



Imagination and Memory in the Context of Artistic Creation: The Case of Byzantine Art¹

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Abstract: *Imagination creates, which means it projects into the future. It also informs the past; i.e. it influences memory. For instance, memory and artistic imagination – embodied sometimes within manuals (can we also say within the artists themselves?) – are the agents that transmit artistic forms and ideas.*

Memory is often affective, which means it retains events which have a strong emotional impact on a person; it also triggers the imagination concerning various events and objects when a person is in a high emotional state.

The paper elaborates on these issues. My position is that the activation of memory is not simply an act of retrieving passive information, but a creative process. That is especially evident in the case of Byzantine art.

Keywords: *Byzantium, art, memory, Byzantine icons, iconographer, imagination, Hermeneias, Dionysius of Fournas*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper has two parts: after the framework of the discussion is set, firstly the views on memory of a famous psychologist, William James, and that of a renowned philosopher, James Mill, are introduced. Secondly, the author of the article presents her definition of memory, especially as this human faculty relates to imagination when an artistic context is considered. Examples of Byzantine art are inserted within the text.

2. WILLIAM JAMES AND JAMES MILL ABOUT MEMORY AND IMAGINATION

As we know, memory and remembering are connected to mind, consciousness, identity, and perception. But also to imagination, even though no many of the books that treat this subject refer to the respective human faculty when discussing about memory. James and Mill had different stands with respect to the concept of memory, even though both emphasize the importance of association in the act of memorizing. The first believes that **primary memory** is the human capacity to retain a state of mind for a certain length of time. **Secondary memory** or memory proper is for him “the knowledge of a former state of mind after it has already once dropped from consciousness; or rather *it is the knowledge of an event, or fact, of which meantime we have not been thinking, with the additional consciousness that we have thought or experienced it before.*”² But James also underlines that the simple fact of recalling, seeing, or hearing objects and people does not involve memory; the association among those processes is of essence when it comes to this human capacity. Mill supports him in this by stating that in order to speak about a complete act of memory in the case of an individual he/she not only needs to have seen objects or heard people, but also to have ‘the idea’ that he/she did so.³ My own definition of memory is that it is the human faculty which is instrumental,

¹ This article is based on my talk “What is the role of memory-imagination when dealing with reality? The case of Byzantine art” given at the Oxford Philosophical Society Day conference, ‘What role does memory play in our understanding of reality?’, 21st November, 2021.

² William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Cambridge, Mass and London, Harvard University Press, c. 1981, 1983, p. 610; his emphasis.

³ James Mill, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* [1829], London: Routledge, 1992, vols. 1-2; on line 2018 via Project Gutenberg EBook #56441.

inter alia, in the co-ordination of experiences. Hence, this is the human capacity that enables us to make sense of both past and current reality and to identify things and people that we encountered in the past. Human memory involves recourse to perception, reason, and sometimes imagination.

As we know, perception refers to direct reactions – feeling, thoughts – to the outside world. But, of course, human beings have also thoughts about realities from their internal universe – like mathematical and artistic notions. These are still conditioned by perception and still involve communication with other beings, but are not reduced to that or to the perception itself. These **internal thoughts** involve to a large extent imagination. Artistic representations/projections, especially in the context of discussing Byzantine art where not all the personages depicted had a historical existence (sometimes they do), belong to this category and make appeal to imagination. But imagination alone is not accountable when the past reality comes to our mind distorted; we know that one specific past event can be described by peoples who attended it in various ways – this is so because each person remembers and imagines a particular reality differently; these processes are subjective. The state of affairs described here tallies up with James’s statement that “The very essence of the act of memory consists in the ability to say: This after-image is the image of a percept I had a moment since; or this image of memory is the image of the percept I had at a certain time”.⁴ James also thinks that memory is a matter of faith (in one’s abilities to remember the past). This is what he says: “Memory is then the feeling of belief in a peculiar complex object; but all the elements of this object may be known to other states of belief; nor is there in the particular combination of them as they appear in memory anything so peculiar as to lead us to oppose the later to other sorts of thought as something altogether *sui generis*, needing a special faculty to account for it.”⁵

