



From Transformation to Desire: Art and Worship after Byzantine Iconoclasm

Author(s): Charles Barber

Source: *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 75, No. 1 (Mar., 1993), pp. 7-16

Published by: College Art Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3045929>

Accessed: 18/09/2009 00:07

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=caa>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



College Art Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Art Bulletin*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

From Transformation to Desire: Art and Worship after Byzantine Iconoclasm

Charles Barber

One of the standard perceptions of Byzantium is that its art, although at times magnificent and resplendent, is stiff and hieratic, far removed from the canon of naturalism that still underlies many of the conceptions of the work of art in art history.¹ The employment of linear and flat styles is considered appropriate for a predominantly sacred art, and for an “oriental” society dominated by the ritual control of church and emperor.² Thanks to its apparent rejection of the natural copy, Byzantine art is often placed outside of the construction of the canon in European art history.³ Byzantine art thus remains the heir of Vasari’s dismissal of the *maniera greca*, a negative “other” to the art of Western Europe.⁴

Various strategies have been employed to counter this implicitly dismissive perception of Byzantine art and society. Foremost among these is the examination of such art with respect to its functional role within the church. Such an analysis emphasizes the sacral context for the production and reception of the imagery.⁵ A number of responses have been evoked by this contextualized analysis. Some have found that the ecclesiastical context only confirms their negative assessment of the formal qualities of Byzantine art and society.⁶ Others have attempted to reconcile our reactions to this art with those of its Byzantine beholders. This approach is based on a paradox. While we might ascribe Byzantine art to categories that lie outside of the Western European tradition, its hieratic style and stiff presentation seeming to deny any emotional involvement, Byzantine viewers reacted to these images in a manner that was deeply passionate. There are reports that worshippers talked to, embraced, and wept before these images.⁷ Such strong interaction seems barely credible to those of us trained to see Byzantine art as drained of all human emotion and pertain-

ing only to the holy, the absent, the other. A third reaction to the evocation of context has been to argue that it demonstrates the anachronism of the formal inquiry.⁸ One consequence of this has been to ask a different set of questions, primarily focused on the conditions of reception of the image. Formal issues have been played down and replaced by the historical analysis of the image as a functioning object.

This paper will examine one example of the reconstruction of the Byzantine beholder’s share of the experience, that of Thomas F. Mathews.⁹ Mathews reads Byzantine art in light of its liturgical role, arguing that viewers transformed themselves into an identity with the image as a result of liturgical experience. This analysis is based upon the psychology of response. Having identified a gap between our formalist perception of the art and the Byzantine perception of it, the author leaves the formal issues aside. Subsequently, the work of art becomes a transparent medium within religious practice. The reception of the image is now framed by a form of initiation. Such liturgical framing has removed the need for any formal discourse about the icon. In what follows, the theses of the ninth-century Byzantine patriarch Nikephoros will be used to argue that it is precisely against this transformation, this transparency, that art after iconoclasm worked. In so doing, this paper will seek to return attention to the formal structure of these images and away from their liturgical function. In effect, I will propose that at the end of iconoclasm there was a significant argument for the separation of art and worship and a consequent conception of the Byzantine image as art object.¹⁰

The concept of the work of art as a site of transformation is thoroughly set out by Thomas F. Mathews in three articles

¹ This paper was written while I held a British Academy postdoctoral fellowship at the Warburg Institute. I would like to thank both institutions, my Byzantine colleagues in London, and the anonymous reader for *The Art Bulletin*.

² An example, among many, of such a formal analysis can be found in the work of Ernst Kitzinger: E. Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making: Main Lines of Stylistic Development in Mediterranean Art 3rd–7th Century*, London, 1977, esp. 104f; *idem*, “On Some Icons of the Seventh Century,” *Late Classical and Mediaeval Studies in Honor of Albert Mathias Friend, Jr.*, ed. K. Weitzmann, Princeton, 1955, 132–150, esp. 145, where an icon is described in this way: “The precariousness of its physical existence enhances the spiritual content of the face. As the material weight decreases, the spiritual weight increases.” See also *idem*, “Some Reflections on Portraiture in Byzantine Art,” *Zbornik radova*, VIII, 1963, 185–193; *idem*, “Byzantine Art in the Period between Justinian and Iconoclasm,” *Berichte zum XI. Internationalen Byzantinisten-Kongress, München 1958*, Munich, 1958, IV, 1, 1–50, esp. 44f.

³ E. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, London, 1960, esp. 144–145 and 150–152, comes close to such an expulsion through setting the mosaics of S. Vitale at a polar extreme to the “Greek Revolution.” For a stimulating, though flawed, challenge to this analysis, see N. Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, London, 1983, esp. 18–35 and 43–51.

⁴ G. Vasari, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori*, ed. G. Milanesi, I, Florence, 1878, 372.

⁵ E.g., H. Belting, *Das Bild und sein Publikum im Mittelalter: Form und Funktion früher Bildtafeln der Passion*, Berlin, 1981, and *idem*, *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, Munich, 1990.

⁶ C. Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of the New Rome*, London, 1980, 267–268.

⁷ In particular, I am thinking of an important pair of articles by Leslie Brubaker: Brubaker, 1989a and 1989b.

⁸ Cormack, 154 and 251.

⁹ Mathews, 1986; *idem*, 1988; *idem*, 1990.

¹⁰ Similar points have been expressed: H.-G. Beck, *Von der Fragwürdigkeit der Ikone (Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, Sitzungsberichte, VII)*, Munich, 1975; H. Thümmel, “Der byzantinische Bilderstreit: Stand und Perspektive der Forschung,” *Der byzantinische Bilderstreit: Sozialökonomische Voraussetzungen—ideologische Grundlagen—geschichtliche Wirkungen*, ed. J. Irmscher, Leipzig, 1980, 9–40; *idem*, “Kreuze, Reliquien und Bilder im Zeremonienbuch des Konstantin Porphyrogennetos,” *Byzantinische Forschungen*, XVIII, 1992, 119–126.

written in the 1980s.¹¹ In his analysis of art in the period following iconoclasm, Mathews places a great deal of emphasis upon the interaction of art and worship. The image is not to be read in isolation; rather, it is to be interpreted with respect to the viewer's relationship with the image. For Mathews, this relationship is mediated through the liturgy and is a product of the liturgical context. The theater for the encounter between viewer and image is the decorated interior of the Middle Byzantine church. Mathews stresses that Byzantine beholders have emotional responses to the visual art within the church. This response, for Mathews, is grounded in a transformation that takes place within the church. He interprets the liturgy as the site of a transformation in which the participant can physically identify with Christ in the Eucharist. When the participants in the liturgy consume the body and blood of Christ, they gain an identity with Christ, becoming filled with the Savior who is now truly present to them and within them. The transformation of the participant in the liturgy is predicated upon the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. The reality of this presence is the necessary starting point for the action of the transformation of the participant. Mathews then implies that this model can be applied to the relationship between the image and the viewer: "The Christ in the dome is the full perfect self that the beholder becomes in communion."¹² This sense of identity is extended to all the images within the Middle Byzantine church. Just as Christ is present within the gifts, so too are he and his saints present to the viewer within the church. Mathews speaks of the Savior embracing the worshipper and of the participant being incorporated within the communion of saints. Hence we might speak of the image as a site of transformation equivalent to that of the eucharistic gifts.

