Byzantine painting. Distinction between pictorial system and style

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Abstract:

Byzantine painting is more than just a style in the history of painting, it is a way of portraying a different, spiritual reality. Based on the art of late antiquity, Byzantine painting evolved as an artistic language expressing the relation between God and man. Regardless of the historic period or geographic region to which a certain Byzantine monument belongs, it is constructed under the rules and principles of the same pictorial system, while a sum of characteristics of pictorial elements are changing according to each artist, painting school or region.

Keywords: *icon, Byzantine style, Byzantine pictorial system, pictorial language*

Many of today's painters are not aware that the old icons are built on the base of a pictorial system made up of strict principles and rules. This system was developed over the centuries by the Byzantine masters, in order to give liturgical functionality to the image. For contemporary painters, the purpose of their work is just to copy the old prototypes. An icon ceases to be the result of a creative act, and is rightly considered by the public not to be a work of art but merely a decoration. We are witnessing such a distortion of the correct perception of the icon, so that some of these conservative painters express extreme views like the lack of evolution in the pictorial language of the icons, claiming the existence of only different styles, depending on the area and the historical period connected with the specific work.

Painting a new icon may seem quite easy, but the issue is amplified when it comes to painting a church or a mural. Beyond the content, or the iconographic program, there are many pictorial problems that appear with every option the painter makes in approaching the new construction.

First of all, there are problems of building the ensemble up. How large will the compositions be compared to the standing saints? How large will the standing saints be in relation to the medallions or to the saints painted in the higher registers? What will be the rhythm of the registers of saints next to the scenes registers? What will be the anthropometry of the saints in the compositions, related to the anthropometry of the standing saints? What will be the chromatic range used, which will be the color alternation and how will the whole surface be approached chromatically?

When discussed in detail, the questions never end. We begin with the way we build the figures, following with the connections among them, and continuing with the way we shape each garment or face. In all these issues, there is an ontological dimension of each option. The pictorial choices made by the painter aim to create a homogenous ensemble, an image characterized by unity.

For the Byzantines and the Orthodox Church in general, an icon is not only a decorative object. The church is not covered by icons just to be beautiful or to teach the faithful the history of the Holy Iconomy. The role of the icon in the church is primarily functional. People need to visualize another reality in order to enter into dialogue with it. A prayer represents the union of two realities, the iconized person's reality and the viewer's reality. The bridge supporting this dialogue is the icon, by bringing the iconic reality into the believer's present.

The viewer, as a human being, cannot overcome his nature, in order to have access to the iconic reality where the saint exists. The only solution, that allows the relationship between the two entities, is for the painting to give the impression that the iconized person is alive and lives in the reality of the viewer. That is why the "as if alive" aspect of the icons was for the Byzantines a major criterion for judging the quality of an icon [M. Psellos believes that an icon is of great quality when it evokes the person or event in a living manner: "... why he finds this particular image so moving. He does so because the image evokes in a lively manner (as if alive) the suffering of the living Christ and translates that original prototype into moving and breathing terms. It is not a copy of other copies"] (Gouma-Peterson 1995: 142).

Most of the artists of all time have made efforts for the painted characters to look alive, but the Byzantine painters have done it in a very

specific way. For the Byzantine, it was enough for the painted figure to resemble the prototype as much as possible, in order to remind the viewer of the appearance and other aspects of it. They needed the presence of the prototype, through its image, to be accessible to the viewer. The method used was, and still is, the abolition of the independent pictorial space, and bringing the iconized person into the reality of the viewer. They considered it necessary to avoid the existence of an iconic reality different form that of the viewer.

The existence of a reality is characterized by two important factors, time and space. Therefore, in order to bring iconized persons into the present reality, Byzantine painters must abolish the space and time defining reality in painting. To solve this very difficult challenge, Byzantine painters have created a whole pictorial system, whose rules are designed to create the framework needed for the two realities to meet.

