Chronos- Revue d’Histoire de l’Université de Balamand, is a bi-annual Journal published in three languages (Arabic, English and French). It deals particularly with the History of the ethnic and religious groups of the Arab world.

Journal Name: Chronos

ISSN: 1608-7526

Title: The Construction of the Architectural Background in Melkite Annunciation Icons

Author(s): Rand Abou Ackl

To cite this document:


Permanent link to this document: DOI: https://doi.org/10.31377/chr.v38i0.346

Chronos uses the Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-SA that lets you remix, transform, and build upon the material for non-commercial purposes. However, any derivative work must be licensed under the same license as the original.
THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ARCHITECTURAL BACKGROUND IN MELKITE ANNUNCIATION ICONS

RAND ABOU ACKL

Abstract
This article discusses the architectural backgrounds visible in Melkite Annunciation icons from Aleppo, Hama, Damascus and Latakia in Syria, dating from the middle of the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. The architectural backdrops of Annunciation icons and the architectural perspective are represented through the technique of reverse perspective. In order to emphasize that the event took place in a real place, the house of Virgin in the city of Nazareth.

Résumé
Cet article traite des arrière-plans architecturaux figurés sur les icônes melkites du milieu du XVIIe siècle à la fin du XIXe siècle de l’école d’Alep et de quelques iconographes indépendants tels que Michel de Damas et Michel de Crète et qui avaient travaillé à la même époque à Alep, à Hama, à Lattaquié et à Damas en Syrie. Cet article s’intéresse aux arrière-plans architecturaux des icônes de l’Annonciation dans une perspective inverse à l’iconographie melkite, dans le but de démontrer que l’événement se déroulait dans le lieu réel, tel que la maison de la Vierge et la ville de Nazareth.

1 Dipartimento di Scienze dell’Antichità, Sapienza - Università di Roma. This article was presented as a PhD study paper during the “Seminario della scuola di dottorato in archeologia 2017”, Dipartimento di Scienze dell’Antichità, Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, La Sapienza - Università di Roma, Roma, 30-31st January 2017.
Introduction

This article examines representations of architectural forms in Syrian Melkite art Annunciation icons dating from the 17th to 19th centuries. The Annunciation, celebrated on each March 25th, is one of the most venerated of the Twelve Feasts. The feast cycle had been stabilized by the tenth century, but the date of its emergence is uncertain. The Melkite church year begins in September, following Jewish and Byzantine precedent (McGuckin 2011: 95).

During the eighteenth century, in Syria, apart from the Aleppo school (Zibawi 1995: 95-99), there were several independent Melkite craftsmen-iconographers, such as Hanna Al-Qudsi, and Deacon Joseph Elian (Zayat 1987). Towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, the most important iconographer was Michael the Cretan who is considered having had a leading influence on Melkite iconographers, although this impact would be weak on the iconographers of the Jerusalem school (Agémian 1969: 58, 68).

The types of Annunciation in Melkite icons

The feast of the Annunciation of the Virgin was established to commemorate the most important of the Gospel events. Around 34 Syrian icons of the Annunciation have been archived, thanks to Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums in Syria (DGAM). Several Annunciation icons from different cities and schools have been chosen for this paper; their chronological order is presented in table 1. Three observations may be made about these Annunciation icons. Firstly, Melkite iconographers, between the middle of the seventeenth century until the end of the nineteenth century, painted many icons depicting this motif for the iconostasis of churches, for their royal doors, as portable wooden icons, or for the houses of Christians (Eldem et al., 1999: 17). Secondly, the Annunciation theme in Melkite art is derived from the Gospel accounts2 and Apocryphal Gospels3. Interpretation variations can be traced to

