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# **Animae Pulchrae: Depiction of Sainly Images in Byzantine Mural Painting**

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## **Abstract**

This chapter investigates the visual aspects of physical beauty of the saintly images depicted within the painterly ensembles of Byzantine art in the period between sixth and fifteenth centuries. It also examines the processes of transposition of beauty as a religious and ideological notion into the visual sphere of its iconographic and aesthetic significance. During the millennium of development of Byzantine mural painting, the different categories of saints have evolved in assemblies of respectable and influential characters with whom the believers could communicate through silent prayers, as well as through their own self-comparison. In that process of ideological interaction between the faithful and the saints as the “constitutional members” of the painted microcosmos of Christian temples, the physical appearance of the saintly images was, by all means, a strong argument in the religious discourse regarding their role in the mission for salvation of humanity. In that regard, each saintly category has received different visual concept of aesthetic values related to their specific physical attraction. Hence, different saintly categories have acquired different aesthetic codes for visual configuration of beauty in the structural design of their iconographic appearance throughout the era of Byzantine artistic production.

**Keywords:** Byzantine painting, frescoes, saintly images, iconography, physical beauty

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## **1. Introduction**

In the eyes of the beholder, the fresco programs of the Byzantine churches were not only a didactic textbook for their religious education through visual paradigms but also a whole world of ideological attitudes and ideas shaped in aesthetic forms of attractive vistas. This particularly refers to the painted cycles illustrating Evangelic stories and Biblical episodes that were designed and depicted across the walls of the temples to give the faithful the necessary

arguments to upgrade and strengthen their belief. The first register of the painted program of any Byzantine church, which encompassed a gallery of represented saintly figures, was the one closest to the beholder and therefore most valuable in regard to their self-recognition in terms of ideological and religious perception and comprehension. Belonging to different categories, established according to the diverse roles they have played in the process of development of the faith and its institutions, these saints gained their specific place and function within the painted ensembles of the religious edifices (angels usually guard the entrances, apostles support the vaulting structures, bishops fill the sanctuary, holy warriors decorate the pillars, etc.). Hence, they became constitutional members of the great assembly of Christian characters, mandatory for embellishment of the lowest zone of the painted church decoration. Represented in larger-than-life dimensions, depicted in full frontal positions, and marked by the characteristic features of their personal contribution to the faith, the saintly figures have become the closest “collaborators” of the believers in the continuous process of religious upbringing of the congregation.

In order to meet the emotional and spiritual needs, as well as expectations of the faithful in the process of the religious interaction, the saintly images had to express a certain amount of aesthetic energy in order to “attract” believers’ attention and fulfill their didactic function of supreme and unchallenging role models. Therefore, a catalog of saintly images was established in the frames of which diverse characters have gained different aesthetic features in regard to their place in the history of the Christian church [1]. Their social background, religious function, and cultic implications were also encompassed in this aesthetic design in a form of visual configuration that reflected not only their physical appearance but also the overall charisma [2]. In that manner, the typological structure of the different categories of saintly images could be expressed through their portraiture, corporeality, and emotional expression appropriate to their deeds done for the faith, as well as adequate to their educational mission for the believers. This “functional beauty” of the Byzantine saints was due to the canonic background of their aesthetic concept established on their sustainable spiritual roles played in the ceremonial story of salvation [3–5]. However, besides the significance of their historical acknowledgment, their sustainable function for the congregation was much more important if one bears in mind the power of their visual appearance over the vigilant senses of the worshippers in the mystical ambience of the Christian church. Reflecting the inner spiritual charge through a set of carefully drafted visual features [6] that should act as a silent, yet powerful PR, the physical appearance of the saintly figures became a painterly matrix of spiritual beauty of the depicted characters which grew into a luxurious catalog of pure and undisputed sacred portraiture.

Although the category of beauty as a visual determinant of someone’s physical appearance within the fresco ensembles was never in the focus of Byzantine scholars, some attempts to analyze its structural core have been made recently [7]. These efforts spring from the notion of the unavoidable visual determination of a saint or a category of saints as a prerequisite for their successful intercession between the believers’ expectation and the higher power of ultimate soteriology. In that regard, the wholehearted angels, the resolute apostles, the wise bishops, the brave soldiers, the dedicated healers, the self-denying martyrs, the devout

hermits, and the modest female saints were all given distinctive features of facial and corporeal character which reflects their inner—spiritual, as well as external—physical capacity. If one should accept the idea that *the form indicates the essence*, that is the visual structure is an external indicator of the substance, then the outlook of the saintly images should be seen as a collection of qualitative references to their overall personality, most importantly to their ability to transmit theological messages to the congregation. Accordingly, the physical appearance of the saints could serve as a powerful instrument for visually enhanced religious action and therefore it should have been designed and depicted in the most corresponding manner. That manner encompassed distinctive features of physiognomy, facial exposition, stance, corporal expression, attitude, temper, and costume of the saintly representations as structural components of their psychological chemistry, as well as physical attractiveness united in the aesthetically provocative and artistically compelling compound of *beauty* [8]. In this chapter, we analyze the different categories of saints in relation to the iconographic benchmarks of beauty encompassed by their specific and highly recognizable physical appearance.

