**Late Byzantine Painting Reconsidered: Art in Decline or Art in the Age of Decline?**

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**Short bio:**

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**Abstract:**

Despite its many faces and complexities, the Late Byzantine period (1204–1453), also called the Palaiologan period, has been viewed largely in light of the end of the Byzantine Empire. But to what extent does the waning political landscape influence the perception of Palaiologan art? Is it an art in decline or an art in (reflecting) the age of decline? By singling out three parameters that have long been established in art historiographies as markers of artistic development –production, artists and creativity – this chapter takes a cut through selected features of Late Byzantine monumental painting and asks whether they show signs of decline. From that perspective, a lesson can be learnt from the deconstruction of another long-held paradigm – decline in art after AD 300 – in the scholarship of the past half-century. This requires evaluating a larger set of transformations reflected by Late Byzantine artistic production rather than viewing it as a mere epilogue to the subsequent flourishing. Considering alternative perspectives – if not decline, then what other model? – will not only lead to a richer comprehension of Late Byzantine art but also engender a revaluation of its artistic legacy that outlived the fall of the Empire in 1453.

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Despite its many faces and complexities, the Late Byzantine (1204–1453) period, also called the Palaiologan period, has been viewed largely in light of the end of the Byzantine Empire. The territorial losses and economic and military weakness that underpin the final disintegration of the Empire have persuaded many to describe the Palaiologan period as an era of decline, and its art as the epilogue of a millenium-long tradition.[[1]](#footnote-1) As expected, developments in Byzantine art are often viewed in tandem with the health of the Empire. But to what extent does the waning political landscape influence the perception of Palaiologan art? Is it an art in decline or an art in (reflecting) the age of decline? This chapter takes these questions as a starting point for a nuanced approach to the study of Late Byzantine art and aims to discard the remaining stereotypes in the understanding of its artistic production. Such an inquiry is timely because Palaiologan society and culture have been studied more intensively in the past decade than in the previous half-century and the concept of decline faces opposition from the cultural vantage point.[[2]](#footnote-2) Cecily J. Hilsdale, for instance, has shown how political decline reconfigured the visual culture of the Late Byzantine Empire.[[3]](#footnote-3) Her work, by centring on the question ‘what does decline enable?’ rather than ‘what does decline diminish?’, represents a constructive new approach. And this chapter takes a step in a similar direction.

The key issues with the concept of decline as well as with flourishing are the conditionality within such models and the narrow understanding of their features: how can one measure or qualify decline in art? By singling out three parameters that have long been established in art historiographies as markers of artistic development (in all its phases) – production, artists and creativity – this chapter takes a cut through selected features of Late Byzantine monumental painting and asks whether they show signs of decline. From that perspective, I argue that a lesson can be learnt from the deconstruction of another long-held paradigm – decline in art after AD 300 – in the scholarship of the past half-century. This requires evaluating a larger set of transformations reflected by these two artistic productions rather than viewing them as mere epilogues to the subsequent flourishing. By questioning the concept of decline in Palaiologan art, the aim is to foreground several artistic phenomena which demand greater consideration and to open a new discursive space for Late Byzantine art, while simultaneously raising nuances within the ‘decline’ trope. Considering alternative perspectives – if not decline, then what other model? – will not only lead to a richer comprehension of Late Byzantine art but also engender a revaluation of its artistic legacy that outlived the fall of the Empire in 1453.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Art in Decline**

The perception of Late Byzantine art as the decaying art of an empire in agony evokes associations with the trope of art in decline.[[5]](#footnote-5) Rooted in Renaissance perceptions of the Arch of Constantine in Rome (dedicated in 315), the paradigm dominated discussions of this monument through to and culminating in Bernard Berenson’s *The Arch of Constantine: or The Decline of Form*.[[6]](#footnote-6) In that art-historical tradition, the ‘decline of form’ was apparent in the reuse of older reliefs, a practice seen as a sign of artistic insufficiency, but also in the newly carved pieces whose style was perceived as a departure from the humanistic standards of modelling, evidenced in the earlier, flourishing phases of Greco-Roman art.[[7]](#footnote-7) As Jaś Elsner has shown, Berenson’s ‘decline of form’ bore greater ramifications in the twentieth-century historiography where this phrase stood for the alienation of post-300 art from classical Greco-Roman traditions.[[8]](#footnote-8) With the establishment of the field now known as Late Antiquity, attitudes towards the Arch of Constantine changed significantly and undermined the narrative of decline. In present scholarship, the sculptural bricolage and style of the Arch are understood as signs of the artistic idiom that would be crucial for the development of medieval art.[[9]](#footnote-9) As a result, with a shifting focus towards changes and the perception of the period as transition, rather than an end of artistic culture, the decline model became questionable.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The deconstruction of the decline paradigm in the scholarship about Late Antiquity may offer a conceptual stimulus for the study of Late Byzantium.[[11]](#footnote-11) The Byzantine Empire sits at the heart of the transformations and overlaps that mark the history of the Mediterranean from the thirteenth century onward. This was a world where people, ideas and objects were in motion, challenging established values and identities.[[12]](#footnote-12) Artistic constructions, regardless of the different approaches in historiographies, should be studied in their appropriate context. From that perspective, reconsidering the concept of decline and the arts of the Palaiologan era calls for closer investigation of the changes brought about by this nascent world order in which Byzantium redefined its standing as well as its distinct artistic and religious culture.[[13]](#footnote-13) The emphasis should shift from decline to transformations that impacted the society, culture, art and architecture of the Late Byzantine world. The artistic aspects, as pointed out in this chapter, would support such views.