In painting, time is materialized by movement. In antiquity, the notion of time was defined by the range in which movement takes place ["Time, at least the pictorial one, becomes perceptible and therefore exists through the movement. The range of movement, that is, the distance separating two points, represents the time on the pictorial surface. Space identifies with time while the two are interdependent"] (Kordis 2009: 141-142). But there are also other elements able to bring physical time into an icon. These elements can easily circumscribe an event or character at a certain time in history. It can give us the impression that a certain event took place in a certain year, in the same way a photograph does it. These types of items are the garments characterizing a certain period of time, certain buildings representing the panorama of a historic city, or the landscape. They begin to be introduced in the church painting by the Renaissance painters who had the same goal as the Byzantines, creating a link between the icon or the iconized event and viewer. The Renaissance painters do not share the principles and mode of operation of the Byzantine pictorial system. For this reason, in order to make a better functioning image, to make it look alive, they introduce in their works portraits of their contemporaries (Italian painters introduce contemporary figures into biblical images to illustrate the connection between the iconic event and the present reality. In the image of the Lord's Crucifixion (**image 1**) painted by Massacio around 1425, in the church of Santa Maria

Novella in Florence, Massacio introduces the figures of the founders in the scene of the Lord's Crucifixion. See our study on this image: Byzantine Monumentality in Moldavian Mural Painting Иконографске студије 5, 2012: 155-187) (see **image 1**), real buildings and garments of the period in which they lived. These elements give the viewer the impression that he sees an anamnetic picture, a photograph of a certain historical period, and automatically connects the iconized event or character to that historical period. For example, an event painted on the hills of a certain city in Italy, with its characteristic buildings in the background, and the figures dressed in the garments of that period, is an image that directly shows the historical period these elements identify with. In this case, however, today's viewer cannot participate in the reality of that city and the only option he has is to look at the image of a historical moment, a beautiful painted image [In this sense, we can bring into discussion the image of the *Visitation* (**image 2**) painted by Domenico Ghirlandaio in the second half of the 15th century, now to be found in church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. The meeting takes place in the environment of a 15th century italian city]. (See Santi 1990: 9). (see **image 2**)

The second factor, space, is characterized by three dimensions: the horizontal, the vertical and the depth. Therefore, especially after the Renaissance, in order to paint a place (τόπος) painters had to build their compositions based on three dimensions. To accomplish this goal, Renaissance painters created the perspectival system, with the two main types, the linear perspective and the atmospheric one. They were looking to create an inner space of the painting, distinct from the real space, in which the characters and the relationships among them can be represented. The existence of the two realities, the painting's reality and the viewer's one, inevitably leads to the positioning of the two poles - the painted figures and the viewer – in different spaces that cannot communicate.

To avoid describing an independent time and space in painting, that is, to avoid creating an iconic reality, Byzantine painters abolish the independent painting depth, one of the tree dimensions of the independent pictorial space. The lack of independent painting depth is one of the fundamental features of the Byzantine pictorial system. In fact, it is the

foundation on which the entire edifice of the pictorial system, developed by the Byzantine masters, is based.

There are many researchers in Byzantine art who argue that icons are built in a three-dimensional pictorial system, with the fundamental difference that the pictorial space is not inside the icon but in front of it, since it identifies with the space of the church. This theory, which I personally embrace, claims that the pictorial space starts at the surface of the icon and, instead of turning to its depth, as it happens in naturalistic painting, it continues in the space in front of the icon, and embraces the viewer. The space where the icon develops is the church's space where the viewer stands. The great Byzantinologist Otto Demus, in his study *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration*, claims that: "there is no space behind the 'picture-plane' of these mosaics. But there is space, the physical space enclosed by the nice, in the front of the icon; and this space is included in the picture" (Demus 1976: 4). Hans Belting shares the same position, regarding the space in which the iconized persons are present:

> The saints, so the faithful viewer believes, are here right where the viewer is. […]
> The beholder loses, as a result, the feeling for the so-called aesthetic boundary
> that usually contrasts reality with the viewer's own reality (Belting 1994: 173).