## 2. Beauty and the categories of saints

Since each category of saints is marked by its own aesthetic code which reflects the inner psychical status, that is the personality, as well as the outer physical appearance, that is the visual attractiveness of the saintly images, each one of them radiates with several distinctive typological determinants of sacral look in the sphere of physical beauty. Hence, each category is characterized by an artistic code of likeness which encompasses two components: (1) the canonical matrix of saints' visual aspects dependent on the iconographic samplers and (2) the inventive configuration of saints' distinctive traits inspired by the imaginative expression of Byzantine painters. The first component was determined by the strict rules prescribed by painterly guidebooks mandatory for all iconographers and fresco painters, while the second one was due to the magnitude of artists' personal painterly idiolects permeated with creative energy, genuine impulse, and unrestrained fantasy. The unity of the two components is actually the artistic product which at the same time reflects the normative boundaries, yet radiates with power and passion of artistic illumination. This unity respects the iconographic cannons, but ennobles them with the illustrative manners of painterly expression characteristic of diverse time periods, different artistic trends, and various painters. Of course, we have to keep in mind that each saintly category had a different spiritual significance for the believers built upon their historic and ecclesiastic background, thus the images had to radiate with the specific visual energy characteristic of each category individually. Accordingly, the eight categories of saints found in the fresco arrangements of sacral edifices from the Byzantine period (sixth to fifteenth century): angels, apostles, bishops, martyrs, holy healers, holy warriors, hermits, and female saints have been marked by eight clusters of aesthetic signatures, resulting in eight different painterly labels of saintly beauty. Each of them will be analyzed in the following subchapters.

## 2.1. Angels

As inhabitants of the celestial heights and messengers of God, the angels occupy a special place in the visual gallery of saintly characters due to their heavenly origin, as well as their supernal nature. Sensual and light-weighted, vibrant and graceful, the supernatural angelic individuals are marked by the features of superiority, charity, compassion, benefaction, and kindness. As intermediaries between heaven and earth and representatives of the superb power of godly intentions for the faithful, the angels are blessed with the virtues of purity and grace, physical seductiveness, and spiritual intensity. As the most exotic of all saintly characters, the angelic creatures can float and hang in the air, balance in the imaginary horizons, as well as be stable and earthbound as much as any other member of the “pantheon” of Christian saints. Originated in the heavenly spheres of the eternal Kingdom, the angels emanate facial features of perfect harmony, composed of round shapes and oval contours with almond-like eyes, rosy cheeks, and juicy lips, and ornamented with luxuriant locks of long, curly hair. Their facial expression is gentle and calm, illuminative, tender, and radiant. Tall and skinny, long-legged, and attractive are the basic features of angels’ corporal appearance which, encompassing their appealing bodies, as well as their elegance, refer to the most desirable form of beauty in the world of saintly characters. The postures of the represented angels are noble and elegant, classy and glamorous, radiating with superior lightness and aerial exuberance. With energetic charge composed of celestial sparkles that permeate the figures with ceremonial motions, the angels look like cosmic voyagers who have come down to earth from the most exotic spheres of the universe. Dressed in white garments made of light fabrics, or, occasionally, in exclusively ornamented costumes with militant or aristocratic insignia, the heavenly messengers, warriors, and landlords astonish with their graceful appearance, imposing elegance, as well as stylish impression.

From the dignified stances of the pretentiously handsome angels in the Basilica of Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (executed in the period between 556 and 569) [9] to the powerful and vigorous angelic figures from the Kariye djami in Istanbul (1321) [10], the angels have gone a long way through the horizons of physical beauty in Byzantine painting. In that regard, one should mention the suggestively portrayed and aristocratically dressed angels from the church of Dormition in Nicaea (Turkey) represented with vivid, almost human-like facial expression [11], as well as the womanly elegant figure of the archangel from the decorative program of the church of St. Sophia in Constantinople [12], both from the second half of the ninth century. Among the many beautiful angelic representations from the mid-Byzantine period, the one decorating the eastern wall of the church of St. George at Kurbinovo in Macedonia (1191) is, by all means, the most attractive (**Figure 1**). Tall and slender, sophisticated and weightless, with long extremities and a feminine portrait, the archangel Gabriel from the Kurbinovo temple is one of the most alluring saintly characters of the twelfth century. The energetic pose of the angel, the temperament gesture full of inner self-confidence, the rhythmically conducted pace, and the dynamic unrest of the light draperies, as secondary traits of the Kurbinovo angelic depiction, are characteristic enough of a jubilant “top model” in the world of saintly characters. The thirteenth century introduces more manly traits in the representation of angels in regard to the corpulence of their figures, as well as the accentuated attention to the design of their costumes, as shown



**Figure 1.** The church of St. George at Kurbinovo, Archangel Gabriel.

by the representations in the church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid (1295) (**Figure 2**). In the fourteenth century, the angels have become breathtaking male individuals with delicate complexion and athletic figures who accompany historic personages, as in the naos of the Lesnovo monastery in Macedonia (1342–1343) [13], or safeguard the entrance to the temple, as in the church of St. Andreas near Skopje (1388–1389) [14].

## 2.2. Apostles

Being among those who accompanied Jesus on His mission of salvation, the apostles gained a particular place in Christian religion as closest collaborators of the Messiah. Witnesses of Christ's ministry and members of his personal entourage, the 12 disciples have become his direct successors in the aftermath of His Passion and Resurrection. Marked by the physical features of sturdiness and vigor, as well as the spiritual traits of unwavering determination, the holy apostles have become members of the saintly gallery as early as the beginnings of painterly decoration of the Christian temples. Immovable and unbreakable, dedicated and proactive, the 12 devoted associates of Jesus gained visual traits of imposing physical strength and firmly modeled psychological characters. In that regard, their facial features are constructed in a manner that displays voluminous forms and accentuated secondary traits appropriate to the different age of each individual. Peaceful and dignified, serious and full of personal integrity, the facial expression of the apostles match their internal affection for humanity, as well as the solemn dimension of their kindhearted nature. In regard to their



**Figure 2.** The church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid, Archangel Gabriel.

corporal appearance, one should notice the firm musculature of their bodies which reflects the power of endurance, the intensity of the physical activities, as well as the magnitude of their missionary performances. Since the bodies are strong and vigorous, the postures of the apostles are stable and resolute, powerful and proud, emanating potency and determination, carnal steadiness, and physical well-being. Permeated with energetic charge of a kinetic nature, yet represented with moderate motion and dignified movements, the apostles look like monumental celestial heroes descended from the horizons of supreme spiritual power. Dressed in characteristic apostolic costumes, depicted with diverse hair styles and inventively configured facial “supplements,” the 12 disciples of Christ are the most “iconic” of all members of the saintly elite.