---

2 In these icons, the spinning scene seems absent, even if in many Byzantine Annunciations a detail inspired by Apocryphal versions of the subject is the spindle which the Virgin holds (Robb 1936, S. 481.
3 Protevangelium of James; Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew; History of the Blessed Virgin Mary; Gospel of the Nativity of Mary.
the different traditions followed by the artists. A third —and much longer—observation concerns the “typical scenes”. Three version can be identified: Mary at a spring fetching water when the angel Gabriel approaches her (Cartlidge et Elliott 2001: 78) and two other versions placing Mary in her house. By far the most prolific of the Melkite Annunciation scenes has the angel appearing to the Virgin while Mary is standing, or sitting, or working on the wool-work that she has been given as a task in the temple (Ehrman 2003: 67), but she is not holding a spindle in her hand. The final iconographical type of the Annunciation is Mary holding a book (a scroll) sitting beside a book-stand upon which is a Bible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Church</th>
<th>Name of the icon</th>
<th>Dimensions (cm)</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Iconographer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>St George monastery, Homyra</td>
<td>The Beautiful Gate</td>
<td>88x129</td>
<td>1685</td>
<td>Ne'beh Al Halabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Latakia</td>
<td>Saint George</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>59x74</td>
<td>1687</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>Dormition Lady</td>
<td>Akathist</td>
<td>86x65.5</td>
<td>1714</td>
<td>Ne'beh Al Halabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>Forty Martyrs</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>24x30</td>
<td>1731</td>
<td>Hanania Al Halabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Idleb</td>
<td>The Orthodox Lady church</td>
<td>four scenes</td>
<td>49x60</td>
<td>1753</td>
<td>Girgis Al Halabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Al Homeyra</td>
<td>St.George</td>
<td>Hodegetria and Akathist</td>
<td>68,6x91</td>
<td>1765</td>
<td>Girgis Al Halabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Hama</td>
<td>the Lady of Entry</td>
<td>Akathist and virgin immaculate</td>
<td>59x123</td>
<td>1777</td>
<td>Girgis Al Halabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>The Lady Catholic church</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>45x58</td>
<td>1848</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>John of Damascus</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>51.7x67.6</td>
<td>1865</td>
<td>Ibrahim son of Ne'beh Naser homsi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>John of Damascus</td>
<td>The Beautiful Gate</td>
<td></td>
<td>1866</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 Protevangelium 10:1-2; Pseudo-Matthew 8.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Location/Church</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Artist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Rif Dimashq</td>
<td>Sydnaia Monastery</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td></td>
<td>1873</td>
<td>Youhanna Saliba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Rif Dimashq</td>
<td>St Michael, Qara</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>30x40</td>
<td>1875</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>St George, Bab Muosalla</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>44.4x72</td>
<td>1887</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Hama</td>
<td>the Lady of Entry</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>38x48</td>
<td>18th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Latakia</td>
<td>Saint Nicolas</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>59x84</td>
<td>18th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Idleb</td>
<td>The Orthodox Lady church</td>
<td>Four scenes</td>
<td>45x56</td>
<td>18th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Rif Dimashq</td>
<td>St George monastery, Sydnaia</td>
<td>The Beautiful Gate</td>
<td></td>
<td>18th c.</td>
<td>Joseph Elian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>St George, Bab Mousalla</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>82x109</td>
<td>19th c.</td>
<td>Nicola Thedori</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>St George, Bab Mousalla</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>24x29</td>
<td>19th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>Orthodox patriarchate</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>22x27.5</td>
<td>19th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>Orthodox patriarchate</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>35.5x27</td>
<td>19th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>Orthodox patriarchate</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>55x58</td>
<td>19th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>St George church, Salibieh</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td></td>
<td>19th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>Lady of Dormition-zaitoun</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>39x52</td>
<td>19th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Hama</td>
<td>The Lady of Entry</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>36x48</td>
<td>19th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>St George monastery, Al Homeyra</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>32x47.5</td>
<td>19th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>St George monastery, Al Homeyra</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>32x47.6</td>
<td>19th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Rif Dimashq</td>
<td>St George church, Irneh</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>38x54</td>
<td>19th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Tartous</td>
<td>St Michael, Safita</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>37x55</td>
<td>19th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Rif Dimashq</td>
<td>Constantine and Helen, Yabrud</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td>42x57</td>
<td>19th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Rif Dimashq</td>
<td>Sydnaia Monastery</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td></td>
<td>19th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>The Lady Catholic church</td>
<td>Annunciation</td>
<td></td>
<td>19th c.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Annunciation at the spring

