

H. MAGUIRE, *Nectar and Illusion. Nature in Byzantine Art and Literature* [Onassis Series in Hellenic Culture] Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2012. xx, 198 p. + 20 color plates and 72 b/w figures. ISBN 978-0-19-976660-4.

This beautiful book is, according to the author himself, "the product of over forty years of research, reflection, and interactions with friends and colleagues" (xix). It is the result of a series of lectures sponsored by the Onassis Foundation and may be regarded indeed as a *summa* by perhaps the most important scholar studying the intersection of Byzantine literature and the visual arts: see his monographs *Art and eloquence in Byzantium* (1981) and *The icons of their bodies : saints and their images in Byzantium* (1996), and the *Variorum* volumes *Rhetoric, nature and magic in Byzantine art* (1998) and *Image and imagination in Byzantine art* (2007). In this book Maguire sets out to discuss the origins and consequences of the contradictory Byzantine reception of nature in both the verbal and the visual arts: he shows and explains how the Byzantines embraced or distanced nature through the manner of its representation by drawing from a multitude of material (archeological, architectural, artistic) and textual (literary and epigraphic, Greek and Latin, religious and profane) sources. His basic tenets are that in many respects the iconoclastic period served as the watershed, and that overall the visual arts had less freedom than the spoken word.

In the first chapter, *Nature and Idolatry* (11-47), Maguire describes the rich decoration of plants, animals, and personifications on floors, walls and furniture in sacred and secular buildings all over the early Byzantine empire (5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries), and contrasts it with the apparently austere or even aniconic period of the 4<sup>th</sup> (a less well documented period, it must be said), and especially with medieval (iconoclastic and post-iconoclastic) Byzantium. Overall, one observes a gradual change from an art that was embedded in nature to one that was 'anthropocentric'. Even before the iconoclastic crisis the depiction of nature raised difficulties for Christian viewers, as Maguire induces for instance from archeological remains. We read fascinating pages (30-34) on the erasure of the personifications of *Ktisis* and *Ananeosis* in the floor mosaic of a private house ("of the Sea Goddess") in Antioch, which he interprets, informed by convincing parallels and the broader context, as a token of the Christian sensitivity concerning the appropriateness of nature-related personifications. The iconoclastic crisis itself brought about the excision of many more animal and human depictions. Maguire expresses a nuanced view on the influence of Muslim attitudes and the role of existing debates within the Christian community itself. His central thesis is that in order to keep the holy portraits, the iconophiles "had to jettison the profane imagery of the natural world" (38). Here again, a careful look at the material evidence (selective erasures, for instance) helps to qualify the sometimes contradictory statements in polemical rhetoric of both sides in the conflict.

The second chapter, *Nature and Rhetoric* (48-77), raises important issues, but it contains, in my view, some less convincing pages. It starts with a section on the "Byzantine Suspicion of Rhetoric", a somewhat misleading title, since the three examples discussed (from Anna Comnena, Michael Psellos, and Nicholas Mesarites) do not appear to warrant the generalizing notion of 'suspicion': Anna's passage on Italos is clearly positive; the two others are at most ambivalent, and their professed suspicion of rhetoric is itself a rhetorical *topos*. Nor am I entirely convinced by the interpretation of a passage from John of Damascus' encomium of St. Barbara (54-55), which is said to mean that "an eloquent eulogy, even if it is carefully arranged according to the divisions set out in the manuals, is, like the beauties of nature, fated to be deconstructed by decay". The wider context of John's §21 suggests that the point of the passage is rather that Barbara's virtues, unlike the charms

of nature, cannot be properly described by speech. The decay of such an eloquent eulogy of bodily qualities is not "like" that of the beauties of nature, but rather the result of the decaying object it praises. Conversely, the praise of Barbara, insufficient as it may be, will last forever. The section on "Nature and Rhetoric in the Byzantine Middle Ages" is, again, fascinating. Maguire starts with the observation that the *Hexaemeron* sermons and similar texts including natural ekphraseis lost popularity in the later periods (with a brief revival in the 12<sup>th</sup> century), unlike in Western Europe. He sees two conflicting views of nature in Byzantine culture: (1) nature as corruptible, fleeting, transient, and false: "we have the impression that the authors felt that their rhetorical descriptions of nature needed to be censored, corrected, or at least excused" (62, I tend to agree most with the last term), and (2) nature as redeemed and sanctified through the incarnation of Christ, as appears, for example, in a Vatican manuscript of James of Kokkinobaphos (Vat. Gr. 1162, with beautiful illustrations used throughout the book), and in the tradition of the ekphrasis of springtime. (Incidentally, I was surprised by the consistent spelling 'ekphraseis' for the singular; the *Index* (190) gives the usual form 'ekphrasis'.) The most intriguing case study in this chapter is the remarkable difference in the depictions of the Annunciations to the Virgin and to St. Anne, even within the same church (Chora and Daphni) or manuscript. In the former (the Virgin), Byzantine artists were reluctant to accept the motifs associated with the rhetoric of natural ekphrasis, whereas in the latter (St. Anne) they indulged freely in natural and animal motifs. The interpretation of this observation is a daring one: "Through its more austere portrayal of the Annunciation of Christ's incarnation, Byzantine art itself made a critique of the earthbound rhetoric of the Annunciation to St. Anne, reproved it, and put it in its place" (74). The term 'reproved' may be somewhat severe (compare above, 'censored', for the ekphrasis of nature). Maguire himself quotes Leo VI, who described the birth of Christ as a miracle "above nature" (PG 107.1B-4A: θαύματος ὑπερφυσῶς). Would this metaphysical aspect of the Annunciation to the Virgin not suffice to explain the absence of natural elements in its depiction, without reading those scenes as a kind of self-criticism? It would be, moreover, more in line with the next chapters.