Making their entry into the painterly world of saintly characters even in the times of the Roman catacombs [15, 16], the apostles have earned their permanent place among the most representative individuals of Christendom. In the Byzantine period, the apostles Peter and Paul became the true representatives of the apostolic community in the sphere of painterly depictions as the two monumental pillars of perseverance and religious determination. This duo took the role of the leaders of saintly processions in the sixth century [17] and later

Peter and Paul appear as symbols of the apostolic group and guardians of Christ's testament and His missionary legacy. That is the case with the monumental and physically powerful figures of the apostles in the church of St. Demetrius at Vladimir from the end of the twelfth century [18], as well as with the suggestive and authoritative portraits of Sts Peter and Paul in the church of saint Achilleos in Arilje (Serbia) from the end of the thirteenth century [19]. The massive corporal appearance of Sts Peter and Paul from the fresco ensemble of the church of the Holy Virgin at Matejče in Macedonia (1384–1352) are consistent with their role of safeguards of the north entrance to the temple [20], while the elegant and graceful figure of St. Peter depicted within the painterly decoration of the Kalenić monastery in Serbia (third decade of the fifteenth century) corresponds to the poetic stylistic nature of the fresco ensemble in the church [21]. One of the most presentable apostolic images from the fourteenth century fresco painting is the strong, muscular, and powerful figure of St. Paul, represented within the fresco arrangement of the church of St. Nichetas at Banjani near Skopje (1323–1324) (**Figure 3**). Manly and dominant, courageous and superior, with a resolute step and a decisive motion, as well as full of sparkling energy, the image of St. Paul from the Banjani temple is one of the most impressive pictures of apostolic predisposition and fervent determination.



**Figure 3.** The church of St. Nichetas at Banjani, Apostle Paul.

### 2.3. Bishops

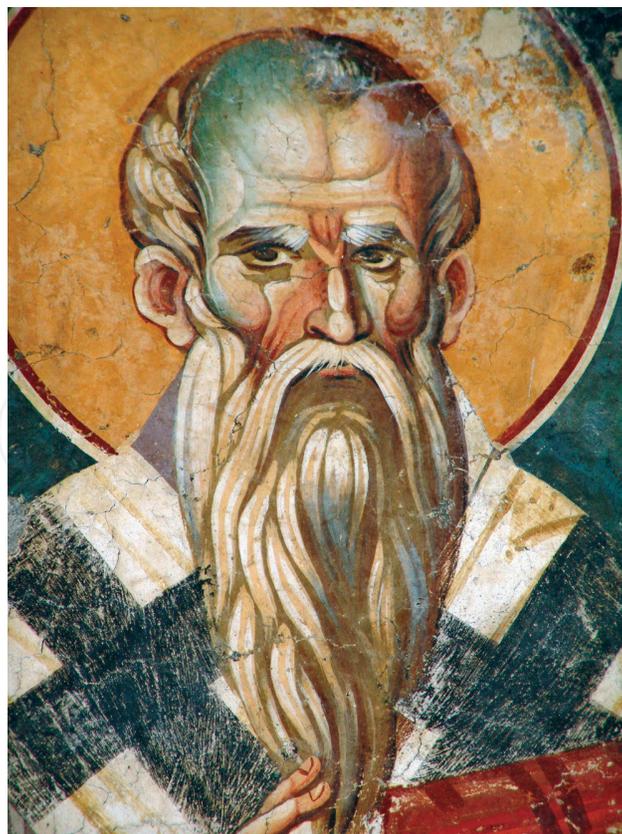
The category of bishops encompasses the respected individuals that, at certain times, occupied the Episcopal centers of the orthodox world as the most renowned representatives of the Christian faith. Intellectuals and scholars, preachers and orators, the bishops were represented as noble, experienced and erudite leaders of the congregation. Well-educated and ennobled with essential wisdom, passionately devoted to theological disputes, and highly creative in the sphere of religious thought and scripts, the bishops were marked by visual traits of devoted missionaries, enduring teachers, and honorable advisers of the faithful. Venerated and admired, esteemed and followed by the believers, the great church fathers of the Orthodoxy were represented in a manner that reflected their exclusive religious status as the most respected leaders of the Christian institution, as well as members of the highest ecclesiastic entourage. In that regard, their facial features are composed with an enhanced anatomic approach that encompasses the wrinkles and ridges to display the golden age of their sophisticated spiritual wisdom. Elderly and mature, solemn and suggestive, aged and bearded, the bishops' images glow with the warm sparkles of religious experience. Their facial expression is calm, yet inviting, strict yet consolatory; the suggestive gaze of the eyes as a primary feature of their facial articulation matches the fervent and ever-watchful nature of their religious devotion. Noble and generous, convincing, serene, and compassionate, the bishops' images radiate with inner composure and soothing energy. Similarly, their corporal appearance is imposing and monumental, elegant and dignified, thus they look as colossal pillars of the architectural structure of the church institution. Represented in postures of full frontal stature when depicted as portraits or in three-quarter processional poses when shown as members of the Officiating liturgical service, their figures are imposingly ceremonial in motion, delicately vibrant, and ritualistic, determined by the harmonious and well-balanced rhythm of their movements. Charged with the sophisticated power of their inner spiritual energy, the bishops move slowly and gracefully, blessing the faithful from the walls of the edifice or performing the church rituals in the sanctuary. Depicted with voluminous facial shapes and saturated in colors, the bishops' images are permeated with the energetic expression of deep emotional charge. In regard to the colors, the respectable leaders of the church communities have the following nuances of the spectrum: pale ochre for the tan, warm brown for the wrinkles, auburn for the ridges, greenish for the shades, and snowy white for their hairs and beards.