Russian theologian Leonid Uspensky characterizes the icon as a three-dimensional image, and holds the same opinion regarding the space of an icon, identifying it with the inner space of the church (Uspensky 2009: 206).

This successful pictorial solution, the identification of the pictorial space of the icon with the inner space of the church, turns the believer from viewer to participant, because he is in the space where the iconized event takes place. O. Demus notes:

> In Byzantium, the beholder was not kept at a distance from the image; He entered
> his aura of sanctity, and the image, in turn, partook of the space in which he
> moved. He was not so much a beholder as a participant (Demus 1976: 4).

At the same time, the iconized persons are brought to life, because they exist in the viewer's reality and thus coexist with him. H. Belting maintains the same thesis:

> The (iconographic) program was in a way completed by living people, who filled
> the actual space in front of the images. Images of holy people and living people

mirrored each other, thus confirming the icon's claim to represent reality (Belting 1994: 173).

There are other elements or pictorial solutions used by the Byzantine painters to avoid the impression of a pictorial reality. One of them is the gold leaf, as noted by H. Belting:

> The gold foil of the background avoids any specific setting that would remove the picture from the beholder. In addition, the lack of picture frames avoids the usual "window experience" by which we are kept at a distance from the reality of the picture. The beholder loses, as a result, the feeling for the so-called aesthetic boundary that usually contrasts the reality of the picture with the viewer's own reality ((Belting 1994: 173). (see **image 3**)

A similar practice is encountered with the Byzantine masters regarding the management of time in an image. As we mentioned above, they abolish the independent time in the icon, by carefully avoiding to locate the iconized persons at a distinct, defined historical moment. They're doing the opposite of what naturalistic painters do. Instead of inserting the historical time into the icon, they bring to life the icon's action in real physical time, in viewer's present [In this aspect, we can bring to the reader's attention the mosaics adorning the monuments of the 11th century at Hosios Loukas or Dafni in Greece. These images are composed with a minimum of elements describing the context and the landscape in which the figures perform the action, with the intent of not specifying a certain real place (τόπος)]. (See **image 3**).

At this point, we stress again the relationship between the liturgical life of the Church, and the frescoes covering its parietal surface. It is well known that the liturgical time is the present. The characteristics of time in church is defined with great beauty and clarity by G. Kordis:

> The church does not have a cyclic or linear perception of time. The Church, having the mystery of the Holy Eucharist in the center, is experiencing the summing up of time in the present of the Holy Eucharist. The whole time unites during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, so past and future are brought to the present (Kordis 2009: 133).

As an organic part of the church space and liturgical life, the icon follows the same rules, and expresses the same truth. So, in the icon, as well as in the rest of the church, all obey and follow the liturgical time where everything takes place in the believer's present. As we can see, all

the efforts of the Byzantine masters to abandon the independent reality of the pictorial space are focused on giving the viewer the impression that the iconized people are alive, that they coexist in the real space of the church. The purpose of the entire Byzantine pictorial system was to bring iconized saints to the present day.

Earlier, we were saying that Byzantine painters avoided to create a pictorial reality distinct from the viewer's reality. Man, cannot get out of the time and space that defines the reality he lives in, in order to move into another reality such as the iconized one. So, the only solution for a dialogue between the iconized saint and the believer, is for the icon to enter into the space and time of the faithful viewer. It is very clear that the movement is unidirectional from the holy icon to the believer and not in the opposite direction, as some researchers claim.

