

THE ILLUMINATIONS OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

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The scene of the transfiguration is one of the most frequently illuminated of the festal scenes. This is true of Byzantine art in general, and of Oriental Christian art, including the Armenian, in particular. The Transfiguration appears in Byzantine art from the sixth century on, while intriguingly it becomes widespread in the West only in the middle of the fifteenth century.

A number of reasons for its widespread distribution might be proposed, but the main reason is the character and importance of the event. Inasmuch as it is the moment of Jesus' transition from an earthly to a heavenly condition, it symbolizes the transition from this world to the world to come. Thus it highlights the aspiration and the desire of every mortal for the transition to the Garden of Eden. This event may be compared in many respects to baptism in which there is a clear move from a bodily and sinful state to a pure sinless state very close to the divine. Indeed, the scene of Baptism is almost as widespread as the Transfiguration and the two scenes contain similar iconographic elements.

Artists who wished to present the Transfiguration encountered one great problem, which was not found in other scenes, including the Baptism. This is: how to paint the change from bodily to divine? How can one convey that event to a viewer? This was the artists' technical problem and different artists chose different, and fascinatingly varied ways of approaching it. This special artistic aspect of the scene is the subject of this paper.

The fixed iconography of this scene, as it was painted in Byzantine art and in Armenian manuscripts from Cilicia, is familiar (fig. 1)¹. It is the following: Christ, in a white garment, is standing on top of a mountain or on the top of the middle mountain of three. He is set in a mandorla

¹ Typical is the scene of the Transfiguration from the Gospel of Queen Keran; Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate, no. 2563, fol. 69.



Fig. 1.

Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate, J2563 of 1272, fol. 69.

and is blessing with his right hand and holds a scroll in his left hand. At his sides are a young Moses on the right and an old Elijah dressed in sheepskin on his left. Beneath them are Peter, James and John, in different poses. Peter, on the left, is standing on one knee and pointing at the spectacle; James is turning around in wonder, and John is falling

down on his face. In the Paleological period, the drama of the scene was enhanced by the apostles lying full length from the mountain.

We must examine the basis upon which artists formulated this scene in the fifth and sixth centuries and what were the iconographic forebears of this particular presentation of the event of the Transfiguration. Conceptually, it is clear that the Revelation at Sinai provided inspiration for them, but we may still inquire about iconographic model.

The most obvious source is to be sought in Roman art. There is a scene in which an important personage (usually the emperor) is changing from earthly to a heavenly being, or is going over into the world to come. Such descriptions are to be found on Roman coins and sarcophagi. One interesting example is a Roman coin of Septimus Severus on which there is a being ascending to heaven, in an apotheosis of the sun².

These attempts represent supernatural or heavenly nature by means of a cloud or an animal, which carries the human figure to heaven³. The spectators fall on the earth from the impact of the vision. Christian artists could well have translated these scenes into their style. The cloud that symbolized the divine and the spiritual⁴ could have developed into the mandorla around Christ's body.

Another possible source are funerary scenes on sarcophagi. Here the figure of the deceased is shown in a medallion (compare the mandorla) borne up by angels to heaven, while the spectators fall to the earth (fig. 2)⁵. Alternatively the deceased are represented, with their souls about to ascend to heaven, and beside them are two standing figures (compare Moses and Elijah in the Transfiguration). At the base of the medallion is a Dionysiac scene, of young men gathering grapes or treading them. They are preparing wine. Such Bacchanalian scenes appear also on a Jewish sarcophagus⁶. In this case, Judaism forbade the representation of the deceased in a medallion and therefore the Temple candelabrum replaced it⁷. Nonetheless, the meaning is clear: the soul of the deceased is en route to the world to come or to eternal life, which is symbolized by the seasons of the year or the preparation of the wine, the drink of

² Cast of a coin of Septimus Severus.

³ Elijah ascending in his fiery chariot is a common theme in art, compare the fifteenth century icon shown in V. LAURIANA AND V. PINDAKOVIOV 1980, pl. 132 and the similar scene *ibid.*, 152.

⁴ See K. WEITZMANN 1982, 38.

⁵ See E. PANOFSKY 1964, fig. 126.

