

Mini Term Paper

An Analysis of Panel with Half-Figure of St. Michael: Pause and Pray

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Introduction

St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, Italy houses many Byzantine artifacts, including the Icon of Archangel Michael, representing St. Michael and numerous saints (Fig. 1). This relief icon was produced in the late tenth to the early eleventh century, during the Middle Byzantine period, and it is forty-four centimeters in height.¹ The artist composed the piece with silver, decorated the angel's garbs with precious stones, and used cloisonné enamel for the angel's wings.²

Formal Analysis

This icon is 44 centimeters in height, making it smaller than a Byzantine wall mosaic and bigger than miniature icons. 44 centimeters, roughly one and a half feet, appear like a picture frame. According to this sizing, St. Michael's portrayal is not life-sized; it is probably most comparable to a human hand.

St. Michael overtakes the frame-like composition while the saints surround him in miniature size, revealing a hierarchy of scale. The saints' bodies appear proportional, while St. Michael's body does not. The shape of the face narrowly squishes his features, making their disproportions noticeable. His eyes bulge out, covering his eyelids, the nose appears narrow and long, and his mouth is squished and pouted. All of these odd, distinguishing characteristics emphasize St. Michael as the key figure in this work and display an idealized, not naturalistic, depiction of the work.

The artist uses bright colors, both earthy and pigmented. Gold, a heavenly color, seems to decorate most of the space, but St. Michael bathes in an illuminated gold, drawing attention to his figure and giving him divine status. This bright gold interacts with the light, highlighting the

¹ *The Treasury of San Marco, Venice* (Milan: Olivetti, 1984), 141.

² *The Treasury of San Marco, Venice*, 141.

right side of St. Michael's face and his palm, proving this to be a performative icon. On the other hand, the saints engage with the primary colors, specifically blue and red, giving them a sense of earthliness. Many of these colors—including an emerald green—are also seen in the precious stones that clothe St. Michael (Fig. 2).

The placement of the figures is all very symmetrical, with St. Michael at the center. The saints surround him with equal distance from one another. Within the frame of St. Michael, two saints parallelly flank his head. On the second layer, six figures are represented. Four of the figures are enclosed in the typical ring-like border, while two depicted women are bordered by a rectangle. Even though the figures themselves are different, how they are composed is reflective. The outermost layer also follows in the symmetrical pattern by equally spacing out the saints around the perimeter of the piece.

The portrayal of the saints contributes to the centrality of the figure of St. Michael because many of them look at him. Their gazes, unfortunately, resemble the attitude of frustration. Even though these figures, including St. Michael, reveal just their busts, their hands are shown holding different objects up. Some of the objects include scrolls, books, crosses, and swords, all biblical symbols.

St. Michael also holds something in his hand—a scepter. This scepter lightly held by St. Michael is crowned with a jewel. His other hand reveals his palm facing the viewer, almost as if he was trying to pause the viewer. This powerful posture creates a space between the icon and the viewer, almost reminding the onlooker of their disconnect from the divine. Also contributing to St. Michael's heavenly status, a halo encircles his head, adorned with a geometric pattern.

The three-dimensional piece, also known as a relief icon, has a rough-looking texture to it because of the multiple layers included and the variety of materials used. The borders suggest a layering of three planes, each holding jagged pieces—St. Michael, the saints’ borders, intricate silver designs, and the borders themselves. The use of different materials, such as silver, precious stones, and enamel, also contribute to the rough texture of the icon.

Contextual Analysis

Icon of Archangel Michael displays the angel Michael from the Bible surrounded by depictions of twenty-two saints. This piece—fashioned in Constantinople, plundered in the Fourth Crusade, and brought to Venice—venerates Michael as a saint to worship in the form of an icon. In Byzantium, artists ornately created portable depictions of Christ, the Virgin, and saints, like the Icon of Archangel Michael, and they are known as icons.³ Charles Barber clearly defines icons as sites of desire.⁴ Religious icons fashioned during the Byzantine era evoked physical and emotional responses from their Orthodox worshipers due to their sumptuous designs.

Icons were believed to be saturated with *charis*, or divine grace, motivating many viewers to physical devotion.⁵ Eastern Orthodox Christians engaged most of their senses—taste, smell, touch, sight—to actively engage with icons. In Byzantium, icons offered a synesthetic experience, where worshippers were able to perceive physical closeness to God simply through

³ Bissera V. Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon,” *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 4 (2006): pp. 631-655, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.2006.10786312>, 1.

⁴ Charles Barber, “From Transformation to Desire: Art and Worship after Byzantine Iconoclasm,” *The Art Bulletin* 75, no. 1 (1993): p. 7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3045929>, 11.

⁵ Bissera V. Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon,” *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 4 (2006).

seeing an image.⁶ Bissera V. Pentcheva describes this experience in his article *The Performative Icon*:

The eye of the beholder is active, constantly moving and sending light rays that touch the surfaces of objects. The eye seeks the tactility of textures and reliefs. Sight is understood and experienced as touch. Not surprisingly, Byzantine icons address this tactile desire with their rich decoration, varied materials, and reliefs.⁷

Synesthesia, or to perceive together, allowed devout believers to see the Lord through touch, smell, and sometimes taste. Often, the whole body of an individual was occupied by the power of an icon, leading them to prostrate themselves in its presence.

Icons also produced highly emotional responses from the viewers, even though many icons depicted biblical figures in an idealized style instead of naturally. The Icon of Archangel Michael proves this point in that the artist represents St. Michael with disproportionate features that do not provide a naturalistic, emotional likeness. In Charles Barber's article *From Transformation to Desire: Art and Worship after Byzantine Iconoclasm*, he explains the response these rigid portrayals of iconographic figures receive:

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 deeply passionate manner. There are reports that worshippers talked to, embraced, and wept before these images.⁸

⁶ Bissera V. Pentcheva, "The Performative Icon," *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 4 (2006).

⁷ Bissera V. Pentcheva, "The Performative Icon," *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 4 (2006).

⁸ Charles Barber, "From Transformation to Desire: Art and Worship after Byzantine Iconoclasm," 1.

Icons in Byzantium evoked highly emotional responses that often spurred on physical responses. Although one could study emotive versus physical worship, it is evident that for the Byzantines the two types of responses went hand in hand. The internalizing of iconography as God motivated viewers to use their bodies to engage with, worship, and submit to the power of God.

Figures

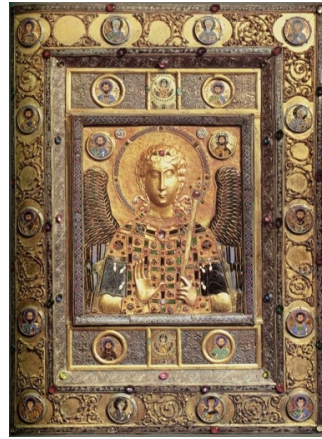


Fig. 1
Icon of Archangel Michael,
Late 10th to early 11th century,
Silver-gilt, gold cloisonné enamel, stones, pearls (now missing), glass.



Fig. 2
Icon of Archangel Michael (closeup on hands),
Late 10th to early 11th century,
Silver-gilt, gold cloisonné enamel, stones, pearls (now missing), glass.

Bibliography

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The Treasury of San Marco, Venice. Milan: Olivetti, 1984.