The main purpose of the church painter is to give the painted characters the tendency to move towards the viewer, to project the iconized characters from the pictorial surface into the viewer's space and time. In order to do this, the Byzantine painters used a wonderful tool borrowed from the Greek antiquity – the rhythm. Rhythm is the instrument coordinating and giving meaning to the movement. In fact, the rhythm coordinates all the movements of the pictorial elements and the whole work. The rhythmic arrangement of the elements on the surface, is accomplished by constructing all parts of the composition within two opposite directions of forces (Kordis 2008: 82). These forces simultaneously generate the sensation of movement and stillness, by balancing each other. In this way, a dynamic equilibrium state is created, as it is called by G. Kordis, in which motion and stillness, life and eternity coexist without being mutually abolished ["The rhythm can be defined as a state in which the pictorial form exists in a dynamic balance – movement coexists with stillness without one of them excluding the other"] (See Kordis 2009: 142-143). [For rhythm in the art of Greek antiquity, see the important study of Κωνσταντίνου 1957].

By rhythm, Byzantine painters succeed to manage the time in their pictorial works, because the rhythm is a well-organized movement, while the movement is the time necessary for an object to get from one point to another. In conclusion, we can say that, by the suppression of the independent pictorial time, and by subordinating all the elements of a

composition to the laws of rhythm, the Byzantines achieve the intended purpose – to bring the iconized character into the reality of the viewer. In addition, because all the elements of the image are subjected to a common rhythm, the icon does not exhibit struggles or tensions, and is characterized by unity. This is a fundamental feature of the Church in the perspective of the Kingdom of Heaven. Therefore, the faithful viewer, who enters the church, by being in touch with the iconized persons, also enters the unity of love that characterizes the entire space of the church.

Now let us see how the movement of all the elements of a composition can be placed under the wand of a common rhythm. As the rhythm drives not only the elements but the whole composition, it also gives dimension to the relationship between the icon and the viewer. So, the whole composition relates to the viewer by subjecting the whole and the parts to the action of the two forces mentioned earlier. G. Kordis distinguishes two levels in which the movements of an image unfold: a plane of the movements taking place inside the image, among its elements, and another plane summing up the dynamics of the image outwards. He therefore supports the existence of an inner rhythm and of an external rhythm of the image (Kordis 2009: 148-149). The moving energies, existing among the constituent elements of the image, give it dynamic and unity, while the energies of motion towards the outside, project the iconized person or event in the viewer's reality, giving the latter the opportunity to participate in the dialogue.

An important feature of the Byzantine pictorial system, underlining the rhythmic management of the icon, is the analysis or decomposition of a shape into distinct forms of smaller dimensions. Byzantine painters use this method to have multiple shapes or elements building relationships, that is, movement and rhythm. This is how their preference for the broken line at the expense of the curved line can be explained. Decomposing the curve into several smaller lines gives them the opportunity to build relationships between distinct segments, which underlines the movement and generates rhythm (Kordis 2008: 29-34).

The inner rhythm is obtained by arranging the elements of the composition, but also the smaller distinct shapes we've mentioned above, in the direction of two oblique axes. These axes, intersecting in a dynamic X-shaped way, identify with the two opposite steering forces we spoke

about]The inner rhythm is produced by using a classical working technique (τεχνοτροποία), by applying the working system in oblique axes. These axes, in fact two opposing forces that balance each other in a dynamic state, are the reference points of all the other movements and forces on the pictorial surface. Thus, all the elements, the figure decomposes into, are developed by following the movement of the two oblique axes. In this way, all the elements acquire a common reason and ultimately, a unity of motion"]. (See Kordis 2009: 148-149).

In fact, the unity among the elements of a Byzantine composition is due to the construction based on the energies of the two oblique axes. This goal is fulfilled only when the distinct forms lose their independent existential reason, and harmonize in the common rhythm, generated by the trajectory of the two oblique axes. G. Kordis notes that while the elements, following the two oblique axes, obtain a common rhythm, a cleansing is also produced. This katharsis of self-standing movements is a process of eliminating all the chaotic movements that appear in nature. These breaks and ruptures should not be displayed in the icon because they characterize our created world and don't exist in the divine reality (Kordis 2009: 151).