The transformation of the beholder into "the Christ in the dome" contains an ambiguity that is crucial in religious representation. What is meant when one speaks of the Christ in the dome? Is this the representation of Christ, or does Mathews believe that the image has become Christ himself, that Christ is truly present within the image? Such ambiguity is derived from the possibilities inherent in the perceived relationship between art and worship. This relationship compels us to ask whether the image is understood to be transformed from mere matter into a form of real presence, just as the eucharistic bread and wine are transformed in the liturgy. Linked to this possibility is the issue of whether the nature of worship has changed the manner in which the image is perceived, such that the viewer confuses the categories of signified and signifier, the work of art becoming a transparent medium in which contact can indeed be made with the one represented.¹³

These issues were crucial to the debates in Byzantine iconoclasm, the debates that Mathews identifies as the

background to his own interpretation of art after iconoclasm. Here I will investigate the treatment of the theme of the relationship of art and worship within iconoclasm in order to examine the validity of Mathews's arguments concerning art in the period following iconoclasm.

The potential for ambiguity in the perception of the image in worship was a source of debate in iconoclasm. This is given precise illustration in a letter written in 824 by the Byzantine emperors Michael II and Theophilos to the Carolingian emperor Louis the Pious:

This too we make known to your Grace, beloved by Christ, that many men, both clergy and lay, estranged from apostolic tradition and heedless of paternal limits, have become inventors of evil things. First they cast out the hallowed and life-giving crosses from the holy temples, and set up images in their place, with lamps about them, honoring them with incense, and according them the same reverence as the hallowed and life-giving wood [of the Cross] on which Christ, our true God, deigned to be crucified for our salvation. They sang Psalms and paid homage, and appealed to these same images for help. Moreover, many wrapped these images with linen cloths, and made them sponsors of their children at the baptismal font. . . . Certain priests and clerics scraped paint from images and mixed it with the offerings and wine [of the Eucharist], and after the celebration of the Mass gave it to those wishing to partake. Others placed the Lord's body in the hands of images, from which those wishing to communicate were obliged to receive it. . . . Consequently the orthodox emperors and most learned priests determined to unite in a local council to make inquiry into these things. When they had come together in this gathering [the Council of 815], inspired by the Holy Spirit, by common consent they prohibited such things to be done anywhere. They caused images to be removed from less exalted places; those that were displayed in high places they permitted to remain, so that the picture might serve as Scripture, but not be worshipped by the untaught and the infirm, and they forbade that lamps should be lighted or incense [used] to honor them. We now feel and hold the same, casting out from Christ's church those who favor wicked practices of that kind.¹⁴

In this famous text the emperors complained about those who worship images. Such worship was manifested in the close interaction of the viewer and the painting, and the bringing of lights and incense to images. To counter these practices, the emperors wished to remove images from personal contact with the viewing public. The emperors' letter provides a graphic characterization of the apparent dangers of the confused boundaries that resulted from the

¹¹ Mathews, 1986; *idem*, 1988; *idem*, 1990.

¹² This phrase can be found in: Mathews, 1986, 19; *idem*, 1988, 19; *idem*, 1990, 212.

¹³ The literature on Byzantine iconoclasm is very extensive. Notable recent publications include A. Cameron, "The Language of Images: The Rise of Icons and Christian Representation," *The Church and the Arts*, ed. D. Wood (*Studies in Church History*, XXVIII), Oxford, 1992, 1–42; J. Pelikan, *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons*, New Haven and

London, 1990; D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago, 1989; Brubaker, 1989a; *idem*, 1989b; Cormack, 95–140. See now K. Corrigan, *Visual Polemics in the Ninth-Century Byzantine Psalters*, Cambridge, 1992.

¹⁴ This text can be found in Mansi XIV, 420B–E. This translation is from A. Freeman, "Carolingian Orthodoxy and the Fate of the *Libri Carolini*," *Viator*, XVI, 1985, 100.

interaction of art and worship. Some instances given in the letter clearly show that the emperors saw a danger in the breakdown of the distinction between the image and that which it purports to represent. They pointed to the use of an icon as a godfather; this was in fact once recommended by the leading iconophile Theodore Studites.¹⁵ They reported that an icon was made to distribute the Eucharist. In another instance, they described how the material of the icon was mixed with the eucharistic gifts. Clearly the iconoclast camp saw peril in the confusion of an image and its archetype. They believed the confusion derived from worship before the image. The amount of space devoted to the issue of art and worship in iconophile literature suggests that they also took this danger seriously.

The emperors' letter emphasizes that the issue of art and worship is central to an understanding of iconoclasm. For the iconoclasts, the worship of the image complicated the boundaries of presence within the image. They feared that the image in worship could become a site of real presence. The line separating Christ from the image of Christ became blurred and hence the danger of idolatry arose. In order to accept Mathews's interpretation of the image as a site of transformation, we need to understand how the image could be related to worship and at the same time safeguarded from idolatry.

My starting point here is the discussion of the Eucharist in the iconoclast debate. The Eucharist is in some senses a limited aspect of the general discourse of iconoclasm, but it distills and represents some of the key distinctions to be made between the iconophile and the iconoclast arguments. Furthermore, it is in the discussion of the Eucharist that the relationship of art and worship is most clearly defined. Indeed, it is the experience of the Eucharist that underlies Mathews's interpretation of the functioning of Byzantine imagery after iconoclasm.¹⁶

The central issue in the discussion was whether the concept of true presence within the Eucharist could provide a paradigm for the definition of the concept of the image. The idea of true presence within the Eucharist was agreed upon by both sides in the argument, although at times accusations flew around it. True presence was instilled within the language of the liturgy. The Cherubikon prayer, said by the priest at the Great Entrance of the eucharistic gifts, contains these words: "You I approach and to you I bow my head and pray: turn not your face from me nor reject me from among your children but deem me worthy to offer you these gifts. For you are he who offers and who is offered."¹⁷ This prayer, directed at Christ as man and God, speaks of the encounter of priest and Christ. Such intimations of presence were developed in the influential eighth-century liturgical

commentary of Germanos (640s–733), which referred to this point in the liturgy. Defining the Cherubikon hymn, Germanos illustrated how the boundaries of presence and absence became ever more complicated: "By means of the procession of the deacons and the representations of the fans, which are in the likeness of the seraphim, the Cherubic hymn signifies the entrance of all the saints and righteous ahead of the cherubic powers and the angelic hosts, who run invisibly in advance of the great king Christ who is proceeding to the mystical sacrifice borne aloft by material hands."¹⁸ In this carefully worded description, Germanos indicates the thin borderline between physical and symbolic presence.¹⁹ The possibility of physical presence was heightened as the liturgy progressed. At the raising of the Host, the priest said: "Advance lord Jesus Christ our God from your holy dwelling place and from the throne of the glory of your kingdom, and come to hallow us [you] who sits with the Father and is here invisibly present with us and deign with your mighty hand to give us a share in your spotless body and precious blood and from us to all people."²⁰ Christ is thus present within the gifts, but the presence is here defined as invisible. For Germanos, the priest was saying: "Look, see, behold God."²¹ Christ as God is invisibly present; within the gifts he becomes manifest in the flesh. This act of transformation from the invisible to the visible, from the absent to the present was celebrated in the liturgy and paralleled the Incarnation, in which the invisible God became present in the flesh of Christ. At the invocation, the priest said:

[Let us] have courage to draw near to your holy altar and presenting the antetypes of the holy body and blood of your Jesus Christ we ask you and invoke you holy of holies through the good will of your bounty that your holy spirit may come upon us and upon these gifts lying before you and bless and hallow and show. This bread to be the precious body itself of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen. And this chalice to be the precious blood itself of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.²²

Clearly, the words of the Eucharist were focused upon the calling of an absent God into the presence of the congregation. As Germanos wrote: "The church is an earthly heaven in which the supercelestial God dwells and walks about."²³ The bread and the wine were to be transformed into the body

¹⁵ Mentioned in his letter I.17 found in *Pat. grec.* xcix, 961B.

¹⁶ On the role of the Eucharist in the iconoclasm debates, see Gero.

¹⁷ The liturgical quotations in this paper are taken from the liturgy of Basil practiced in the 8th and 9th centuries and published in Brightman, 308–344, Cherubikon prayer at 318. The translations in this paper, except where specified, are my own. On the liturgy in Byzantium, see R. Taft, *The Great Entrance: A History of the Transfer of Gifts and Other Pre-anaphoral Rites of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, CC)*, 2nd ed., Rome, 1978; H.-J. Schulz, *Die byzantinische Liturgie: Glaubenszeugnis und Symbolgestalt*, 2nd ed., Trier, 1980.

¹⁸ The text and this translation can be found in Saint Germanus of Constantinople, 86–87.

¹⁹ For discussion of Germanos and his work, see R. Taft, "The Liturgy of the Great Church: An Initial Synthesis of Structure and Interpretation on the Eve of Iconoclasm," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, xxxiv–xxxv, 1980–81, 45–75; R. Bornert, *Les Commentaires byzantins de la divine liturgie du VIIe au XVe siècle (Archives de l'Orient Chrétien, IX)*, Paris, 1966, 125–180; L. Lamza, *Patriarch Germanos I. von Konstantinopel (715–730): Versuch einer engültigen chronologischen Fixierung des Lebens und Wirkens des Patriarchen*, Würzburg, 1975; C. Barber, "The Koimesis Church, Nicaea: The Limits of Representation on the Eve of Iconoclasm," *Jahrbuch der Osterreichischen Byzantinistik*, xli, 1991, 43–60.

²⁰ Brightman, 341.

²¹ Saint Germanus of Constantinople, 104–105.

²² Brightman, 329–330.

²³ Saint Germanus of Constantinople, 56–57.

and blood by the actions of the liturgy. Transformation thus underwrote the real presence of Christ within the gifts. But could this paradigm be applied to imagery?

The emperor Constantine V (741–775) appears to have been the originator of the iconoclast use of the Eucharist in the image debate.²⁴ For Constantine, the paradigm of presence in the Eucharist defined the true image. In his first Inquiry, Constantine had said: “If the image is good it is consubstantial with that of which it is the image.”²⁵ The image and its prototype are in this way linked by a common essence. Such language is trinitarian and ultimately derived from the controversies of the fourth century, when writers such as Athanasios and Basil strove to describe the nature of the Trinity.²⁶ God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were understood to have a common nature. It is this that maintains the essential unity of the Trinity, manifest in its distinct forms. The relationship between the parts of the Trinity was expressed in the language of images. God and Christ share a common divine nature; hence it is possible to speak of Christ as an image of God. It is this language that guided Constantine here. From his starting point of an essential relationship between the image and its archetype Constantine argued that there can be no true icon of Christ. The icon and Christ have no essential relationship; therefore the icon cannot be a true image of Christ. Furthermore, the divine nature in Christ is uncircumscribable and so cannot be represented in the icons. If Christ is seen in an icon, then such an image either denies the divine nature in Christ or claims to be able to represent the divine. In either case, the representation of Christ in the icon is heretical. According to Constantine, the theandric Christ is excluded from the possibility of representation because of his divine nature.

Once he had defined the icon as a false image, Constantine, in his second Inquiry, argued that the Eucharist was an example of a true image.²⁷ The first proof of this was that the eucharistic gifts were sanctioned by the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper. Such a sanction enabled the Eucharist to be defined as an *acheiropoieta* (not made by human hands) image. An element of the miraculous underpins this definition and suggests a transformation of the natural world through divine intervention. When the iconoclasts held a church council in 754, they confirmed Constantine’s reading of the Eucharist. In its *Horos* (Definition) the council made this declaration about the Eucharist: “Therefore as the natural body of Christ is holy, as it has been deified, so, obviously, is the one which is in its place; that is, his image [the bread] is also holy as one which becomes deified by

grace, through an act of consecration.”²⁸ The presence of Christ within the gifts is there through the action of the Holy Spirit. Thanks to the intervention of the priest, Christ is materially present in the now transformed gifts. It is this transformation that is the key to the iconoclast definition of the image. The true image shares the essence of its archetype; the bread is thus a true image only from the moment it is transformed from being bread to being the body of Christ. For an icon to be a true image, its material content similarly had to have been transformed.

The iconophile response was based, in part, upon a perhaps deliberate miscognition of the iconoclast case. The iconophiles emphasized that the iconoclasts called the Eucharist an icon of Christ.²⁹ In the sixth session of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787), the deacon Epiphanius said: “None of the Holy Apostles—the trumpets of the spirit—or of our all-memorable Fathers called our bloodless sacrifice, which is celebrated in memory of the suffering of our God and of his entire dispensation an icon of his body.”³⁰ The iconophiles then go on to say: “Afterwards, leaving aside falsehood, they [the iconoclasts] touch for a moment upon the truth, saying that the bread does become the divine body. But, if the bread is an icon of the body, it is impossible for it to be the divine body itself.”³¹ The iconophiles have in this way represented the iconoclasts’ use of the term image/icon as a denigration of the real presence of Christ in the gifts. In so doing, they have ignored the trinitarian cast of the iconoclast’s language.