3. HOW IMAGINATION AND MEMORY INTERACT WITHIN A BYZANTINE ARTISTIC CONTEXT

There is no doubt that in order to create any work –even, for instance, a painting produced in a realistic style – an artist appeals to imagination. But memory is also very important in the field of art since, though not always reliable, it is deployed to recall and create representations of the past. Imagination and memory relate to one another because the artist may create works based on recollections. As indicated above, these are filtered through the emotions of the artist through his or her sensibilities and states of mind, therefore they are individual. This is why one can speak about the originality of an artist and of his/her work. Scientific experiments have been conducted to indicate the manner in which people have different memories of the same realities; it is certain that a happening from the childhood is differently recalled by the siblings that grew up in the same household, and that a play or a concert are differently remembered by various attendees. From this perspective, one can say that imagination is instrumental not only in future **projects, but also in the way we remember the past** i.e. it constructs memories.

As it was suggested, in certain cases, such as the practice of Byzantine art, imagination is used to a greater degree because usually icons and frescoes –the most representative artistic forms within Byzantium and the culture inherited from it – do not always depict historical people, but mythological, symbolical, or ‘prototypal’ ones (those who, in some peoples’ mind, represent the quintessence of humanity). In this framework, sometimes the art of painting requires the artist to “aggregate” a list of human qualities, give it a name, and call it a saint or a special being (it should be remarked that there have been saints of whom existence has been historically attested). Images representing Byzantine art, icons, are shown here in figures 1-4. As I demonstrates at length in my book *Between Tradition and Modernity*, there are a few differences between a painting rendered in a Byzantine style and one of the Renaissance, for example.⁶

⁴ W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 648.

⁵ James, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 613; my emphasis.

⁶ Elena Ene Drăghici-Vasilescu, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Icons and Iconographers in Romania*, Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2009

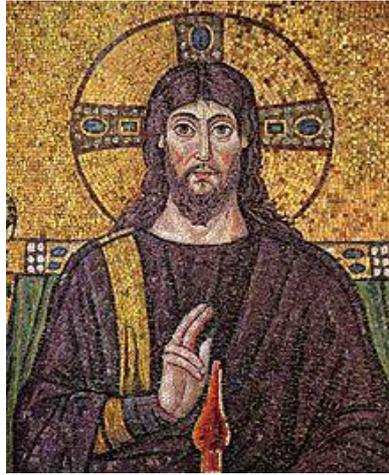


Fig. 1. Sixth-century mosaic in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna. It portrays Jesus long-haired, bearded, and attired



Fig. 2. A representation of the 'Good Shepherd' within the Domus dei Tappeti di Pietra (The Domus of Stone Carpets), Ravenna. As one can see, this is different from any other classical representation of the same iconographic motif; sixth century. Photo taken by EED-Vasilescu, June 2021 in Ravenna.

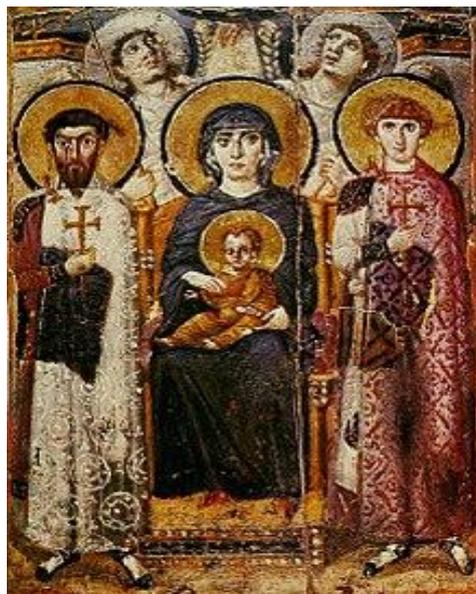


Fig. 3. Icon of the enthroned Virgin and Child with saints Theodore and George and angels, sixth century, Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai; encaustic on wood, 2' 3" x 1' 7 3/8"/68. 58 cm x 49. 7 cm . Source: Elena Ene D-Vasilescu, "The Fourth Century Theotokos Icon of the Temple Gallery", in *Byzantinoslavica* 65, 2007, p. 90 [pp. 83-90].



