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BIBΛIOKPISIEΣ -- BOOK REVIEWS

A BYZANTINE MASTERPIECE RECOVERED, THE THIRTHEENTH CENTURY MURALS OF LYSI, CYPRUS, by Annemarie Weyl Carr and Laurence J. Morrocco, introduction by Bertrand Davezac, 157p., University of Texas Press, Austin (in association with the Menil Foundation), 1991.

Two very poor black and white photographs of Byzantine murals, the one of a dome depicting Christ Pantocrator, angels and the Hetoimasia and the other the Theotokos with a medallion of Christ and Archangels, both shown by art dealers in a dark store room in Munich, were the beginning of the interesting story of the location of the wonderful murals from the church of St. Euphemianos (or Themonianos) at Lysi, Cyprus. The murals, after they had been brutally mutilated by the Turks and removed from the church, were taken to Munich to be sold on the art black market. It is worth mentioning that the dealer of the murals A. Dikman, was the person who also sold the mosaics of Kanakaria to P. Goldberg.

In his introduction, Bertrand Davezac describes vividly not only the way the murals were traced to have originated from Cyprus, but also how treacherously the illegal art trade works against the cultural heritage in the occupied part of Cyprus. After the purchase of the murals, it was mutually agreed upon by the purchasers, the Menil Foundation, and their legal owner, the Church of Cyprus, that the murals would be restored under the auspices of the Menil Foundation and displayed on extended loan in Houston, Texas, for fifteen years. Their restoration was completed in 1988 in London.

The church of Lysi is a domed-hall of a Greek cross type, a type found frequently in the island, especially in the eastern part. The Lysi church served as a private votive church rather than as an institutional one. In the dome the imposing Christ Pantocrator is surrounded by a zone composed of two throngs of angels, the Theotokos and St. John the Baptist, and directly below the Christ Pantocrator the Throne of Hetoimasia with the Symbols of the Passion, the Gospel Book and the Dove, all encircled by a mandorla. In the apse, the Theotokos Orans with a medallion of Christ on her breast stands between the two Archangels.

The author analyses the iconography of the frescoes as well as the interrelationship of their meaning, the quality of the formal elements and the use of colour. She proceeds to a comparative analysis of their stylistic features, classifying them in the group of other contemporary murals of Cyprus.

She also examines the type of Theotokos Orans and analyses the iconography of the dome in comparison with similar iconography found elsewhere in Cyprus, underlining the uniqueness of the combination of the elements which comprise the dome decoration.

As the author says this combination "reflects broader developments that were occurring in Byzantine art at large. These features make it clear that the Cypriot domes took up the current imagery with a distinctive message in mind". A.W. Carr also examines thoroughly the production of contemporary icons in Cyprus. The murals of Lysi, dated stylistically to the second third of the thirteenth century, also add to our understanding of the icons of the same period. They represent, according to the author, the so-called "Maniera Cypria" which emerges not so much as the final chapter of Cyprus' s twelfth-century art, but as the evidence of a renewed vitality in the thirteenth century.

In the second part of the book, the technical procedure of the reconstruction and restoration of the murals is described by Laurence Morocco, the conservator in charge of the project.

The main conservation work consisted of two basic problems. First, the conservators had no dome or apse to work on; second, the murals of the dome and apse were in twenty-six pieces and had lost their curvature. It was an immense achievement to make models of the dome and apse in their original dimensions and curvature having no measurements of the real ones. The next stage in the restoration process was to reshape the fragments into their original curvature using positive and negative moulds and finally fitting the fragments into position, joining them together with the aid of the two black-and-white photographs. In this way the whole iconographic programme of the dome and the apse had been restored.

A.W. Carr's book is a notable contribution to the enrichment of a relatively small bibliography on byzantine art in Cyprus, although the presence of an index would make the book more convenient to the reader. The appearance of books like the present volume is becoming vitally important, because they refer to cultural property being under constant harassment, plunder and destruction by the Turkish occupying forces in the north of the island. Above all, this book underlines the real necessity for the creation of an integrated and conclusive archive of the cultural heritage of Cyprus. Furthermore the publication of research treating all monuments and especially those in the occupied part of the island, should be expedited, so the outside world might easily recognise articles originating from Cyprus.

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