Equally important is that, due to subordination of all compositional elements to the same rhythm, there is no disorder or rivalry within the pictorial form in the Byzantine icon. This feature greatly aids the placement of the icon in relation to the viewer, because, if the elements had rivalries, they would not be able to relate to the viewer (Kordis 2009: 145-152). Actually, the inner rhythm prepares the iconized figure to meet the viewer.

The outer rhythm realizes the movement of the iconized figure in the time and space of the viewer. According to G. Kordis, the iconized saint is brought into the immediate reality by the construction of the figures on the pictorial surface and by specific use of colors. In this way two forces are created, starting from the icon and crossing each other in a skewed relationship in front of the pictorial surface. These two forces generate an opening which encompasses the viewer [See drawing 2 in which G. Kordis explains how these two energies are composed and come out of the pictorial surface uniting the iconized saint with the faithful viewer] (Kordis 2009: 153). The first force is generated by the movement

of the characters to the left or to the right, and the second one by illuminating each form or element on the opposite side of its movement (Kordis 2009: 160-165).

On the pictorial surface, the compositional elements are drawn in a specific way: those closer to the viewer are placed in the lower part of the composition, while the ones situated further, are placed above. Due to this way of building the drawing, all elements of composition, figures, landscape, buildings, come towards the viewer.

Color is the other element contributing to the projection of the figures from the pictorial surface into the viewer's reality [Researches explain the use of colored proplasmas in different ways. Russian thinkers place the use of colors on account of the theological load of the image] (Karelin, Gusev, Dunaev 2007: 60; Uspensky 2009: 126). [Otto Demus links the use of different colors to the area-registers that make up the iconographic program. In his view, in the upper area of the walls, gold and lighter colors are used, in the second area - the middle one, a larger variety of colors is allowed except dark ones, and in the third area they used heavy colors in dark tones, with the aim of underlining the hierarchical structure of the entire edifice of images: "the arrangement of colors helps underline the hierarchical structure of the whole decoration"] (Demus 1976: 37). [G. Kordis considers that color is an element of construction, through which the iconic figure is projected from the pictorial surface in order to enter into relationship with the viewer] (Kordis 2009: 163-172). [In the same direction, see the article by Charalambides 2002: 84-90). In the Byzantine pictorial system, the color has several functions. First of all, Byzantine masters use color as a construction element. The rule that controls how different local colors are placed on the surface is not related with the object's natural appearance [In many places of his important work, *Byzantine Aesthetics*, G. Mathew notes that the logic or the chromatic reason of the Byzantines is not related to the natural colors of the objects, but to a very important pictorial reason in the image's structure – the rhythm: "In Byzantine painting and mosaic there is often no relation between the chosen combination color and the natural tint. Changing color schemes is conceived in terms of rhythm. Perhaps both painting and mosaic were somehow apprehended as music and the color combination seen as

harmony"] (See Mathew 1963: 5), but with the painter's own need to distinguish and read well all the elements of the composition. Therefore, in a composition built in the Byzantine system, a warm color is placed next to a cold one, and a light color near a dark one, in order to obtain chromatic contrast which makes it easy for the viewer to follow the elements of composition.

Another color function is to give plasticity to shapes. On the local color of an average tone, proplasma [We call proplasma the first local color, of a vestment, architectural or landscape element, over which Byzantine painters shape both shadows and lights], as the Greek painters call it, light tones are shaped. These tones, or lights, as they are called in technical language, are usually lighter layers of the same local color. The tones are placed in distinct shapes and layers, and their arrangement resembles the steps of a staircase. The steps start from the local color, the proplasma, and continue climbing to white (See drawing 5 in Kordis 2009: 167). The described movement starts at the local color level, identified with the plane of the pictorial surface, and moves in front of the work towards the viewer. Therefore, the color also contributes to the movement, to the projection of the figure from the painted surface to the viewer.