In this theme, the angel appears to the Virgin as she stands at the well, according to the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (Baldwin Smith 1918: 11–13). “9. Mary at the fountain addressed by an angel. On the next day as she wove, he appeared again and completed the Annunciation” (Elliott 2006: 89). The angel appears to the Virgin as standing (Akathist, Aleppo, 1714⁵ and Akathist and Immaculate, Hama, 1777) or sitting (Akathist and Hodegetria, Homeyra, 1765) at the well according to the account in the Pseudo-Matthew. The first three scenes of these icons represent the Virgin at the well when she heard the voice of the angel, as related in the Protevangelium of James, whereupon she retired to her dwelling and took up the spindle which can be seen inside it. This type of Annunciation would be confined to depicting of the first picture of Akathist icons in Melkite art.

The Annunciation at the house

This motif represents the episode of the Gospel in which Archangel Gabriel announces to Mary that she was to become the mother of Jesus⁶. The Annunciation scene in Luke’s Gospel may be divided into phases, from the angel’s greeting, to Mary’s apprehension, resistance or doubt, to her glad acceptance of God’s commandment or meek compliance to it. In the artist’s imagination, there may be a further point: when Mary hesitates and Gabriel beseeches her (Rohr Scaff 2002: 114). However, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Annunciation icons show the Virgin standing, sitting, or kneeling in front of an ecclesiastical building symbolizing the Temple or her own house. This type of composition existed in Byzantine and post-Byzantine periods, and it was particularly frequent in Melkite art of the eighteenth century. There are numerous Annunciations showing the Virgin and Gabriel in the foreground, in front of architectonic structures. By the middle of the nineteenth century, this exterior type would be rarely depicted, to be replaced

---

⁵ There is Akathist icon, painted by Yousef Al-Halabi; see Grabar (Grabar 1969: N. 2).
⁶ The earliest renderings of the Annunciation of Mary were, no doubt attempts to depict the Gospel accounts of the incarnation of Christ. Subsequent artists built upon the more rudimentary archetypal elements of the earliest of these depictions, translating them, ultimately, into Christian liturgy (Montgomery 2015: S. 18).
by an interior type, in which the Annunciation takes place inside the building, in the house of Virgin, or inside her room (Fig. 1). The angel and the Virgin both kneel: this motif is close to the western type, which probably derived from the Pseudo- Bonaventur (Robb 1936: 485).

Fig. 1: The Annunciation, 24x30 cm, Forty Martyrs church (Armenian), Aleppo, 1731
The Annunciation of Mary while reading at the house

In the apocryphal account, (Pseudo-Matthew 6), the Virgin holds a book, with the third typical scene depicting the lectern before which the Virgin stands or sits being a reference to her reading the Psalms⁷ (Robb 1936: 485). This is an Annunciation scene which was continued in the west (Cartlidge et Elliott 2001: 80). Here, Mary’s occupation at the Annunciation began to shift from her working on the temple veil to an emphasis on her learning (Cartlidge et Elliott 2001: 80). The iconographical type was represented during this period, with the oldest surviving icon dated 1687 and located in St George’s church in Latakia (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: The Annunciation, 59x74 cm, St. George Church (Orthodox), Latakia, 1687, Archives of DGAM.

⁷ Pseudo-Matthew 6: “No one could be found better instructed than [Mary] in the law of God and singing the songs of David”.

Chronos nº 38 - 2018
The representations of architecture in the Annunciation scenes

In icons, no scenes ever take place indoors; instead, the façades of the buildings in which they are supposed to have occurred are used instead to form their backgrounds, a canopy or cupola sufficing to indicate that the event had taken place indoors (Rice 1963: 29). In some cases, the Annunciation is one of the scenes, which always presents in this manner. From the twelfth century onwards, architectural forms began to appear more and more often in monumental painting of the Annunciation (Papastavrou 2011: 234).

Two types of icons can be observed: the first consists of buildings or just some architectural elements such as columns, arches, doors, a spring, or a wall. In the second type, the background has no architectural element, a gilded or coloured background replacing everything. This kind of Annunciation icon is frequent after the middle of the nineteenth century.