The third chapter, Nature and Metaphor (78-105), deals with the "disjunction between constantly reiterated verbal metaphors on one hand and sporadically appearing visual imagery on the other" (78), focusing on literary descriptions and artistic representations of the Virgin and of paradise respectively. In the introductory section Maguire proposes sensible definitions of 'metaphor' (inherently multivalent) and 'symbol' (fixed in some way). The diachronic treatment shows that, once again, animals and plants eventually became unwelcome in the visual arts, even in association with the Virgin, whereas natural metaphors for the Theotokos continued to abound in church literature. Maguire relates this observation to the importance of the 82<sup>nd</sup> canon of the Quinisext Council (Christ should be portrayed as a human being and not symbolically as a lamb). For the later period, Maguire discusses the medieval paintings of the *Akathistos* and the use of vegetal motifs in the Pammakaristos and in the Chora (here it is said that, in the scenes from the infancy of the Virgin, "both plant and, unusually, animal motifs were deployed *in her celebration*", 88: this would be difficult to reconcile with a 'critique' or a 'reproval' of such an 'earthbound rhetoric', see above). In the two Constantinopolitan churches, Maguire shows that some logic governed the use of vegetal motifs, creating a hierarchy of spaces, yet in both cases in a different manner. This leads him to draw an important general lesson – that will be corroborated by the rest of the book: in Byzantine art, symbolism is not absolute, but relative, and varies according to context. The chapter ends with a comparison of the Byzantine ambivalence toward visualized metaphors from nature with their

acceptance in the West, for example, churches of Rome and Torcello, the *Libri Carolini*, the official response to the acts of the Second Council of Nicaea. Once again, an observation is followed by a thought-provoking explanation. Maguire posits that, in the West, the portrayals of saints functioned essentially as symbols or as reminders, rather than as authentic likenesses that were thought to be true, as in Byzantium. Hence, the Western culture displayed less fear of nature worship when it comes to the visualization of metaphor, whereas, paradoxically, the iconophile Byzantines avoided the depiction of creation.

The chapter on Nature and Abstraction (106-134) starts again from a similar evolution: whereas in early Byzantine churches various kinds of animals, fruits and plants were represented on floors, walls and vaults, and apparently a delight was taken in their careful distinction and recognition, posticonoclastic pavements are characterized by their abstract compositions in opus sectile ("the switch from opus sectile to tessellated floors", 111, is an erroneous reversal). Possible explanations for this switch are, according to Maguire: a change of taste generated by an increasing scarcity of materials (making a marble floor into a display of wealth and power); the growing influence of monastic asceticism (which associated natural bounty with gluttony); and the wish to distinguish churches from mosques (with vegetation, but without human portraits). Yet, abstraction to modern eyes is not necessarily aniconic or meaningless. Polychromatic stones depicted nature, albeit in a completely unspecific way. The comparison of rhetorical descriptions of buildings with the objects that they describe reveals that patterns that appear to viewers today as abstract were identified by the Byzantines with a range of landscape features. This is, yet again, Maguire at his best, as he traces the mutual influence of visual aesthetic and literary rhetoric. He concludes that "for both artists and spectators, the marbles on the walls and floors of churches really did represent the earth" (125). Moreover, when plants were depicted in the medieval period, the images became more generic and less differentiated, in marked contrast to the portrayals of saints, which became more specific and recognizable. Maguire insists – another general lesson – that there was no general tendency towards abstraction in Byzantine art. Closeness of definition was apparently reserved for the spiritual, while the avoidance of definition was associated with the mundane: "this conclusion reverses the conventional view of Byzantine art, which tends to associate abstraction with the depiction of the transcendental" (134).

The final chapter, Nature and Architecture (135-165), discusses different types of architectural symbolism. Since depictions of buildings brought no danger of idolatry they were especially suitable to act as conveyors of spiritual meaning. Of course, it is sometimes hard to determine whether a given motif was intended by the artist to be read as a metaphor (e.g. the gate as a symbol of the Virgin), or only as a part of an actual building. In some cases, though, there are clear indications, whereas in other cases one may argue for a multiple significance. And here again symbolism is shown to be absolute rather than relative. The chapter contains exemplary interpretations of church paintings or mosaics (Lagoudera on Cyprus; Hagioi Anargyroi in Kastoria; Monreale) and manuscript illuminations (the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus in Par. gr. 510; James of Kokkinobaphos again). One example: the rich architectural settings for portraits of Evangelists (the heralds of incarnation) versus the austere presentations of other (more ascetical) saints in the same church or manuscript. This implies that the first role of architectural space was to indicate, by its relative presence or by its absence, the spiritual status of any given portrait or scene. The representation of architecture may suggest a hierarchy of subjects, or contrast the mutability of the earthly buildings with the immutability of the sacred actors. The final pages discuss the remarkable absence of architecture in

many Byzantine depictions of the heavenly court. Once again Maguire points to fundamental differences between the vocabularies of literature and of the visual arts, and to the contrast with the West. The latter is tentatively explained by the frequent illustration of the Apocalypse in the West.

The Conclusion (166-173) provides the reader with a synthetic recapitulation of the main observations and hypotheses. It is followed by a rich bibliography and an extensive index (187-198). The beautifully edited book makes for fascinating reading and satisfies both the literary and the visual taste by its engaging style and the many pictures. (The latter are mostly of very good quality, albeit with a couple of exceptions, which make it difficult to recognize the relevant details in a couple of images.) It will be clear from the summary above that this is a magisterial book, full of insightful observations and interesting hypotheses, ranging from the provocative, over plausible to the persuasive. Through the lens of nature Maguire draws a general picture of Byzantine, especially sacred, art and literature.

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