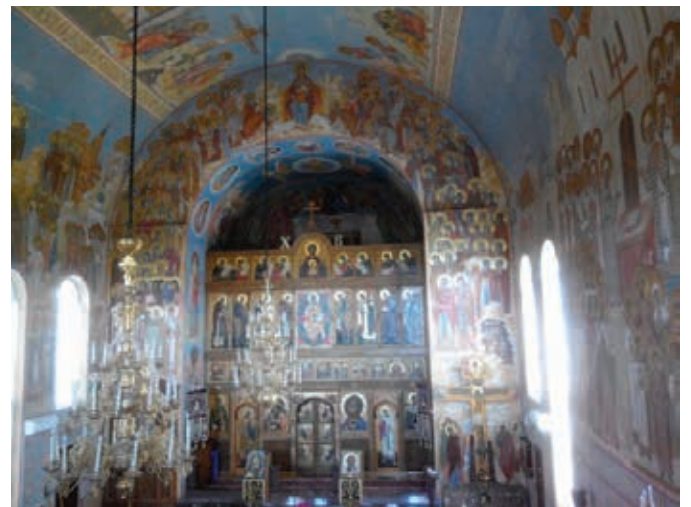


Photo 17.

tor of Christian religious ideas and values, it is strict, restrained, ascetic and "laconic". Achievement of a high artistic level in icon painting and architecture may not only be wrong to set as a goal, but also is not welcomed" [2, P. 44].

The main task of monumental painting, like other types of church art, is the upbringing and formation

of a person, putting their souls into a prayerful contemplative state. Temple painting is designed to help a person “repose in God”.

**Conclusion.** The iconographic program of the Church of All Russian Saints was formed under the influence of the following main factors: the dedication of the church, the cultural and historical situation, liturgical texts, church dogmas, features of the internal architecture of the church, the wishes of the customer, the selection of the most revered saints in the convent. The program of the painting of this church traces the influence of both ancient Byzantine

and ancient Russian icon painting traditions. Since new saints glorified by the church periodically appear, this is reflected in the church fresco painting. In this regard, it is acceptable to slightly change the previous iconographic narratives, adding to them newly glorified saints. The unusual architecture of the church, which forms its interior space, can serve as a source for a creative approach to drawing up an iconographic program. The art of an icon painter is not an end in itself, it is designed to tune a person to prayer and repentance, since the church is the place where the worldly reality is united with the heavenly one.

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