In reading the iconoclast’s position as one that denigrated the real presence of Christ in the gifts, the iconophiles were objecting to their extension of the concept of real presence to the concept of the icon. The iconoclasts wished to narrow the definition of a true image down to one in which the true image shared the essence of its archetype. The Eucharist became their paradigm for this, with the consequence that an essential identity was demanded between image and archetype. Such a definition effectively excluded the icon, as no one believed that it shared an essential identity with its archetype. The iconophiles read the iconoclast texts as a denigration of the Eucharist because they did not believe in the essential identity of icon and archetype. The distinction between them was the basis for their separation of the icon from the Eucharist, and consequently for the necessary separation of art from worship. To counter the iconoclast discourse, the iconophiles strove to replace it with a new formalist paradigm, as opposed to the essentialist one, for the relationship of the image and its archetype. Following from this, the icon could no longer make present or even re-present.

It is in the writings of Patriarch Nikephoros (750s–828) that this formalist conception of the icon was most clearly

²⁴ See Gero for bibliography.

²⁵ This text can be found in *Pat. grec. c.*, 225A. Our knowledge of Constantine’s arguments is based on the writings of his enemies. They quoted him in order to set up the preferred dialogue format for their own arguments in favor of the icons. The classic source is the *Antirrhetikos* of Patriarch Nikephoros of Constantinople, written ca. 818–820. The whole text can be found in *Pat. grec. c.*, 205–533. This has now been translated into French: Nikephoros, *Discours contre les iconoclastes*, trans. M.-J. Mondzain-Baudinet, Paris, 1989.

²⁶ G. Ladner, “The Concept of the Image in the Greek Fathers and the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, VII, 1953, 1–34. For a discussion of the theological issues in iconoclasm, see Pelikan (as in n. 13).

²⁷ Gero, *passim*.

²⁸ Mansi XIII, 264B. This translation is from Sahas, 93. This definition is preserved in the acts of the iconophile Seventh Ecumenical Council held at Nicaea in 787; Mansi XII, 951–XIII, 458B.

²⁹ Hereafter I will refer to any material image as an “icon,” leaving the term “image” to refer to the concept. Both senses are covered by the Greek term εἰκών.

³⁰ Mansi XIII, 264E, trans. Sahas, 94.

³¹ Mansi XIII, 265E, trans. Sahas, 96.

worked through.³² In his first *Antirrhetikos*, Nikephoros wrote that an image was:

A likeness of an archetype, having impressed upon it the form of what it represents by similarity, differing from it only by the difference of essence in accordance with the materials; or an imitation and similitude of the archetype, differing in essence and substance; or a product of some technical skill, shaped in accordance with the imitation of the archetype, but differing from it in essence and substance.³³

The dividing line between the icon and the archetype was the nature that each had. While they might have shared formal similarities, they could not be identical in essence. Nikephoros has here reiterated the basic distinction that the iconophiles needed to maintain.

Circumscription was the key issue for Nikephoros. The central question for images in iconoclasm was the possibility of representing Christ, who in his hypostasis contains both a divine and a human nature. For instance, did the representation of Christ in the icon imply that his divine nature was circumscribable? If it did, then the Second Commandment would be contravened. It was in the works of Patriarch Nikephoros that the iconophile response to this challenge was set down at some length:

In fact it is in circumscription that presence is necessary. In painting there is nothing of presence . . . for while a man is certainly inscribed in his icon, he is not circumscribed there, only in the place proper to circumscription. And the means of these are clearly distinct. For one inscribes a man through pigments and mosaics, as the situation demands, so producing his figure with varied and many means, and differing in brilliances. Never but never is it a question of circumscribing by these means, since it has been said that circumscription is something else again. Moreover, painting makes present the corporeal form of the one depicted, imprinting its contour and its sensible form and its likeness. Whereas circumscription, having nothing in common with these three modes of which we have spoken, delimits boundaries. Thus the inscription has a relation in terms of likeness to the archetype and is an inscription of the archetype.³⁴

Nikephoros made clear that there was an important gap between circumscription and inscription. While Christ incarnate could encompass both the divine and the human within time and place, an icon of him could never claim to do such a thing. An icon existed only in a formal relationship with its archetype. The key phrase “in painting there is nothing of presence” removed the ground from the iconoclast’s case. An icon could never be the equivalent of the Eucharist. It

cannot make the one depicted present to the viewer here and now. For the iconoclasts, this meant that the icon was illegitimate; for the iconophiles it was this difference that helped to legitimate religious imagery. Nikephoros has therefore invited us to examine this break between art and worship.

The distinction between icon and archetype was drawn through the removal of both Christ’s divine and human natures from the icon. These were necessarily present in the Eucharist, which depended upon the reality of Christ’s presence. The difference in nature between the bread of the gift and the body of Christ was overcome by the action of transformation. For Nikephoros, the presence of Christ within the Eucharist was a false model for his appearance within the icon. In the Eucharist the relationship was essential; in the icon it was formal. Hence Nikephoros wrote: “Making the absent visible as if it was present through the similarity and the memory of form, the icon maintains with its archetype an uninterrupted relation throughout its existence.”³⁵ The presence within the icon was relative. But in this relationship, Nikephoros was able to affirm the icon and to distinguish it from what it depicted. To support this distinction, it was necessary for the patriarch to separate the icon from the Eucharist and the transformational practice of worship.

My criticism of Mathews is therefore based on his maintenance of an ambiguity derived from worship in the relationship between the icon, its archetype, and its viewer. Such ambiguity leaves the problem unresolved as to whether it is Christ himself in the icon or whether the icon is simply a depiction of Christ. In arriving at his definition, Mathews has applied the notion of transformation in the Eucharist to the function of the icon. This provides the key to his account of post-iconoclast church decoration, with transformation explaining the emotional response to this imagery. But, as shown above, the theme of transformation was not applied to the icon; indeed, iconophile thinking rejected the relevance of the notion of transformation for an understanding of the icon. The potential for misunderstanding presence in the icon through such thinking proscribed it from the realms of the possible within official iconophile discourse. For the iconophiles, art and worship had to be separated.

Having argued that transformation is an inapplicable concept in the art of this post-iconoclastic period, I now propose to offer a definition of the icon as a site of desire.³⁶ To do this, I will concentrate on one post-iconoclastic icon, the ninth-century narthex panel in St. Sophia, Istanbul (Fig. 1).³⁷

³² *Ibid.*, 280A.

