

THE ICON OF ST. PAUL at the Wignacourt Museum, Rabat, Malta

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Figure 1:

This image of St. Paul is an icon, and one that is particularly interesting for the way the artist has inserted western iconography in an image otherwise mainly constructed along the lines of eastern Christian art. In both traditions the receding hair and long nose have remained instantly recognisable since their description in the second century Acts of Paul, and the attribute he carries—a book or a rotolo symbolising his famous epistles—is also common to both.

An icon may be seen as ‘art’, and subject to artistic judgment, but for the eastern orthodox Christian, it is a visual aid to his devotion, an interactive medium between his every-day world and the eternal and universal world of Christ, and the artist’s aim is to inspire this devotion. Following the eastern tradition, this artist has identified for the worshipper St. Paul’s physical persona by following the established iconographic canon, whereby different classes of saints—apostles, bishops, soldiers and others—are first identified by their clothing, and then further identified by the colour and arrangement of hair and beard. Our figure duly wears the antique tunic and *himation* (cloak) of an apostle, with the hair and beard of St. Paul. However, it is the style in which these iconographic features are presented that is all-important for the eastern artist, expressing as it does the essence of a personality, providing the essential key to our understanding of St. Paul’s spiritual role. And the means employed are symbolic rather than naturalistic. A useful study of such symbolism explains some of the stylistic features this artist includes. [H. Maguire, *The Icons of their Bodies: Saints and their Images in Byzantium*, Princeton 1996]

Firstly, as regards the physical form of a saint, form follows function, varying according to his life’s role: corporality and movement increase according to his closeness to Christ’s life on earth. The bodies of aesthetes, monks, and clergy, for instance are shown with a deliberate lack of emphasis, often with a lack of modelling, whereas St. Paul, whose earthly life followed closely that of Christ, and who was a brave and indefatigable traveller, is seen here wearing drapery that appears inflated, giving his figure a solid, well-rounded outline. His spirituality is suggested by a clear-cut outline to the entire figure, the absence of any reference to a natural environment (horizon, landscape, etc.), a background completely closed off by decorative patterning: all these emphasise the saint’s existence in a timeless world beyond our own. Within this timeless world the modelling of his cloak symbolises his earthly activity: it is schematic, pronounced and energetic. It is also interesting that the particular geometric form of this style of modelling, with its long parallel lines, was originally an optical device used by eastern-trained artists when creating large figures in mosaic high up in the domes of churches, where traditional modelling using tiny tesserae was unintelligible from far below. These figures were always the most sacred, most often those of Christ and the Virgin. Over time this design took on an iconographical meaning associated with the holiest images in other contexts, a mark of sanctity, used even on small icons. [See O. Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration*, 1976, pp. 38-9.]

Our first glance however, will be drawn, by soft high-lighting, to the sources of St. Paul’s particular gift to all Christians: his head, as the seat of his unique intelligence, and his hands, in one of which he holds the attribute which identifies for the worshipper the category of saint to which he belongs: the epistles he wrote, and which are for Christians an everlasting inspiration. The importance of category in identifying a saint is incidentally born out in the case of St Thekla. Female saints usually carry a simple cross, but in her case, as a close disciple of St. Paul, she carries a book.

In St. Paul’s other hand he holds a sword, an attribute that only in western iconography denotes the manner of his martyrdom – in Paul’s case beheading by the sword. In eastern icons attributes are more important for establishing the category of saint to which an individual belonged. A sword, for example, is the attribute of a warrior saint.

In conclusion it should be said that this western element, together with a certain ‘western’ smoothing out of the classic facial lines of a saint as composed in eastern Christian terms, in no way detract from the appeal of the icon. This St. Paul is not monumental; his focus is inward, and quite in keeping with the qualities evoked by the artist’s interpretation of his major role.

APPENDIX

Features traced to countries under orthodox influence:

1. BACKGROUND DESIGN: The same pattern was used for the background to the four paintings on the wings of a triptych in the collection of the Holy Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai, Egypt. The paintings are now considered to be by a French artist working in the Levant, and are dated to the

mid-thirteenth century. [See R. Cormack, *Icons*, British Museum Press 2007, p. 79, Fig. 50; and R. Cormack and M. Vassilaki, *Byzantium, 330–1453*, Royal Academy London 2008–09, p. 363, Fig. 53.]

This background imitates the metal covering or riza sometimes given to Byzantine icons, and those from orthodox areas after 1453, from Cyprus and the Balkans; and later very popular in Russia.

2. BEARD OF ST. PAUL: Its unruly curls are seen in the work of artists working each side of the Adriatic coast during the fourteenth century. See S. Papetti, *L'Aquila e il Leone: L'Arte Veneta a Fermo, Sant'Epidio a Mare e nel Fermano*, Catalogue of exhibition held March-September 2006, p. 108.
3. PARTICULAR FORM OF THE SCROLL OR ROTOLO: small, slim, 'cigar-shaped': Seen in work by the Maestro d'Elsino, formerly known as the Ceruda Master, active at the end of the fourteenth century. See ed. F. Flores d'Arcais, *Il Trecento adriatico*, catalogue of exhibition held in Castel Sismondo, Rimini, August-December 2002, p. 216, Pl. 58; also *L'Aquila e il Leone*, op.cit. above, p. 101, Pl. 6.
4. RECTILINEAR HIGHLIGHTS, ROUNDED HAND holding sword, OUTLINES IN BLACK: Seen in St Clement, Ohrid, Macedonia. See P. Muller, *Famous Icons – 12th to 18th Centuries*, Belgrade 1984, Pl. 34 The Apostle Matthew, 15th century.

AFTERWORD

The Sword of St. Paul: Fine details of the pommel of the sword have been revealed by the recent cleaning of the icon: these require further study.

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