From the rigorous and almost remorseless facial outlook of Ravenna's archbishop Maximianus (548) depicted as a member of Emperor Justinian's retinue in San Vitale [22] to the formally configured peacefulness on the images of Serbian archpriests (second half of the sixteenth century) represented in the narthex of the Patriarchate in Peć [23], there is a vast palette of facial expressions that can be seen within bishops' portraiture. It is of course due to the different approach of the painters to the artistic currents of different time periods, as well as the intention of the authors to depict the church individuals in regard to their historical status and ecclesiastic privileges. However, the physical look of the bishops has always reflected a type of beauty compulsorily related to maturity and generosity, as primary aspect of their spiritual personality. In that regard, we can point to the imposing serenity of the countenances and the mild configuration of the facial patina of St. Basil the Great and St. Nicholas (second half of the tenth century) in the painted ensemble of Agioi Anargyroi in Kastoria [24], as well as to the noble composure of the

graphically wrinkled face of St. Niphon in the fresco painting of the Holy Mother of God church in Veljusa, Macedonia (ca. 1085) [25]. The solemn postures of the bishops' figures officiating in the sanctuary of the Serbian church of the Holy Trinity in Sopoćani (1272–1276), the festive stances of their ceremonial bow, the delicate composure of their facial mimicry, and the harmonious coloristic spectrum of their chromatic definition saturated with golden ochre and hazel shades are another example of unrestrained attentiveness, prudence, and devotion. Somewhat more energized is the portrait of St. Clement from the painted arrangement of the Holy Mother of God church in Ohrid (Virgin Peribleptos) from 1295, executed with accentuated voluminous configuration of the facial anatomy, vivid shapes, and pictorial colors, with a purpose to picture the highly authoritative role of the bishop as the first archpriest in the influential Episcopal see of Ohrid. The dynamic facial architecture that ridges around the suggestively contoured eyes, the multistructured facial constitution, the muscular figure, as well as the colorful resonance of optically diversified shades and hues glowing in his inflamed facial expression make this image of St. Clement one of the most remarkable creations in saintly portraiture in the history of the Byzantine painting (Figure 4).

#### 2.4. Martyrs

The category of martyrs includes those who have suffered a tragic death due to their religious determination, usually in the earliest times of Christianity. They have proudly sacrificed themselves for the common ideological cause and were put to many tortures resulting in glorious



**Figure 4.** The church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid, St. Clement of Ohrid.

and memorable death. After being celebrated as the most courageous followers of Christ who have never renounced their faith in spite of the unbearable torments, the martyrs came to be associated with the bravest devotion to Christianity and were considered as the most stable columns of Christian dedication. Suffering at the hands of pagan emperors and governments at a relatively young age, the martyrs were looked upon as uncompromising devotees sacrificed at the altar of salvation in the dawn of the Christian epoch. Thence, their physical appearance should reflect the youthful energy and the resolute determination encompassed by their dignified, as well as resilient outlook. Due to the courageous character that led them into voluntary death, the facial features of the martyr saints are composed of mild curvatures, serene architectural lines, and saturated palette of colors. Young and vibrant, strong and resistant, the portraits of the martyrs reflect their inner strength, spiritual power, and ideological energy. That is why their facial expression is always an expression of willingness and capacity, resilience and bravery. Proud and insolent, bold and adamant, the martyrs are pictured with accentuated vividness of the facial configuration reflecting the inner fount of inflamed spirituality. In regard to the corporal appearance, the martyrs display a variety of different typological features. However, the anatomy of their bodies is always elaborated nicely, showing a great deal of unrestrained muscular construction due to the youthful age and the physical strength of the manly figures. The postures are marked by an underlined elegance and are usually frontal in the projection, but scenic due to the lively rhythm of the corporeal motion. The martyrs are represented in the full outburst of their carnal energy, manifested through a distinctive range of remarkable stances and accentuated figural gestures. Given an energetic charge of elastic movements of the bodies and resolute gestures of the upper extremities, the martyr saints are pictured with hands in a pose of blessing or in a stance of a devoted prayer. Depicted in various costumes that denote their diverse social statuses—from modest clothing to luxuriously ornamented garments, the martyr saints are the class of sacral personages with the most heterogeneous costumes in the history of the Byzantine painting. That can also refer to the chromatic range of the palette applied to their faces and figures; the glowing ochre and the crystal ecru for the tans, the warm auburn and the deep chestnut for the hairs and beards, as well as Pink rose for the cheeks and light gray for the shades are the most common colors for the depiction of martyrs' portraits.

Starting from the first ever depicted procession of martyrs dressed in ceremonially white garments in Ravenna's Sant'Apollinare Nuovo (556–569) [26] and closing with the picturesque row of ritually lined up characters in the paracession of St. George in the Hilandar monastery on Mount Athos (second half of the seventeenth century) [27], the Byzantine art has left a multitude of remarkable specimens of martyrs' images. Among them, one should mention the illustrative and highly picturesque portraits of the ones who suffered their martyrdom in the time of Emperor Julian the Apostate, depicted in the church dedicated to the Tiberiopolean martyrs in Strumica, Macedonia (turn of the tenth century) [28], as well as the gentle, aristocratic and almost poetic representation of St. Christopher holding a martyr cross in the fresco ensemble of the church of St. George in Omorphoklissia in Greece (end of the thirteenth century [29]). Another portrait of St. Christopher painted almost at the same time in the Petrova crkva in Ras (Serbia) displays quite different characteristic; although solemn in stature and elegant in the posture, the martyr represented in the Serbian temple is marked by a decisive gaze of the eyes and a firm psychological attitude of his resilient gesture [30].