Although we talk about lights and lighting, it is well known that in Byzantine paintings there is no source of interior or exterior light in the image. We've discussed this detail because the light tones we talk about are called "lights" by many researchers. Byzantine artists, as we've already shown, use light tones / lights for another purpose and not in order to give the impression of the natural volume of the object, as it happens in naturalistic painting. In antithesis with the Byzantine masters, the Renaissance painters start from lighter proplasmas, shaping them with darker colors (Skliris 2002: 49). The movement thus recorded, starting from the plane of the painting develops to the depth of the surface of the image. It is exactly the opposite of what happens in the case of a Byzantine painting, in which the movement is from the pictorial surface to the exterior, towards the viewer. That is why we will never meet chiaroscuro (Renaissance's specific painting mode) in a Byzantine icon.

Various theories have been published regarding the shaping of the lights in the pictorial forms of the icon. O. Demus notes the absence of

any light source in a Byzantine icon, but considers that the Byzantine painters construct their forms using light in order to modify the characteristics of the space between the icon and the viewer's eye (Demus 1976: 35).

Russian theologians, especially L. Uspensky, propose a certain way of understanding the distribution of light in the Byzantine icon. According to L. Uspensky, the divine light floods the icons and the lights must be located centrally on the surface of the figures and objects (Uspensky 2009: 108).

Father S. Skliris considers light to be an ontological feature of the icon, and its presence aims to show the eschatological state of the iconized persons (Skliris 2002: 40). At the same time, according to Father S. Skliris, the lights are placed centrally on the figure for pictorial reasons, while the shadow gives contour to the shapes, avoiding any confusion that would make the icon difficult to read (Skliris 2002: 14-17 and 40).

However, it is easy to see that in an icon the light is not centered but appears in a dynamic way, by placing a larger amount of light on one part of the form. In the opinion of G. Kordis, the lights are positioned on the wider part of the body or object. When the figure or object moves in one direction, it is divided by its axis of construction in two uneven parts. If the figure moves to the right, the body portion on the right of the axis will be smaller than the left one and vice versa. G. Kordis explains how the Byzantines make the choice to balance the movement of the figure by placing the light in the opposite direction. This type of construction generates rhythm, and, at the same time, creates two forces, two motion vectors, which open the image to the viewer. Without the second force, imprinted by the movement of light, the iconized figure moves and relates only to the rest of the composition to which it belongs, but cannot relate to the viewer.

From the above, it is more than clear that the Byzantine pictorial system is a well-structured system with clear principles. Independent of the historical period or area of origin of a Byzantine monument, the Byzantine pictorial system presents a distinct and unique mode of operation.

The Byzantine pictorial system developed in parallel with the writings of the church fathers about liturgical life and the way of understanding the relationship between man and God. Beyond the evolution of the pictorial system, there are elements changing from one work to another and from a monument to another. Many differences can be observed among the frescoes of two churches, even if they were painted in a short distance in time and in the same geographical area. These differences can be seen as being part of the category of elements defining the personal working style of each painter. Thus, Byzantine language is made up of two types of elements, elements that do not change and elements that change according to the historical period, painting school or artist. The stable elements are the main figures, faces and historical data of a composition. The rest of the elements, the ones that make up the style, quality of line, tone of colors or composition, can change consistently from one work to another.

Style of painting can be compared for example with the style or the form of a text characterizing the work of a particular writer. Although they write using the same language, the writings of St. John Chrysostom were different by way of layout, expression and composition of the paragraphs, from the writings of St. Basil the Great. The common language used by the two fathers applies the same set of grammatical rules, the same structure. However, the order of words, and especially the way in which the ideas and the relationships among them are placed in the text by each writer, differ so much, that the writings of an author can easily be distinguished from the another one's. The author cannot change the grammatical rules of the language he writes in, without changing the language itself, but he can define the style as he wishes. The same applies to pictorial language. The pictorial system is identified by a set of grammatical rules defining the language, and ensuring communication between the speaker and the listener, in our case between the painter and the viewer. Like a reader who would not comprehend a text written with other grammar rules than those of the language he knows, the viewer cannot understand an image formulated in a system different from the one he is familiar with.