The representations of buildings in background

Along with the posture and disposition of the figures, the spatial conception and structural arrangement of Annunciation art functioned to keep Mary and Gabriel apart. The earliest depictions extending through several centuries showed both figures motionless against a shallow “spaceless” background. The result was a timeless instant that represented a sacred moment of truth. The flat gilded background of Byzantine art, for example, served as a backdrop for several centuries of religious icon production (Rohr Scaff 2002: 112).

- The spring

As mentioned above, according to the apocryphal Gospels, the Virgin was announced the good news by the Archangel at the fountain, and later, in the house where she was preparing a purple veil for the temple. This apocryphal account was represented in Melkite art Akathist icons. The Akathist

---

8 The gilded background indicated the sacredness of the scene, and absolute, universal faith as gold is the symbol par excellence of God’s glory: in the gilded background, which is pure light, the absence of shadow alludes to the absence of time, and in turn, the absence of time alludes to eternity.
icons consist of twenty-four scenes; the first three scenes represent the Annunciation to Mary. The oldest icon\(^9\) shows the Virgin and the archangel at the well. In the icon of Hodegetria and Akathist, from Al-Homeyra and dated 1765 (Fig. 3), Girgis al Halabi illustrated the first scene: the Virgin receives the Annunciation by an angel close to the well, outside the city of Nazareth, depicted by buildings and a rotunda on a mountain; perhaps this could be the church of Annunciation. During the eighteenth century, during the rule of Daher el-Omar, this church was rebuilt (Kesich & Kesich 1985: 32-33). According to Eastern Orthodox belief\(^10\) this where the Virgin Mary drew water at the moment of the Annunciation, \(^{11}\) and the church is located over an underground spring\(^{12}\). During 17th century, an account written by Quaresmi, the Italian writer and Orientalist, indicates that this church was not visible above ground, but that the top of the vault of a subterranean chamber that had remained intact was at ground level (Pringle 1998: 141). Perhaps Girgis al Halabi refers to this church in his icon of the Annunciation.

---

\(^9\) “An Archangel was sent from Heaven to say to (the Mother of God: Rejoice!)”.

\(^10\) According to Greek Orthodox tradition, the Annunciation took place while Mary was fetching water from the spring situated directly under this richly frescoed, 17th-century church (other denominations hold that she was at home during the Annunciation). The barrel-vaulted crypt, first constructed under Constantine (4th century CE), shelters Nazareth’s only year-round spring, a place everyone in the village obviously visited often. Emmett 1995: 81.

\(^11\) Abbot Daniel describes a church located at this site between 1106 and 1108, as follows: “Then we left this town and went a little way to the north east where we found a wonderful well which was deep and very cold, and to reach the water you must go deep down on a stairway. And above this well there is a church dedicated to the Archangel Gabriel, and it is round” (Pringle 1998: 141).

\(^12\) In 1106, the Russian pilgrim Daniel mentions this church built above a well and dedicated to the angel Gabriel (Culiffe 2007: 424).
- The Church of Annunciation, the house of the Virgin

This motif of the house-church\(^{13}\) is an old iconographic theme: during Late Antiquity, Christian representation of the house of the Virgin was a kiosk (edicola) (Muzj 1996: 496), which eventually became assimilated to the church (Hunt 2000: 180). In early Christian art, the building is rather a narrative index justified both by the Proto-Gospel of James (ch. IX) or by the Gospel of Luke (I, 26). It sometimes recalls the topography of the Holy Places, or the form of a basilica, probably the church that was erected on the site of Mary’s house in Nazareth (Papastavrou 2011: 231). In the sixth century it depicted the façade of the church or one of its sides or even the roof (Muzj 1996: 496). One can also note the existence of a second home-church to remind Joseph’s house or the second basilica in Nazareth. At the end of the seventh century, Arculf saw two “very large churches”, one in the centre of the city on the site of the house where Jesus was brought up, the other on the site of the house where Mary received the angel Gabriel (Cunliffe 2007: 424). Pictorially, in the mid Byzantine period\(^{14}\), the two house-churches, joined together, form a background

\(^{13}\) The “house” is mentioned in Protev. 12:3–13:1 and Ps-Matthew 10:1. See; Protev. 12:3–13:1 3E Day by day her womb grew, and Mary was afraid and went into her house and hid herself from the children of Israel…, Joseph came from his buildings and entered his house and found her with child. See (Elliott 2006: 42.)