However, in the range of the numerous martyr portraits preserved in the fresco decoration of Byzantine temples, we have to acknowledge the outstanding spiritual composure of the image of St. Jacob the Persian from the church of St. George in Staro Nagoričino in Macedonia (1317–1318) (**Figure 5**), one of the most exceptional examples of sophisticated approach to the configuration of a medieval saintly image. Handsome and exotic, firm and corpulent, St. Jacob the martyr is depicted with a perfect oval of his facial appearance, darkish tan, and a tamed hairdo, appropriate to his oriental origin. Dressed in a lavishly decorated cloak ornamented with rich and colorful embroidery, this image of St. Jacob reflects the affluent courtly position he once held at his home country. Chromatically saturated with pastel colors: olive for the tan, hazel-greenish for the facial shades, nut-brown for the hair, and warm brown for the garment, St. Jacob the Persian, exotically represented as a noble and dignified oriental individual, can be encountered among the most “attractive” martyrs of the Byzantine painterly culture of the fourteenth century.

## 2.5. Holy healers

The category of Holy healers encompasses several saintly characters who appear as true symbols of physical and spiritual health. Although the brothers Sts. Kosmas and Damian, as well as the most venerated by the congregation—St. Panteleimon, were the most frequently represented



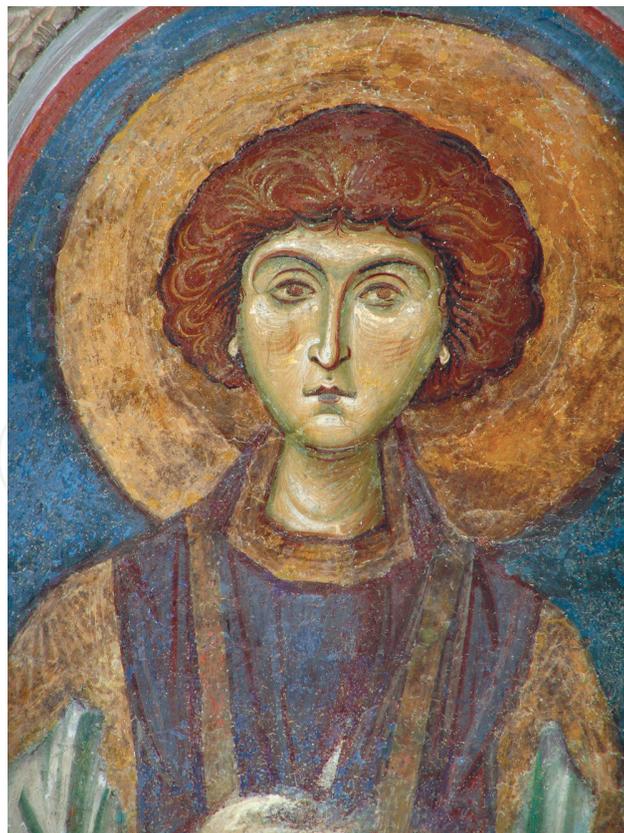
**Figure 5.** The church of St. George at Staro Nagoričino, St. Jacob the Persian.

physicians within the painted ensembles of Byzantine churches; other representatives of this category (St. Kyros, St. Luke the Surgeon, St. John, St. Sampson, etc.) also appear in the fresco decoration of sacral edifices throughout the medieval epoch. Performing the noble duties of physical and psychological healing of the pure and underprivileged, helping the sick and the mentally unstable, assisting the ones suffering from diseases, and comforting the weak and the fragile, the holy physicians have gained the admiration of the believers due to their benevolent activities and humanistic approach. Committed to the beneficial tasks of medication and dedicating their lives to mastering the curative skills, the holy healers gained the respect of distinctive members of the Christian society on the ground of their professional devotion, as well as their humane determination. Picturing the charitable Christian virtues and symbolizing the health care given to the people wholeheartedly, the *anargyroi* received the attentive outlook of young and determined, noble and alert, dignified, and tender characters. In that regard, their facial features are young, fresh, and vigilant, permeated with a suggestive facial energy and illuminative strength. Facial ovals, almond-shaped eyes, bushy hairs, and beardless countenances are the most frequent characteristics of the saintly category dedicated to the noble spheres of practical medicine. Since the faces are youthful and full of inner vitality, the facial expression of the physicians is always attentive, watchful, and responsive, radiating the noble energy of their vigorous humanistic determination. Their corporal appearance is also energetic, vivacious, and decisive, while the postures are always fully frontal and firmly configured. Equipped with medical instruments and a box of curative potions and lotions, as a distinctive emblem of the many successful treatments they have performed gladly, the holy healers are always depicted in stable and dignified poses, ennobled with careful and gentle motions, appropriate to their responsible and reliable occupation. Wearing traditional garments adequate to their social status and affiliation, the physicians usually occupy some of the most noticeable places in the spatial organization of church decorations.

Among the most remarkable specimens of painterly images of the holy physician saints, one has to mention the portrait of St. Panteleimon depicted at the end of the eleventh century in the fresco ensemble of the church dedicated to the Holy Mother of God in Veljusa [31]. The holy physician in Veljusa is depicted with a mild facial oval, almond-shaped eyes, basket-like hair style, gentle facial expression, and a massive, muscular corpus, all reflecting the full-blooded, yet affectionate humanistic determination of the medicine man. The gentle composure of the portrait, softly modeled with mild curvatures and toned anatomic components of the same saint represented in the ensemble of the church dedicated to St. Panteleimon at Nerezi, Macedonia (ca. 1166) makes it even more amazing (**Figures 6, 7**). Depicted with fair complexion, luscious facial anatomy, elegant hairdo, and generous expression, the image of St. Panteleimon in the Nerezi church emanates a strong psychological determination visualized through the large almond-shaped eyes and the resolute glance. Similarly, the neat image of St. Panteleimon in the church of St. George at Kurbinovo (1191) [32] is dressed in luxurious cloak ornamented with embroidery, while his "colleagues," Sts. Kosmas and Damian are dressed more modestly, but are represented with the same decisive and determinant attitude, as their fashionably clothed companion. Usually depicted as representatives of the category of the holy healers, this trio makes a small, but a respectable assembly of competent physicians wholeheartedly dedicated to their merciful occupation. That is the case with the depiction of St. Panteleimon flanked by



**Figure 6.** The church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi, St. Panteleimon.



**Figure 7.** The church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi, St. Panteleimon (detail).

St. Kosmas and St. Damian in the Ascension church in Žiča, Serbia (1315), where the saints are represented with slender corporal appearance, elegant motion, graceful postures, and gentle facial expression [33]. Articulating care and compassion, empathy and spontaneous affection, the three physicians from the Žiča monastery summarize the inner ethical nature and the external physical beauty of the holy healers in the most appropriate manner.