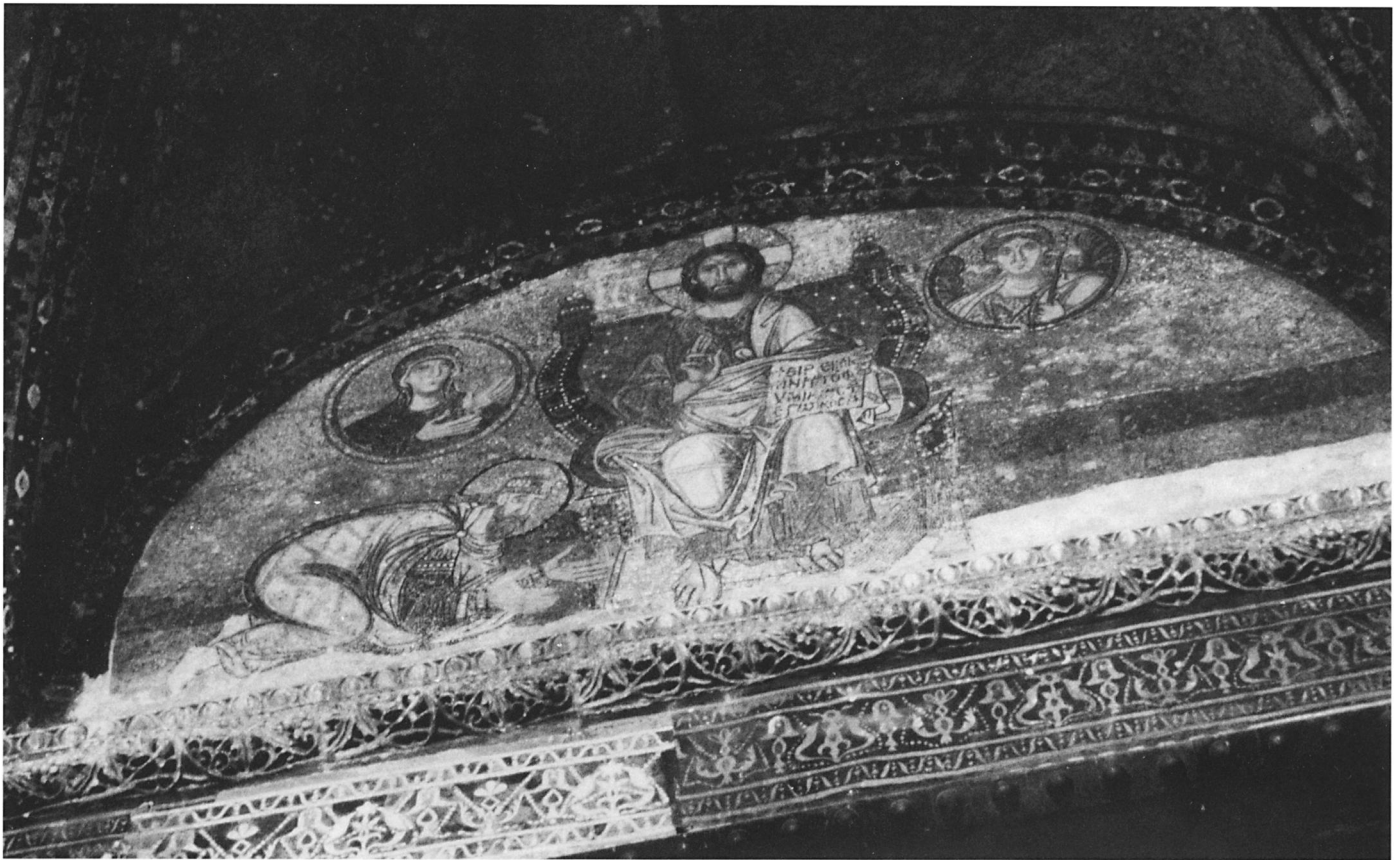
³⁶ The term “desire” (πόθος) derives from the final definition of the icon at the Seventh Ecumenical Council. In Mansi XIII, 377D, the icons of saints are said to move their spectators “to remember and desire” the ones depicted.

³⁷ This mosaic has produced a lengthy bibliography. Recent discussions include H. Franses, “Symbols, Meaning, Belief: Donor Portraits in Byzantine art,” Ph.D. diss., London University, 1992, 37–60; R. Cormack, “Interpreting the Mosaics of S. Sophia at Istanbul,” *Art History*, IV, 1981, 131–149; Z. Gavrilović, “The Humiliation of Leo VI the Wise (The Mosaic of the Narthex at Saint Sophia, Istanbul),” *Cahiers archéologiques*, xxviii, 1979, 87–94; N. Oikonomides, “Leo VI and the Narthex Mosaic of Saint Sophia,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, xxx, 1976, 151–172; E. J. W. Hawkins, “Further Observations on the Narthex Mosaic in St. Sophia at Istanbul,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, xxii, 1968, 151–166.

³² On Nikephoros, see P. J. Alexander, *The Patriarch Nikephoros of Constantinople: Ecclesiastical Policy and Image Worship in the Byzantine Empire*, Oxford, 1958; J. Travis, *In Defense of the Faith: The Theology of Patriarch Nikephoros of Constantinople*, Brookline, Mass., 1984; and, especially, the important but neglected article, Baudinet. The following analysis of Nikephoros draws on this last article.

³³ *Pat. grec.* c, 277A.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 357BCD.



1 Narthex mosaic, St. Sophia, Istanbul (photo: author)

Much of the discussion of this mosaic has centered on the question of the identification of the emperor seen kneeling in the icon and the consequent intentionalist readings of the work. Rather than becoming directly engaged in this debate, I will discuss the panel here as an example of the pictorial possibilities in post-iconoclastic art.

The icon fulfills many of the expectations of those who would dismiss Byzantine art from the canon of European art. The mosaic panel shows Christ enthroned at its center. He is bearded and has a cross nimbus. He blesses with his right hand, and in his left hand he holds an open text which reads: "Peace to you: I am the light of the world." On either side of Christ are medallions. The one to the left shows a woman praying to Christ or beseeching him. She is usually identified as the Virgin Mary. The medallion to the right contains an archangel. In the lower left quarter of the panel is a kneeling figure. His beard, costume, crown, and halo all indicate that he is an emperor. He is shown in proskynesis, worshipping Christ. The flat ground of gold and gray-green bands immediately suggests a lack of concern for illusionism. This disregard is reiterated in the throne, where the footstool, the seat, and its back seem awkwardly aligned. The use of medallions also prevents this space from being read as a natural one. Similarly, the exaggerated green tesserae used in the modeling of figures and the disproportionate scale of hands and feet act against a Zeuxian interpretation of the mosaic.

It is the assumption that the panel ought to be examined only in light of what it re-presents that can be criticized here.