Fig. 4. *The mosaic of the triumphal arch. Basilica of San Vitale; Ravenna. 548 AD*

The process of creation is aided by the usage of manuals; with respect to painting, in Western Europe the most known of those is that written by Cennino Cennini, *Trattato della Pittura*, translated in English as *The Book of Art*.⁷ This is thought to have been penned around the turn of the fifteenth century. Within the Byzantine context there are a few similar books concerning painting; these are called *Hermeneias* (“Grammars”). A great example of such a manual is that published in Greek by Dionysius of Fourna in the eighteenth century. It was compiled on Mount Athos from 1730 to 1734 from ancient and contemporary sources and various receipt, and has been translated in many languages; figs. 5-6. The rules and the prescriptions within the above-mentioned texts were gathered by artists in Byzantium and Europe from the fourth century – in the case of Dionysius’s text, until the eighteenth century. Some recipes from Cennini’s *Treatise of painting* – but not all – are also found in Dionysius’s book. It means that both authors collected such prescriptions from their peers and put them together. Contemporary to us artists who work in Byzantine style still use the old manuals to guide them, but in some cases they add new formulae to the traditional ones; see such a book (in its Romanian translation from English) by Constantine Cavaros (1918 –2011) in fig 7.⁸ The just explained reasons have made clear that it is essential to recognize the importance of memory and imagination when artworks are created, no matter the period or style.

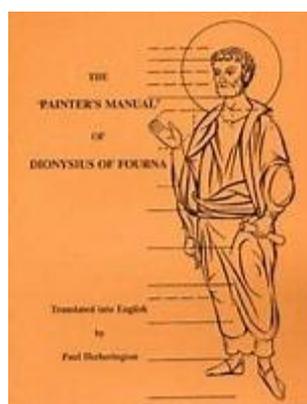


Fig. 5. *Dionysius of Fourna, Painters' Manual, trans. Paul Hetherington, Los Angeles, CA: Oakwood Press, 1981.*

⁷*The Book of the Art* by Cennino Cennini offers guidance concerning late Medieval and early Renaissance painting. See Cennino Cennini, *The Book of the Art: A Contemporary Practical Treatise on Quattrocento Painting*, London: Routledge (c. 1899), Classic Reprint, 2018; also Cennino Cennini, *Trattato della Pittura*, edited by Giuseppe Tambroni, Rome: Torchi di Paolo Salviucci, 1821; and *Cennino Cennini, Il libro dell'arte/ The Book of the Art*, translated and edited by Lara Broecke (tr. and ed.), London: Archetype Publications, 2015. The standard modern translation is Cennino Cennini, *Il Libro dell'Arte/ The Book of the Art. A new English translation and commentary with Italian Transcription*, edited by F. Frezzato, Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2006.

⁸Constantine Cavaros, *Guide to Byzantine Iconography*, Boston, MA, 1993; here in its Romanian translation by Anca Ppescu, *Ghid de Iconografie bizantină*, București/Bucharest: Sophia Publishing House, 2005.

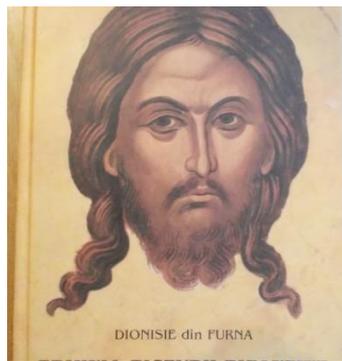


Fig. 6. *The Romanian translation of the same Hermeneia by Dionysius of Fourna, C. Săndulescu-Verna, București/Bucharest, Sophia, second edition, 2000.*



Fig. 7. *A contemporary Hermeneia written by Constantine Cavarnos, Guide to Byzantine Iconography, Boston, MA, 1993 in its Romanian translation as Ghid de Iconografie bizantină.*

Closing here with more theoretical lines about memory, we shall mention that historically there have been two main competing views regarding the nature of the realities that constitute the subject of memory: one which **see these as they** are, and one that holds that memory functions **by representing objects**. As it is to be expected, the first stance is called **direct** realism, and the second **indirect** or representative realism. With respect to Byzantine artistic works one can say that their creators are **representative realists** in the sense that for them what they paint is mainly the result of their thoughts.

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