## 2.6. Holy warriors

The category of the holy warriors, unavoidable in the painted decoration of the Byzantine temples, encompasses a dozen individuals who appear as the most athletic figures among the representatives of the saintly gallery. Due to their bravery, described in hagiographic texts, as well as the uncompromising nature of courageous fighters against the evil, the holy warriors received painterly features of masculine and vigorous outlook as a true match to the furious battles they have fought, to the celebrated victories they have won, and to the benevolent victims they have become in honor of the Christian faith. Therefore, their facial features are constructed vividly: the mild oval of the face refers to their youth, the plump cheeks and the rosy tan speak of their full-blooded energy, and the flashy eyes burn in the eternal fire of their physical, as well as spiritual supremacy. Their facial expression is adequate to the youthful countenances and the firm facial architecture they possess and encompasses a wide scale of different emotional reflections, mainly summarized in the references of bravery, self-confidence, commitment, and reliability. Being strong and courageous, adamant and irresistible, the holy warrior saints are depicted with firm corporal anatomy, elaborated boldly in details and represented with accentuated muscular anatomy of the figures. The enforced corporeality, stressed through the swaying poses of swaggering motion of the figures is the dominant element in conception of the warrior depictions which radiates with power and passion of their evident youth, obvious strength, and verified courage. Hence, the poses of the holy warriors are determined and ready for action, energetic and dynamic, abundant in kinetic mobility, and bursting with inexhaustible strength and inner potency. Superior and irresistible, powerful and invincible, the warrior saints emanate the spicy sparkles of their potent energetic charge through different sets of motion that refer to their vivid temper and tireless nature. Dressed in lavishly assembled military costumes and proudly holding the spears, swords, and shields, that is their militant equipment, the holy warriors deserve the title of “officers and gentlemen” on the ground of their luxurious uniforms, their relentless attitudes, and, most of all, the power and passion of their struggling determination.

From the time of Early Christianity, when an exclusive image of Christ as a soldier, dressed in a militant attire was represented in the Archiepiscopal chapel in Ravenna (second decade of the sixth century) [34], the depictions of warrior saints have become frequent enough to be unavoidable in the decorative ensembles of the Byzantine era. However, the most remarkable warrior characters can be detected in the painted arrangements of the Middle Byzantine and Late Byzantine period – starting with the imposingly presentable and vigorously self-assured image of St. Demetrius in the church of St. Archangel Michael in Kiev (beginning of the twelfth century) [35], as well as the irresistibly handsome depictions of St. Theodore Stratelates and St. Merkurios from the fresco arrangement of the church of Panagia Kosmosotira in Pherres (after 1152) [36], portrayed in a full masculine bloom and fashionably luxurious military array. A decade later,

the warrior saints in the church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi manifest a firm martial attitude and a thick charge of kinetic energy [37], while the figures of St. George and St. Demetrios from the church of Hagioi Anargyroi in Kastoria (ca. 1180) fascinate with the noble facial expressions, elaborated corporeality, and glamorous ornamentation of their lavishly assembled uniforms (Figure 8). In the fresco painting of the church of Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid (1295), the warrior saints gained larger-than-life dimensions of ruthless fighters against evil [38], while in the church of St. George at Staro Nagoričino (1317–1318), Christ's soldiers were depicted in elegant and dignified poses glowing with inner spiritual charm and a chivalrous gallantry [39]. Also, the luscious facial oval, the soft and gentle nuances of the tan, the alluring eyes and the stylish hairdo of the patron saint in the St. Nichetas church at Banjani (1323–1324), as well as his vainly good-looking figure, occupy one of the main places in the “department” of saintly beauty in the art of the fourteenth century [40]. Similarly, the holy warriors depicted within the fresco ensemble of the Dečani monastery in Serbia (1347–1348) display a number of playful poses and a wide scale of dynamic motions of their energetic and warm-blooded nature [41]. Beautiful and



Figure 8. The church of Hagioi Anargyroi in Kastoria, St. George and St. Demetrios.

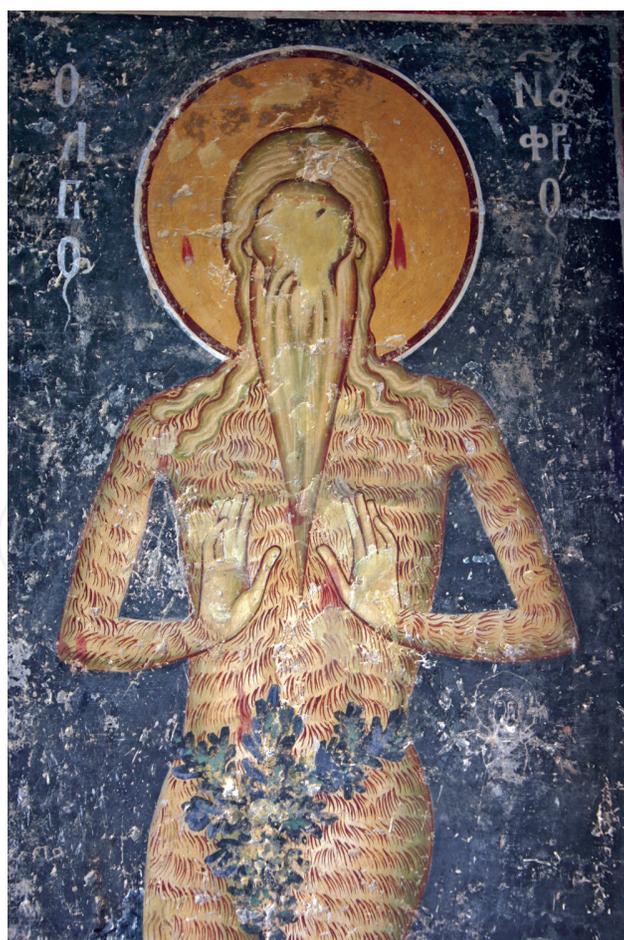
well trimmed, gentle in the expressions, and uncompromising in their temperament gestures, the soldiers depicted in the fresco decoration of Dečani can be compared to a company of heroic knights descended from the celestial spheres of Heaven.