⁶ See *ibid.*, fig. 127.

⁷ Sarcophagus fragment from Museo Nazionale delle Terme, third century.



Fig. 2.

Sarcophagus, The Louvre (Panofsky 1964, fig. 1260)

eternal life. The overall structure here reminds us of the Transfiguration where the prophets take the place of the seasons and the apostles take the place of the three Dionysiac youths.

There is also a conceptual background to the adoption of the structural plan of the scene. Since it contains a number of elements that represent eternal life, the seasons of the year (renewal) and the wine, perhaps the first Christian artists saw in this a suitable exemplar to represent the sublime scene of the Transfiguration, which also indicates future eternal life.

This structure served as a pattern for another scene, the ascent to heaven, as may be found as early as the sixth century in the Rabula Codex and later in the eleventh century Armenian manuscript from Mughni⁸. The structure was so intimately connected with this scene that in an Arabic manuscript from Florence we find the scene of Christ's ascent to heaven while at the bottom is an exact copy of the three apostles from the Transfiguration, amazed at the vision. Here the apostles' figures replace the spectators of the ascent⁹.

The most famous sixth-century example is the mosaic from St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai. Here the Byzantine formula was fixed, with the two lateral apostles standing on their knees, while the central one is lying on his front¹⁰. In St. Catherine's, at the foot of Mt. Sinai, down to the present

⁸ See D.T. RICE 1963, fig. 25 and L.A. DOURNOVO 1969, fig. 11.

⁹ See G. MILLET 1916, 220-221, fn. 2, fig. 185: footnote no. 5.

The Florence Arabic manuscript is Biblioteca Laurentiana Med. Pal. 387, fol. 46r.

¹⁰ See J. GALY 1979, fig. 119.



Fig. 3.

Matenadaran, M6201 of 1038, perhaps Tarōn. fol. 62 (V. Ghazarian, 1981, fig. 64)

day the Transfiguration is the second most important feast. Scholars think that the church was originally dedicated to the Transfiguration and only later was it changed to become a church of St. Catherine.

St. Catherine's Monastery is built on the traditional site of the burning bush, a scion of which is still shown there. The burning bush and the Transfiguration are very similar, both being revelations of divinity, and the revelation of God on Mount Sinai resembles Christ's revelation on the Mount of the Transfiguration. In both cases the events are difficult to describe in painting. In the Transfiguration the difficulty is the metamorphosis of Christ, the cloud and the voice.

In Armenian painting the scene develops in two parallel ways. One resembles that which can be observed in Byzantine art, while the other is unique to Armenian art. In the area of Melitene, where a distinctive school of Armenian art developed, a special version of the Transfiguration also developed. It was unique to the style of this area, which is notable for simplicity and for the presentation only of those details essential to transmit the content of the painting (fig. 3)¹¹.

¹¹ See V. GHAZARIAN 1991, 47, fig. 64.

Ms. Matenadaran M6201 of the year 1038 presents us with an abbreviated Transfiguration that is, nonetheless, quite clear. The painter presents the basic signs of recognition in order to tell the viewer what the scene is. Christ is standing on the top of a high mountain. The three apostles are lying on the slopes of the mountain, with their faces visible and they are shading their eyes with their hands. Moses and Elijah are standing on the left part of the picture, to Christ's right. Moses is first and he is wrapped in a shroud. This presentation is based on the ancient interpretation in the Jewish apocryphal literature, which deals with Moses' burial. This tradition says that Moses was buried like other mortals, and did not ascend to heaven alive like Elijah¹². Therefore, when he arose from his tomb for the Transfiguration, he was wrapped in a shroud.¹³

According to Izmailova, Moses symbolizes the world of the dead while Elijah symbolizes the world of the living. Thus Christ appears as king of both the world of the living and the world of the dead¹⁴.

Ms M6201 of the year 1038 witnesses to the existence of a school of manuscript illumination in this style in the eleventh century in the area between Melitene and the Taurus mountains. It seems to have drawn on ancient traditions and perhaps on models from Cappadocia and from Syria. We note the structure of the faces with large, round eyes, an elongated nose and a small mouth. This was typical of early examples¹⁵. The parchment is light and there is no background. Only Christ's figure is enveloped in bright clouds. There are two trees, laden with fruit, on the mountain.