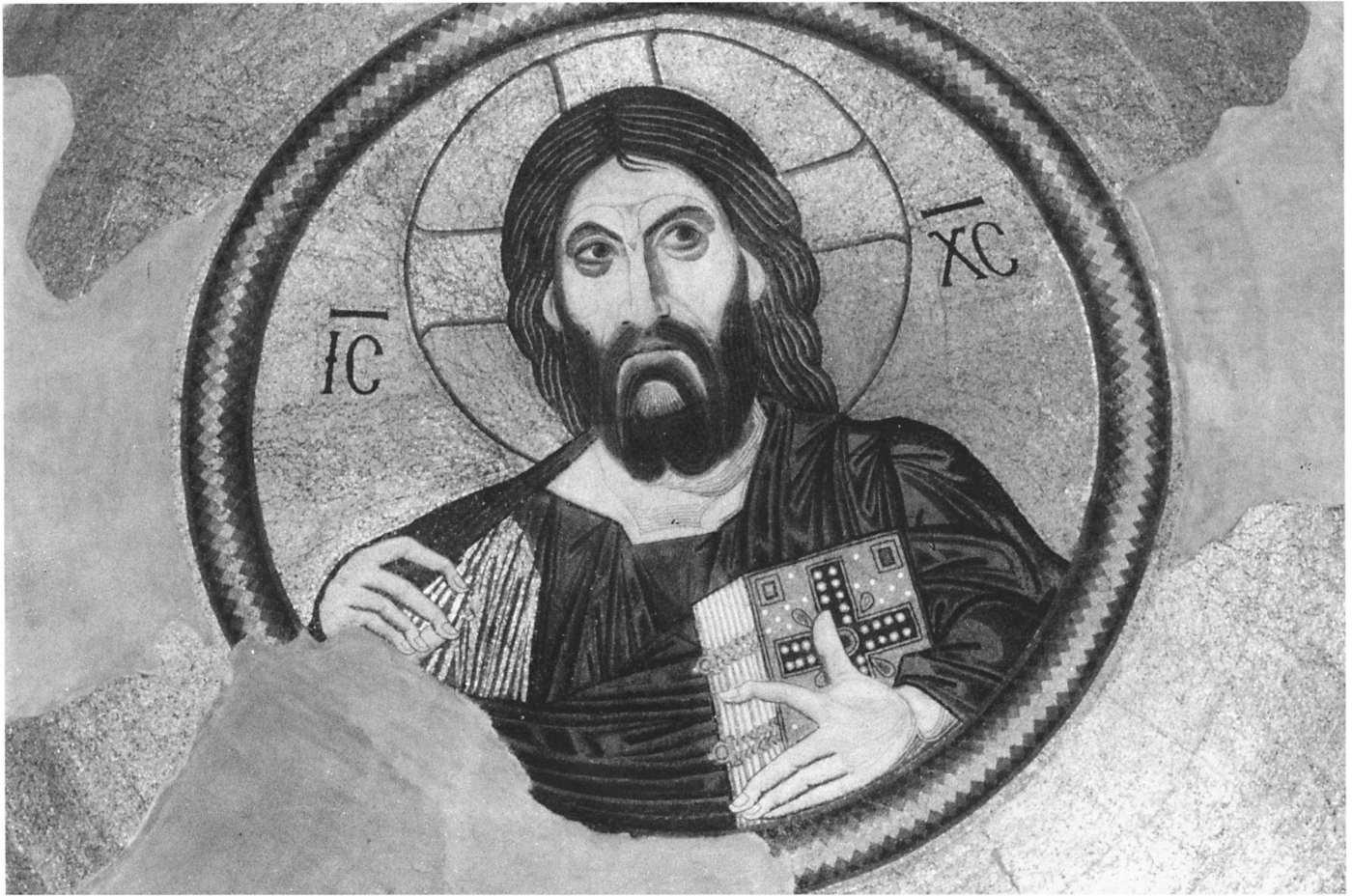
The dismissal of Byzantine art, of which the narthex panel is an example, from the canon of European art is predicated on an anachronistic assumption that the work of art is structured around its changing means of reproducing the material world.³⁸ Clearly, this art is not concerned with such a project. Furthermore, it can be argued that this art is not limited by the need to re-present the holy. It is often assumed that Byzantine art is shaped by such a need, so that a more linear or "abstract" style is considered appropriate to representation where a danger of idolatry had been identified.³⁹ Both of these readings are premised on a representational model. As an alternative, one could argue that the formal practices employed in Byzantine art draw attention to the pictorial field itself as an autonomous significant space rather than as a representational space.⁴⁰ Such a change of emphasis has implications for Mathews's transformational model.

Mathews uses the Christ in the dome, the Pantokrator, as his prime example of transformation symbolism (Fig. 2). The

³⁸ See n. 3.

³⁹ See n. 2. For the 11th century, see H. Maguire, "Style and Ideology in Byzantine Imperial Art," *Gesta*, xxviii, 1989, 217-231, esp. 224 on Psellos's use of "abstract" terminology to praise the emperor. For a criticism of this approach to the relation of art and language, see L. James and R. Webb, "To Understand Ultimate Things and Enter Secret Places: Ekphrasis and Art in Byzantium," *Art History*, xiv, 1991, 1-17.

⁴⁰ This point derives from Baudinet, 1978. For a similar, although ultimately different, discussion, see G. Dagron, "Mots, images, icônes," *Nouvelle Revue de psychanalyse*, XLIV, 1991, 151-168. For an interesting comparison, see C. Greenberg, "Byzantine Parallels," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, Boston, 1965, 169.



2 Pantokrator, dome, Daphni (photo: author)

worshipper is transformed into this Christ as a result of liturgical experience. To understand this possibility, it is necessary to investigate what the Pantokrator might have meant in Byzantium in the ninth century. It is a problematic icon. Indeed, a number of authorities have despaired of defining the Pantokrator.⁴¹ Mathews has argued, however, that we can discover the meaning of the icon through its functional role. In particular, he argues that the liturgy constructs a response to this icon in the individual. We need then to examine the terms in which the liturgy framed the Pantokrator. For example, in the anaphora the priest says:

O Being, Master, Lord, God, Father, Pantokrator, Adored, it is truly meet and right and befitting the majesty of your holiness to praise you, to hymn you, to bless you, to give thanks to you, to glorify you, the one and only God, and to offer you this our reasonable service in a contrite heart and a spirit of lowliness, for you are he who has granted us the knowledge of your truth; who is able to express your noble acts or to make all your praises heard or to tell of all your wondrous works? Always Lord of all things, Lord of

heaven and earth, and of every creature visible and invisible, who sits upon the throne of glory and beholds the depths, and without beginning, invisible, incomprehensible, uncircumscribed, unchangeable, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the great God and Saviour of our hope, who is the image of your goodness, seal of equal type, manifesting in himself you the Father.⁴²

This text and the title Pantokrator are addressed to God the Father, to the divinity. What the prayer affirms is that Christ is also the Pantokrator. It is a trinitarian prayer. God the Father cannot be seen; he is materially and physically absent; however, through Christ, God becomes visible. This is possible because of their shared nature, as affirmed in the prayer: “The image of your goodness, seal of equal type, manifesting in himself you the Father.” The icon of the Pantokrator can be understood, and usually is, as a visual parallel of this representation. It is the icon of the Father-in-the-Son. As such, it confirms a basic theological argument. It assures us of Christ’s divine nature, as perhaps the Virgin in the apse confirms his human nature. That the Pantokrator can be seen confirms, perhaps more than any other icon, the possibility of Christian representation. The divinity has been and can continue to be seen as a consequence of the

⁴¹ The articles by Mathews discussed in this paper provide a good overview of the topic. Useful reference points are K. Wessel, “Christusbild,” in *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst*, 1, 1044–1020; J. Timken Matthews, “The Byzantine Use of the Title Pantokrator,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, XLIV, 1978, 442–462. The despair is expressed by Wessel.