## 2.7. Hermits

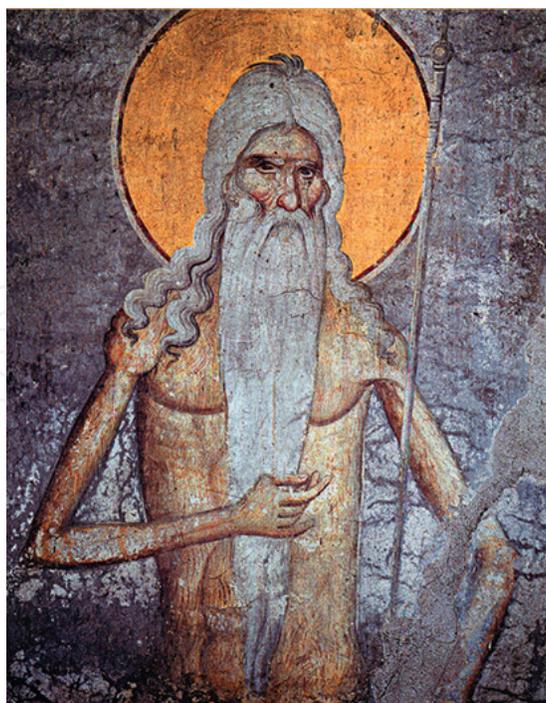
The category that encompasses the eremites is a very specific one since its members are the most radical devotees within the Christian “pantheon” of saints. Depicted ascetically and stripped to their natural, nude outlook as ultimate defenders of the purity of faith, the hermits are one of the most impressive class of saints due to their extremely expressive appearance. Pale and aged prematurely, wrinkled and darkened due to their permanent exposure to the severe climatic conditions and radical changes of the weather, these enduring zealots have gained features of sturdy and unwavering soldiers of the anchoritic army of determinate survivors. Living a life of benevolent refugees from civilized communities, the eremites represent the final border of human denial and self-torture in the name of the Christian faith. In that regard, they are represented with pale complexion of the faces and a wrinkled anatomy of the images as primary facial features of their exhausted countenances. The dark bags under the eyes, the yellowish color of the skin, the loose facial structure permeated with deep ridges, as well as the gray tone of the drained muscular lines are encompassed by the rude facial expression, “backed” in the hell-shaped oven of their physical self-torture. The dramatically suggestive gaze of the declined ocular portion of the faces, the dehydrated skin of the foreheads, the withered cheeks, the loose lips, and the snow-like hairs and beards can hardly fit in any category of physical beauty known to the artistic production of humanity. However, the expressive glow of their self-determination, the sophisticated sparkles of the long-term dedication to ascetism, as well as the supreme inner tranquility of their psychological profiles create an exclusive category of “attractiveness” that is much more spiritual than aesthetical. The same refers to their corporal appearance which is anorexic in the contours and rigid in the overall silhouette. Extremely skinny and malnourished, with declined strength and a minimum of corporal energy, the eremites display their everlasting restraint of all earthly pleasures and welfare benefits. Therefore, their postures are mainly static, expressing only the necessary motion for a prayer, a blessing, or a total devotion to religious ecstasy. However, a slight energetic charge of a kinetic outburst in the position of the praying hands has been given to the depiction of the eremites in order to expose their inner spiritual dedication and vigorous temptation. Dressed in garments made of rough fabrics, or much more often nude and covered with thick hair all over their bodies, the hermits are the most modest saintly characters in regard to their clothing.

Although the eremites appear in the painted decoration of the Byzantine monuments later than the rest of the saintly images, the Middle and the Late Byzantine period display a range of remarkable portraits of the representatives of this ascetic category. In that regard, the figure of St. Paul of Thebes dressed in a minimum-tailored garment and the image of St. Makarios of Egypt covered with fur-like hairs from the ossuary of the Bačkovno monastery in Bulgaria can be encountered among the most impressive eremitic portrayals created at the turn of the twelfth century [42]. No less attractive is the figure of St. Onuphrios from the fresco ensemble of the church dedicated to St. Archangel Michael in Prilep, Macedonia (ca. 1275) represented in a temperament motion of a prayer and covered with short, but thick

“layer” of a costume-like hair (**Figure 9**), as well as the image of St. Peter the Athonite from the decorative program of Protaton on Mount Athos (1290) with an impressive, golden-ochre tanned face and a fur coat made of human hairs (**Figure 10**). The next century brings a representative catalog of eremitic depictions, among which one has to point to the tall, slender, rude, and boney figures of the four hermitic saints depicted in the second level of the narthex of the St. Sophia cathedral in Ohrid (1345–1346) [43], as well as the matching saints represented in the narthex of the Holy Mother of God church in Matejče (1348–1352) [44]. The Matejče eremites, which are very similar to those depicted in the Ohrid cathedral, are the quintessential example of characteristic design of the four zealots (St. Barbaros, St. Peter the Athonite, St. Makarios of Egypt, and St. Arsenios), pictured together as a small assembly of pure devotees to ascetic Christianity. One also has to mention that in the case of Matejče, as a representative of the fourteenth century painting, the dress code of the eremites abandons the modest garments in favor of simple *perisomae* (depicted in different colors), but retains the specific carnal hair as the most “fashionable” way of clothing of the hermitic devotees. The frail faces, the white hairs, the impressively long beards and the short furry coats made of human hairs, altogether with the exhausted muscular bodily architecture are the traits of beauty inspired by the deepest and most secluded ascetic ideals.