\(^{14}\) The late 7th-century Insular Latin text *De Locis Sanctis* describes two large churches in the centre of Nazareth. One is the Church of the Annunciation. The other was near it, set above a vaulted crypt with two tombs (tumuli in Adomnán’s Insular Latin) either side of a “house”. See (Dark 2013: 177).
that assumes the appearance of a city, identified as Nazareth (Hunt 2000: 180). Since the seventeenth century, the site itself of the Annunciation has belonged to the Franciscan Custody of the Holy lands (Halevi 2010: 424-425). In Melkite icons of the Annunciation, this motif varied; the house is represented by the two-house churches (Fig. 4), or just a vaulted building (Candea et Agémian 1969: Fig. 12). Some icons have a rotunda and two buildings with sloping roofs, or just distinct buildings with sloping roofs.

Thus, in the Annunciation scene, the idea of a house-church can be expressed using different iconographic details. From the second half of nineteenth century, this theme of a house-church was replaced by the chamber of Mary, as was for the case in western art.

Fig. 4: The Annunciation, 59x84cm, St. Nicolas church (Orthodox), Latakia, 18th century (Archives of DGAM)
- The garden imagery of fertility and paradise

The garden that is depicted represents paradise. Some icons depicted the garden as walled by arcs and columns, or some form of barrier. The Virgin’s garden is represented by a wall and some plants, trees, or just a vase. The vase of flowers is the only important addition of the thirteenth century to the iconography of the Annunciation, which is usually portrayed in terms as simple and dignified as the Gospel story itself (Robb 1936: 482).

- The representation of Nazareth city in icon-maps

Icon-maps were drawn in a traditional iconic style and offer expressly spatial representations of sacred places in both Jerusalem and the Holy Land, or of cities, like Nazareth (Meier 1991: 216).

They are icons painted on wood; icons on cloth (canvas), which are known as “proskynetaria” (Προσκυνητάρια, or proskynetarion in the singular). Nazareth city is occasionally represented with the entirety of its churches, bell towers, houses and other buildings, as from a bird’s-eye view. In the icon-map in Sydnaia monastery (Immerzeel 2005: 24) and dated 1738-39 (Fig. 5), the city of Nazareth is represented as two buildings —probably referring to the motif of the house-church— flanking a polygonal edifice with a dome. The site of the scene is located to the upper left side of the city of Jerusalem, near the Jordan River. The cartographic rendering of the entire Holy Land shows Jaffa to the West (below), the Jordan River to the East (above), Jerusalem at the centre, Nazareth to the north (left), and Bethlehem to the south (right). In other words, the Church’s orientation does not match with the other sites on the map. All the subsequent paintings followed the archetype of this cartographic model; the oldest example is the icon-map in Saumur, France (Rubin 2013: 128).
In the icon with the topography of the Holy Land, dated 1827 from Saint Tekla Monastery in Ma’lula, the representation of the city was replaced by the scene of the Annunciation; however, the site is still in the upper left of Jerusalem city. Thus, city of Nazareth in icon-maps goes beyond the purely literal narrative and endorses the topographical location of the town. The depictions of Nazareth follow the conception of sacred space which may be associated with “real” geographic territory such as the “Holy Land”, or it may have a more limited nature such as a building: a synagogue, church, monastery or a holy site (Houtman *et al.* 1998: 2).