⁴² Brightman, 321–322. The prayer was silent. Nevertheless, it opens to us a possible context for the interpretation of this image.

Incarnation. The issue remains, however, as to whether the visibility of the Pantokrator is the same thing as his presence.

During iconoclasm, the debate focused on the acceptability of the portrayal of Christ in an icon, the issue being whether one of the Trinity could be represented in an icon. The dispute confirmed that an anthropomorphic God not only could, but had to be depicted in the icons.⁴³ The act of depiction is not only a product of the Incarnation, but also confirms the reality of this event. The nature of Christ is the hinge of this possibility of figuration. Within his hypostasis, he contained two natures. One is divine—that is, invisible, uncircumscribed, and materially absent. The other is human—visible, circumscribable, and materially present. Because of this full human nature within the hypostasis, Christ can be depicted. The paradoxical making of the absent present within the Incarnation opens the whole possibility of Christian representation, with Christ as the prototypical sign. Christ through his human nature makes the divine visible in his hypostasis. The Pantokrator is perhaps the image of this possibility and so justifies Mathews's attention.

Mathews goes on to argue that the Pantokrator is an expression "of the totality of the self, of a wholeness toward which one strives."⁴⁴ Spectators can become Christ in/through the icon, just as they have in/through the Eucharist. The model for this transformation was given by Maximos Confessor's comments on the Eucharist: "By adoption and grace it is possible for them [the participants in the Eucharist] to be and to be called gods, because all of God completely fills them, leaving nothing in them empty of his presence."⁴⁵ This comment, directed at the Eucharist, assumes the full presence of Christ within the gifts. Through their partaking of the Eucharist, the participants enter into an identity with Christ. Such an identity is grounded in an essential presence, the bread and the wine having become the body and the blood of Christ. These are not a representation, but an actual presence. But this model of the eucharistic food consuming its consumer is misleading when applied to the icon.⁴⁶ The icon cannot have presence in the manner of the eucharistic gifts. It is essentially different from that which it depicts. This gap between the icon and its archetype marks a crucial difference between the Eucharist and the icon. The difference is that between absence (the icon) and presence (the Eucharist). This difference argues that the icon, rather than transforming spectators or acting as the site of their transformation, is not a site of identification through representation, such as Mathews wishes the Pantokrator to be, but a site of desire.⁴⁷

⁴³ On this necessity, see K. Parry, "Theodore Studites and the Patriarch Nicephoros on Image-making as Christian Imperative," *Byzantion*, XLIX, 1989, 164–183.

⁴⁴ Mathews, 1990, 213.

⁴⁵ *Pat. grec.* xci, 697A; Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagoga*, in J. Stead, trans., *The Church, the Liturgy and the Soul of Man: The Mystagoga of St. Maximus the Confessor*, Still River, Mass., 1982, 96. Quoted by Mathews, 1988, 19, and *idem*, 1990, 213.

⁴⁶ Contrast this reading with that of L. Marin, *Portrait of the King*, London, 1988, 8–14, and *idem*, *La Critique du discours: Sur la "logique de port-royal" et les "pensées" de Pascal*, Paris, 1975, esp. 51–77, in which it is argued that the Eucharist provides the paradigm for a system of representation.

This desire is suggested in a passage written by the patriarch Photios (ca. 810–ca. 893) in 864. This text comes from a homily written by the patriarch for the consecration of the church of the Virgin Pharos in the Great Palace in Constantinople. What it encapsulates is an experience of looking at a decorated church in the period immediately following iconoclasm:

When one has painfully torn oneself away from there and glanced into the church itself, one is filled with a great and huge delight and also with confusion and astonishment. One is wholly awed as if one has entered into Heaven itself with no one barring the way from any side and been illuminated as if by the stars by the beauty in many forms and partially visible everywhere. Furthermore everything appears to be as in a vision and the church itself to be spinning round. For in both their every twist and turn and their ceaseless movement, which the variety of the spectacle on all sides compels the spectator to experience, one imagines one's own experience into the things seen.⁴⁸

This is a difficult passage and a remarkable account of looking. It presents us with two ways of seeing an icon such as the one in St. Sophia. The first way suggests a transformation. Photios has written that the entry into the church was like an entry into Heaven, with nothing separating the spectator from the direct experience of the holy figures listed later in the text. Such a direct experience returns us to the transformation symbolism of Mathews. The experience of the icon has become equivalent to that of the Eucharist. Like the Eucharist, the signifier (bread/icon) has become transparent, and the signified (Christ) has left absence behind and become wholly present. The Christ in the icon or the eucharistic gift has become present here and now to the worshipper. The icon in the narthex seems to represent such unmediated presence. Christ and the emperor share the same space. The emperor is worshipping Christ himself, not an icon of Christ. It would appear that a transformation has taken place. The emperor might not have become Christ, but he is with Christ. Such an icon appears to confirm the notion of transformation symbolism, of the possibility of participation in the icon with the holy figure represented there.

But Photios introduced this passage with an "as if." It was "as if one has entered Heaven." The church is not Heaven, only a spectacle of Heaven. This imaginary quality is underlined at the end of the passage where the patriarch informs us that the spectator "imagines one's own experience into

⁴⁷ Desire is the first condition of the icon itself. It marks an absence into which spectators could project their own desires. For example, at the end of the 12th century Mesarites was able to see the potential for both love and fear in the icon of the Pantokrator: C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire*, Toronto, 1986, 232. As a site of desire, the icon is not marked by fixed meanings or readings. It is not bound by the expectations of representation.

⁴⁸ The text is from Photios's tenth homily: B. Laourdas, *Photou Omhrai* [in Greek], Thessaloniki, 1959, 101, ll. 16–25. A commentary and alternative translation can be found in C. Mango, *The Homilies of Photus Patriarch of Constantinople* (*Dumbarton Oaks Studies*, III), Cambridge, 1958, 177–190, esp. 186.

the things seen.”⁴⁹ Such a description suggests that an element of projection is involved in the perception of this art, and it opens up an alternative, and second, way of seeing the icon in the narthex. As discussed above, late iconophile theory had clarified the difference between the icon and the archetype of that icon. This theory argued that Christ could not share the icon space with the emperor, because Christ could not be within the icon, only the depiction of Christ. The figure of the emperor should be understood in a similar manner. The emperor, too, is absent from the icon. This panel is set above the imperial doorway in the narthex of St. Sophia. Before entering the church proper, the emperor would offer worship to Christ below this mosaic.⁵⁰ The difference between this icon of an emperor and the living emperor was underwritten by this action. The presence of the emperor below would emphasize his absence from the icon above, marking this as a depiction rather than a re-presentation of something wholly absent. Furthermore, the emperor in the icon did not re-present, or double, the specific activity of the emperor below. There is a gap between the textual description of the emperor’s worship here and the visual presentation of an emperor at worship in the icon.⁵¹

The icon is not rendered impotent by this non-representational aspect; its power is, however, different from that of the Eucharist and worship. Despite their non-presence within the icon, the emperor and Christ are seen there. They share a space without reference to another place or time. Indeed, we see no representation of an event in this icon. Instead, we see an icon of the fulfillment of the desire in worship. That is the physical and spiritual encounter with the absent holy. But this encounter exists only within the terms of the visual language employed. The icon not only shows the desire in worship, but it sustains that desire.⁵² The encounter with the holy remains unfulfilled, because the holy and the human are not there in the icon. What is there is a formal language with which the viewer can comply. It promises identity, but leaves it unachieved. The beholder projects “their every twist and

turn and their ceaseless movement” onto the still icon, but the gaps between the beholder and the icon, the icon and the referent, remain and they maintain desire. It is here that the power of the icon lies.