A similar composition may be observed in M10780, another manuscript of the same period¹⁶. Here too Christ is standing on the peak of a mountain, with the apostles lying in the same posture on the slope of the mountain, this time to Christ's right. On his left stand two figures, one Moses in a shroud and the other, Elijah. Here however, there are additional iconographic elements. In both pictures there are big trees on the mountain. Mathews commented that the presence of trees in this scene is unique to Armenian painters and that it may serve to stress for the viewer the connection between this scene and Paradise¹⁷. As in the

¹² See S. LOEWENSTAMM, 1976, 142-157.

¹³ See R. STICHEL 1978, 669-673.

¹⁴ T.A. IZMAILOVA 1970, 221-222.

¹⁵ See L.A. DOURNOVO 1961, figs. 23, 33-39.

¹⁶ See GHAZARIAN 1991, 49, fig. 67. It is dated to the tenth century by MALKHASYAN, 199-200.

¹⁷ MATHEWS and SANJIAN 1991, 95-96.

previous painting, the trees bear fruit and symbolize the tree of life in Paradise, which is related to the world of the transfigured Christ.

The high mountain is also related to Paradise, as may be seen also in other, literary sources¹⁸. Yovhannēs Erznkac’i says that it is a mountain higher than the whole world. The important new element is the hand of God, which comes forth from the heavens and sends out rays that touch each of the participants in the scene. The radiant heavenly hand demonstrates the presence of God, as in the Baptism. God’s hand rarely appears in this scene and as far as we know this is one of three or four instances, all in Armenian art¹⁹.

Manuscript M4814 of the year 1294 belongs to the Armeno-Oriental school, which Sirarpie Der Nersessian identified together with L.A. Dournovo²⁰. In addition to the special structure of the visage, the following elements appear: a tree with fruit, Moses in a shroud, together with Elijah on Christ’s right, while the apostles are bunched together at his left. Here, however, the apostles are kneeling and facing the viewer and Christ, while one of them looks sideways. All three cover their eyes with their hands.

Mathews argues that this Armeno-Oriental school is part of the East Christian tradition²¹. The resurrected Moses symbolizes the resurrection of Jesus. The tree symbolizes paradise where Adam will be reconstituted. Moses and Elijah witness that Jesus is the same, in the past, present and future, which are unified in Armenian and Syriac sources²². A new, important iconographical element appears here, the mandorla which surrounds Christ’s body²³.

Manuscript M974 of the eleventh century is also considered to belong to the early Armeno-Oriental school (fig. 4). In it Cappadocian influence can be clearly discerned in the figures and the colours²⁴. In a group of various scenes is a Transfiguration, on the left side of the page. This time the figures are in their familiar position, at the top of a mountain. Moses and Elijah are at Christ’s two sides, while below them are the astonished apostles. As we said before, here a sort of halo encompasses not just the figure of Christ, but also part of the figures of Moses and Elijah.

¹⁸ See N. STONE 1997, 81-90; eadem, “Four Rivers” (forthcoming).

¹⁹ See T.F. MATHEWS and A.K. SANJIAN 1991, fig. 106b.

²⁰ S. DER NERSESSIAN apud DOURNOVO 1961, 6.

²¹ See *ibid.*, 96.

²² See *ibid.*, 96, notes 15, 16.

²³ See O. BRENDEL 1924, 5-24.

²⁴ See IZMAILOVA 1970, 314-318 see also DOURNOVO 1961, fig. 61.



Fig. 4.
Matenadaran, M974, 11th century.

The mandorla, which is a halo surrounding the whole body, is painted on purpose in a colour which Durnovo calls one of “the variants of Armenian purple.”²⁵ Here the painter has ignored the text of the New Testament where it says that Christ’s clothes became white, and he coloured the cloths as he liked. The mandorla is reminiscent of clouds as in M6201. The use of the mandorla serves to resolve one of the problems which the painters faced and which we mentioned above, viz., how to represent the moment of the Transfiguration itself. The use of a cloud or of a cloud-like shape was most convenient and it joins the hand of God, which we already observed above in M10780 as a means of expressing this idea.