The distinction between the two terms, pictorial system and style, is extremely important in the creative perspective of the contemporary

church painters. The misunderstanding of this distinction and of the rules that sum up the pictorial system, can lead to the loss of the liturgical functionality of the image.

Awareness of the distinction between style and pictorial system can bring great benefits to both painting and theology. If we consider that both St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom are enlightened by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and their writings are spread using the same language, we can ask, in a simplistic perspective, why did the Church need two series of writings to describe the same Truth with the same language instrument? As it's well known, Truth does not change … Surely the Truth, the divine reality, lies beyond the describing capacity of any linguistic or pictorial instrument created by man. Each father of the Church describes a certain part, a facet, a characteristic of this Truth seen through his own experience, seen in the perspective of his own relationship with God. Probably the style of one painter is the part of the image that reflects the character of the author's relationship with God.
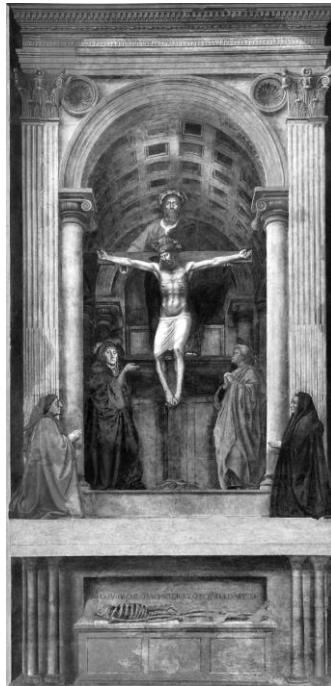

Image 1. Massacio, *Holy Trinity*

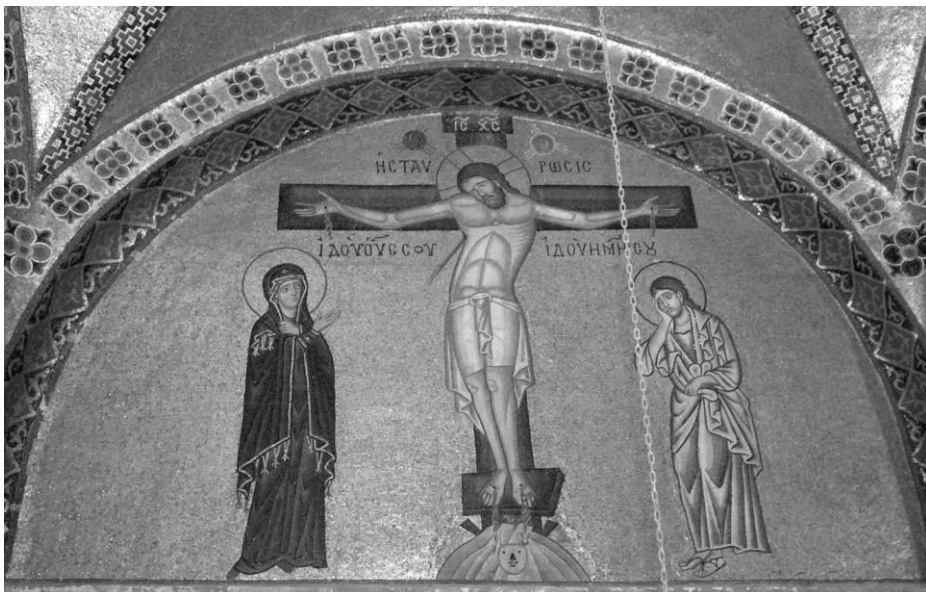**Image 2**. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Visitation*

Image 3. Monastery of Hosios Loukas, Greece, *Crucifiction*

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