In the cyclical theory of history, with its biological metaphors of growth, maturity and decay, decline is a consequence of a prior flourishing.[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus, reconsidering the concept of decline in Late Byzantine art requires two specific bases of comparison: determining a decline in relation to art from which period in history and in relation to what specific aspects of art? It is generally assumed that Late Byzantine art declined in comparison to Middle Byzantine art, taken as the period of flowering in literary and artistic production, ending with the fourth crusade and the conquest of Constantinople in 1204. But this position requires greater nuancing, given the numerous elements that persisted between Middle and Late Byzantine art. Most particularly, the works of the twelfth century foreshadow the exploration in the areas of content and form that would characterise the Palaiologan artistic idiom despite the half-century of the Latin Empire in Constantinople (1204–61).[[15]](#footnote-15) This shows the relativity of the ‘bud, bloom and decay’ cycle model unless one specifies what particular artistic qualities constitute a flourishing and its subsequent decline.[[16]](#footnote-16) Taking as a reference point Bernard Berenson’s ‘decline of form’, the decline will be discussed here on the basis of these three criteria: the production, the artists and the creativity.[[17]](#footnote-17) The chapter does not propose an extensive analysis of each criterion but a cut through selected features and examples from monumental painting, taking this medium as the key exponent of the pictorial arts during the Late Byzantine period.

1. \* I am grateful to xxx and xxx for inviting me to participate in the symposium from which this chapter stems and for their help and patience throughout the writing process.

 About Palaiologan art presented as ‘art in the service of failing society’, see Cormack 2000: 187. On this subject see Ćurčić and Mouriki 1991, Brooks and Oresko 2006. Palaiologan art has also been viewed as the last Byzantine ‘renaissance’, another loaded paradigm, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this chapter. According to various scholars, Palaiologan paintings show classicising tendencies (characterised also as progressive, courtly, Constantinopolitan or plastic style) as well as anti-classicising currents (seen as regressive, monastic, popular, graphic, to name a few). See, for instance, Underwood 1975, Chatzidakis 1977, Belting, Mango & Mouriki 1978, Rosenqvist 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 51st Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies ‘The Post-1204 Byzantine World: New Approaches and Novel Directions’ (the University of Edinburgh, 13–15 April 2018) testifies that the exploration of the Palaiologan period has grown into a vibrant and leading field of Byzantine studies. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The author analysed new patterns of artistic practice, patronage and munificence that emerged in the face of decline by studying art objects created specifically for diplomatic exchange and their role in late Byzantine diplomatic strategies. She concludes that ‘…despite or because of diminishing political advantage, Byzantines relied on an increasingly desirable cultural and artistic heritage’ (Hilsdale 2014: 22). See also Cutler 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The concept of the so-called Post-Byzantine art has recently been reconsidered and questioned in the conference ‘“ Post-Byzantine” Art: Orthodox Christian Art in a “ Non-Byzantine” World’ (Central European University, Budapest, 15–16 May 2013). On Byzantine artistic legacy after 1453 see, for instance, Ćurčić 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Michelis 1955: 249–53, Fernie 1995: 10–11, 27–8. The concept of decline also served as the model for the study of the Late Ottoman Empire. See Kafadar 1997–98. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Berenson 1954, Elsner 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Berenson 1954: 13–14, 48–60. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Elsner 2002, Trilling 1987. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Elsner 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Brown 1988, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Despite the obvious differences between them, the fact that arts of both historical eras were viewed through a lens of decline represents an interesting parallelism. Discrepancies between the political turbulences, economic weakening, on the one hand, and the cultural strength, rich and diverse artistic productions, on the other, underpin the developments of both Late Antique and Late Byzantine worlds. Such contrasts and juxtapositions reflect the complexities of millennia-long cultures. One may see them as symptoms of a ‘*fin d’****ép****oque*’ and decay but they can also be approached in a neutral way. In the descriptive model, used by Heinrich Wölfflin, for instance, Late Antique and Late Byzantine arts would be characterised as Baroque in contrast to Classical (Michelis 1955: 221–9, Fernie 1995: 15–16, 116, 134, 333. They can also be perceived as expressions of the late style that Edward Said defined as specific artistic idioms that emerge in the works of art ‘in the thought of the end (death)’ (Said 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See the collection of essays in Ödekan, Akyürek & Necipoğlu 2010. About the analysis of the thirteenth-century Aegean as the world of liquid frontiers, where individuals were forced to negotiate multiple identities while clinging to long-established certainties, proved to be challenging, see Saint-Guillain & Stathakopoulos 2012. About the impact of the objects in motion see Mathews 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This paper focuses on monumental arts but it is important to signal the place that icons hold in Late Byzantine artistic and religious culture (Carr 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Fernie 1995: 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Djurić 1981, Cutler & Spieser 1996, Evans & Wixom 1997. The fact that several aspects of the twelfth-century paintings will reach their full development in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries makes scholars also use the term Later Byzantine art that encompasses them all. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Western art-historical conceptions of flourishing have been rather narrow: the maturity of an artistic style/phase has often been equated with classical values and originality. Such viewings reinforced the decline model in the study of Late Antiquity but also of Byzantium, both cultures being seen as post-classical, therefore declining (Fernie 1995: 11, Elsner 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Berenson 1954: 1–9, 37, 61–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)