The icon in the narthex of St. Sophia is a pure signifier. It cannot re-present its signified, although this must exist for the icon to be valid.⁵³ Instead, the icon, as a pure signifier, maintains absence, maintains desire. This function is underwritten by the formal structure of the icon. Nikephoros has spoken of the formal relationship between the icon and its saint. Photios has talked of “the beauty in many forms and partially visible everywhere.” I would suggest that the relative “abstraction” of some Byzantine art is connected to this need to show that the icon is a non-representational space.⁵⁴ The “abstraction” of this art does not mark some anachronistic failing; rather, it draws attention to the art as a powerful site of significant showing without re-presentation.

The creation of this purely pictorial space allows for the construction of a relationship between the absent and the present, the holy and the human. Such a resolution belongs in the imaginary field of the icon, where the earthly and the heavenly can meet. Within the icon the imaginary can happen; the religious discourse can be confirmed; and an identity within this discourse can be proposed. Outside of the icon, the viewer can imagine the end to desire, and is invited by the icon to submit to the discourse of resolution represented in the icon, to identify with the one praying.

Nevertheless, the icon remains a site of desire, where the resolution promised can only be met within the discourse of the icon. Within this visual discourse, an identity is deferred. As such, the icon operates in a manner wholly different from worship. In worship, whether it is the consuming of the eucharistic gifts or the prayer to the saints, there is an expectation of presence. In contrast, the icon is the signifier of absence. The icon cannot therefore be called a site of transformation; rather, it should be understood as a site of desire. It is an autonomous depiction, and as such it acts as a barrier between desired full presence and actual absence. Consequently, the icon maintains desire, maintaining the sense of difference between the one looking, the medium of portrayal, and the one portrayed, and it defers forever the actual presence of the latter. So, instead of the presence or the nostalgia for presence suggested by the art history of the natural copy, we should understand that the icon in the ninth century works to deny presence and hence to counter the

⁴⁹ The analysis that follows owes a great deal to J. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, trans. A. Sheridan, London, 1977, esp. 203–260.

⁵⁰ Constantin Porphyrogénète, *Le Livre des cérémonies*, ed. A. Vogt, 1, 2nd ed., Paris, 1967, 10–11, 95.

⁵¹ An interesting contrast in the possibilities of religious imagery is suggested by the 6th-century decoration on the door below this mosaic. Directly below the enthroned Christ is an icon of the Etimasia, the throne of Christ’s Second Coming. In this bronze the throne is occupied by the Gospels, the Word. By way of contrast, the mosaic above is occupied by an icon of Christ visible in his human flesh. These two icons perhaps indicate changing attitudes to imagery across this crucial period for Christian art.

⁵² It is here that I part company with Brubaker and Franses. Brubaker argues (Brubaker, 1989a, 35–37) that the gap between the icon and its archetype provides a space for the viewer to enter the icon and to supply the missing essence removed from the icon as a result of the fear of idolatry. Franses (as in n. 37), 250–269, argues that an understanding of the icon as metaphor enables closing the necessary gap between the “possible” natural world and the “impossible” supernatural one. He uses the notion of transformation to overcome this divide. In contrast to these two arguments, I would suggest that the icon maintains the gap between the icon and its archetype, and that the separation of art from worship is an aspect of this maintenance. The icon neither participates in its archetype, nor acts as a substitute for it (see Baudinet, 95); instead, it exists within its own terms as a site of desire.

⁵³ I will discuss this relationship further in a forthcoming article. For now, see Baudinet, and *idem*, “L’Incarnation, l’image, la voix,” *Esprit*, 11, 1982, 188–199.

⁵⁴ That the icon should be thought of as a nonrepresentational space is a product of the iconophile need to suppress the possibility of presence opened by the practice of re-presentation. The relative “abstraction” of much Byzantine art can be associated with this need. My argument, and the consequent identification of the icon as a site of desire, derives from the art theory available in 9th-century Byzantium. This theory addresses the condition of being-an-icon. It does not account for, nor is it the intention of this paper to account for, the changing formal possibilities in Byzantine art. These have their own history. See, e.g., H. Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium*, Princeton, 1981, for a discussion of the possible roots of the emotional art of the later 12th century in Byzantium.

expectations of worship. After iconoclasm, art and worship are not to be confused.

Charles Barber received his Ph.D. from the Courtauld Institute, and is currently a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the Warburg Institute. He is studying art and worship in Byzantium, and has published a number of articles on Byzantine topics [Warburg Institute, Woburn Square, London WC1H 0AB, U.K.].

Frequently Cited Sources

Baudinet, M.-J., "La Relation iconique à Byzance au IXe siècle d'après Nicéphore le Patriarche: Un Destin de l'aristotélisme," *Les Études philosophiques*, 1, 1978, 85–106.

Brightman, F., *Liturgies Eastern and Western 1: Eastern Liturgies*, Oxford, 1896.

Brubaker, L., 1989a, "Byzantine Art in the Ninth Century: Theory, Practice, and Culture," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, XIII, 23–93.

_____, 1989b, "Perception and Conception: Art, Theory and Culture in Ninth-Century Byzantium," *Word & Image*, v, 19–32.

Cormack, R., *Writing in Gold: Byzantine Society and Its Icons*, London, 1985.

Saint Germanus of Constantinople, *On the Divine Liturgy*, trans. P. Meyendorff, New York, 1984.

Gero, S., "The Eucharistic Doctrine of the Byzantine Iconoclasts and Its Sources," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, LXVIII, 1975, 4–22.

Mansi, J.D., ed., *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, Florence, 1759–98.

Mathews, T.F., 1986, "Psychological Dimensions in the Art of Eastern Christendom," *Art and Religion: Faith, Form and Reform (1984 Paine Lectures in Religion)*, ed. O. Overby, Columbia, Mo., 1–21.

_____, 1988, "The Sequel to Nicaea II in Byzantine Church Decoration," *Perkins Journal*, xli, 11–21.

_____, 1990, "The Transformation Symbolism in Byzantine Architecture and the Meaning of the Pantokrator in the Dome," *Church and People in Byzantium*, ed. R. Morris, Birmingham, 191–214.

Sahas, D., *Icon and Logos: Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm*, Toronto, 1986.