**Figure 9.** The church of St. Archangel Michael in Prilep, St. Onuphrios.



**Figure 10.** The church of Panagia Olimpiotissa at Elasson, St. Peter the Athonite.

## 2.8. Female saints

The last category of saints in relation to the notion and manifestation of beauty is the one of female saints, included within the gallery of holy characters depicted in the first register of church decorations. Belonging to two separate subcategories—modest nuns and extravagant lady aristocrats, the female saintly characters are the most appealing portion of the figural arrangement in the fresco decoration due to their gentle outlook, tender femininity, and affectionate nature. Although the two subcategories display different features of facial and corporal aesthetic exposure, they both express a mutual visual reference of physical likeness, presentable appearance, and pleasing exposition. In that regard, their facial features display mild curvatures and fair complexion, permeated with serene facial architecture and inner spiritual tranquility. The facial expressions are calm and tenderhearted, merciful, and compassionate. Radiating with composure and laxity and glowing with innocence and unimposing virtues, the female saints in Byzantine painting are the true jewels of visual attractiveness and stand for the most appealing vistas in the world of pure and unrivaled painterly imagination. Their corporal appearance is also very desirable—tall and slender, elegant and graceful, and noble and dignified, the figures of the female saints fill the interior of Byzantine churches with cultivated aesthetics of their femininity, permeated with the hues of gender sensitivity and irresistible vulnerability. With elegant postures and graceful gestures that manifest their spiritual devotion to an obedient prayer, the female saints are imbued with energetic charge of a mild nature, tamed exposure, and quiet temperament. The graceful movement of the elongated fingers, the ceremonial motion of restrained gestures, as well as the mild expression of dignified affection are the basic features of saintly energy that ornament the figures of the female Christian individuals. The greatest distinction between the depiction of the nuns and

the aristocratic women is within the dress code, which, in the first case, constitutes of modest robes nuanced in pastel colors, while in the second, of luxurious and lavishly decorated garments, ornamented with rich embroidery and adorned with abundance of precious stones.

The real physical beauty of painted female saints is exposed for the first time in the second half of the sixth century in the depiction of the procession of ladies in the church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna [45]. Elegant and glamorous, graceful and ceremonious, the female characters in this basilica are, by all means, the most beautiful assembly of extravagant ladies in the history of Byzantine painting. The middle Byzantine period was the time of differentiation of the female individuals in relation to their social status and hence, their physical depiction. The best example in this regard is the gallery of female saints represented in the church of St. George at Kurbinovo (1191), where the three mildly configured and modestly dressed nuns are accompanied by the three extravagantly positioned and fashionably costumed lady aristocrats [46]. Similar case can be found among the saintly representations of the church dedicated to Sts Peter and Paul in Berende, Bulgaria (mid-fourteenth century), where St. Paraskevi, depicted as an unpretentious and humble monastic inhabitant, is accompanied by the feminine and highly attractive St. Kiriaki [47]. From the same period, the representations of the modest nuns Paraskevi and Barbara in the church of St. George at Pološko in Macedonia are painted together with St. Kiriaki portrayed as a glamorous beauty with refined complexion and *Haute couture* [48]. At the turn of the fifteenth century, the fresco painting of the paracession built next to the temple of Sts Constantine and Helena in Ohrid reveals yet another similar example—the modest and gentle appearance of St. Sosana (**Figure 11**) versus the aristocratically attractive portrait of St. Catherine (**Figure 12**) was the finishing touch to the manifestation of two-dimensional female beauty in Byzantine mural painting.



**Figure 11.** The church of Sts Constantine and Helena in Ohrid, St. Sosana.



Figure 12. The church of Sts Constantine and Helena in Ohrid, St. Catherine.

### 3. Conclusion

In the course of the evolution of Byzantine art, the different categories of saints have gained diverse identities in regard to the depiction of their physical appearance. The beauty as a distinctive aesthetical category of the depicted saintly characters was dependent on their social structure, religious mission, and association with certain physiological references such as strength, temper, passion, and spiritual charisma. Hence, the sensual, weightless, and exuberant angels; the determinate, ambitious, and resolute apostles; the suggestive, dignified, and authoritative bishops; the courageous, committed, and fearless martyrs; the noble, benevolent, and charitable healers; the powerful, vigorous, and passionate warriors; the modest, exhausted, and self-denying hermits; as well as the gentle, affectionate, and radiating female saints have distinguished aspects of physical beauty established on their essential significance for the believers. The superior angels, the proud apostles, the wise bishops, the brave martyrs, the dedicated healers, the alert warriors, the ascetic hermits, as well as the tender female saints constitute eight different clusters of physical beauty rooted in the visual spheres of religious meaning, transformed into aesthetic impression. In that context, the angels are graceful as celestial aristocrats, the apostles are energetic as relentless missionaries, the bishops are prudent as

tireless teachers, the martyrs are bold as unwavering tribunes, the healers are compassionate as beneficent auxiliaries, the warriors are invincible as victorious generals, the hermits are self-determined as salvational victims, and the female saints are attractive as representatives of the aesthetically superior gender. Radiating with charm and passion, shining with endurance and devotion, gleaming with power and resilience, and/or impressing with courtesy and manners, the saints have not only beautified the vision of the congregation, but have also given their most presentable appearance to the grandiose horizon of Christian belief and artistry.

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