The cloud or cloud-like shape is used in the sixth century in a wall mosaic in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome²⁶. Here the scene represents the verse Num 14:10. The Israelites are about to stone Moses and his defenders, Joshua bin Nun and Caleb ben Jephunneh, and the “glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel.” That is to say, there was an irruption of the divine so as to save the three victims of the attack. Similarly, the artist used the mandorla to describe the divine, which surrounded Christ and his apostles and defended them.

²⁵ Durnovo, 60.

²⁶ See A. GRABAR 1966, fig. 159.

The mandorla, therefore, also received the role of representing the divine in the Transfiguration. In the sixth-century mosaic to which we referred, the hand of God appears from heaven and sends rays of light to the figures in order to highlight the divine presence, just as we found in M10780.

So far, then, we can say that in the eleventh century we find an early and distinctive form of the Transfiguration in manuscripts of the Armeno-Oriental school. It is characterized by special iconographic features of the figures, by the trees, and by Moses in a shroud. Together with all these, we observe elements starting to appear that are shared with Byzantine iconography, viz., the mandorla, the hand of God and the vertical stance of the figures. These eleventh-century Armenian representations of the Transfiguration form a separate group in iconography and style within the Armenian tradition. It is true that various of elements of this group are drawn from different sources, but their combination is uniquely Armenian.

Alongside this distinctive stream of artistic tradition, Armenian artists also continued to create scenes of the Transfiguration that were based on the adoption of elements of the Byzantine structure.²⁷ Although, from time to time we find certain elements that are typical only of Armenian Transfigurations and exhibit individual initiative or an unusual model, the general structure is consistent.

The problems discussed above were not solved by the adoption of the Byzantine structure. The issue remained of how to represent Christ's metamorphosis. The adoption of the mandorla helped, but the problem of the colour persisted. What colour would best serve the purpose of the mandorla? In the Matt. 17:2 it says, "and he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light" and then the text adds that "a bright cloud overshadowed them" (Matt 17:5). In accordance with this description the natural colour for the figure of Christ should be white, perhaps with gold to signify the shining like the sun. However, no colour is mentioned for the cloud the enveloped them.

The Trebizond Gospels are of the eleventh century²⁸. They constitute an excellent example of an Armenian artist who painted the scene with great delicacy and feeling. The presentation of Christ and his Apostles is appropriate to that of the period. The figures are expressive, the lines of

²⁷ See S. DER NERSESSIAN 1978, fig. 105.

²⁸ See *ibid.*, fig. 78.

the mountain are rounded and soft, as if the painter had seen Mount Tabor and was painting it. Only on the top of the mountain are three rough peaks that symbolize the three tabernacles which the Apostles set up.

Christ's garments are white, in accordance with the Gospel texts. The Armenian artists, like others, concentrated on the attempt to convey the event by means of the mandorla or the cloud (fig. 5). In Constantinople in the year 1000 the artist who created an ivory dyptich attempted to paint a cloud in the shape of a half-moon, just as in the example of the apotheosis of the sun²⁹.

In an eleventh-century icon from Shemokmedi in Georgia, the artist drew a line around the participants in the event and for the rest, makes do with the gold background. Gold is an excellent colour for solving heavenly problems³⁰. Armenian artists of the 13th century (mainly from Cilicia) and thenceforth, took over the Byzantine gold and some times used it to paint the mandorla around Christ on the background of the blue of the sky, occasionally it is accompanied by gilt rays of light.

Conclusion

The scene of the Transfiguration was very important to Armenian illuminators³¹. It appears in most manuscripts where the festal scenes are painted. Alongside the Byzantine-style Transfiguration scene, Armenian artists developed a unique local version.

²⁹ See WEITZMANN 1982, fig. 38.

³⁰ See S. AMIRANASHVILI 1971, fig. 74.

³¹ See the recent publication by V. Devrikian 2006. His chief interest complements the present article as he stresses the liturgical dimension of the feast. He gives a rich assemblage of images but does not stress the iconographic dimension.



Fig. 5.

Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate, J1956 of 1265.

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