**The reverse perspective in the Annunciation icons**

The term of “reverse perspective” in Annunciation icons in Melkite art refers to the particular construction of pictorial space (Antonova 2010b: 29), as “hieratic and anti- illusionistic” (Osborne 1970 (1984 [printing]): 856). Unlike linear perspective, reverse perspective takes into account an inner,
psychological factor (centring on the process of memory) which influences perception (Antonova 2010b: 35). It is “directly connected with the dynamics of the viewing position: the form of reverse perspective is the result of the summarizing of the viewer’s perception under the conditions of a multiplicity of viewpoints, that are themselves the result of the dynamics of the viewing position” (Antonova 2010b: 42). This leads to the simultaneous representation of different planes of the same image on the picture’s surface, regardless of whether the corresponding planes in the represented objects could be seen from a single viewpoint. This definition will stand in contrast to the commonly accepted one: “reverse perspective” is, in some ways, an opposite to linear perspective as Kemp states (Kemp et al. 2016: 105). However, (Antonova 2010a) suggests that Byzantine perspective cannot be defined in relation to other perspective systems because the reasoning and philosophy behind it constitute an alternative way of seeing the world; in her paper, Antonova draws attention to the still highly problematic use of the term and thus suggests that it is far from being “a small matter”. In the Byzantine approach, the notion of the whole imbues the representation of space, where the image of the exterior is fused with the image of the interior space (Hadjitryphonos 2010: 144). The Byzantine artist delivers a comparable message without attempting to portray actual space. The wall in Byzantine icon, in some sense, separates the earthly from the heavenly realms, but does so symbolically rather than pictorially (Ćurčić 2010: 25).

**Analysis of Annunciation icons**

Inversed perspective was put to work in Melkite iconography by varied iconic schools dating from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. The various schools did not use it with the same rigor even though it was present everywhere. Up to the end of the eighteenth century, we can observe forms of inversed perspective, but during the nineteenth century, with the School of Michael of Crete and especially with the iconographers of the Jerusalem School, we can only see the simplest forms of inversed perspective. We have chosen four icons which are characteristic of their periods: in our descriptions we used the terms “left” and “right” in relation to the spectator who has to put himself in the place of the persons represented so that the real movement of the icon takes place from right to left.
- The Annunciation, 1687, Latakia

The space of this icon (Fig. 6), is marked by slanting lines, below the feet of the chair and the base of the lectern, and the top of ciborium and the arcade. The lines of Mary’s house, the polygonal building inside the circular wall, move to the opposite direction. We look down on the tops of the wall drawn in inverted perspective. In this icon, space does not follow Euclidean laws: there is no absolute point of view of the beholder. The various viewpoints represent different aspects of the ciborium and of reality at large. Furthermore, reverse perspective takes into consideration the double view produced by the two eyes, a fact disregarded by linear perspective. A further characteristic of the beholder is that he/she is no longer assumed to occupy a fixed position (Antonova 2010b: 35).

The space of this icon ends behind the arcade and blends into the golden background. The floor-foreground seems to rise up toward the spectator, an impression accentuated by the chair and lectern drawing in slightly inverted perspective. The same phenomenon occurs, for example, with the book, depicted lateral, but at the same time we can see two of its sides.

Fig. 6: The scheme of the Annunciation icon, Latakia, 1687 (by author)
- Akathist, 1714, Aleppo

This icon, (Fig. 7) (Agémian 1991: 208), consists of 25 scenes, but only the first three depict the Annunciation. In the first scene, the well is in inverted perspective, as we can be observed in its the upper part. The main characteristic of this icon is to give the impression that it only has a background. The Virgin and the person to her right, float in the air in front of the mountains.

In the second scene, which represents the second verse of the Akathist, three movements are depicted. Firstly, is the appearance of Archangel Gabriel and his greeting; secondly, it depicts the perplexity of the Virgin: not only does she consider her vow of virginity but also the law of nature; thirdly is her concern, the slightly bowed head, the raising of her hand in acceptance or obedience.

Ne’met Allah Al-Halabi depicted it by using the reversed perspective refusing the “boxspace” model, and by following Byzantine art canons that depict what took place inside a building as though it took place outside. In order to indicate that action was taking place inside the building, a red veil is suspended from the top of the building to the right to the structure on the left. The need arises to combine the various positions (the two flanking buildings in this scene) and aspects into one synthetic image, as reverse perspective
does not represent one single aspect of the figure/building (as would be the case with linear perspective), but a synthesis of several aspects (Antonova 2010b: 39). There are very obvious and frequently observed perspective deformations as a result of this process. Several views that cannot be seen at the same moment overlap in a single representation. To achieve such a view would have required movement in time of the beholder, the image, or both.

In the third scene of the Akathist, the space is marked by slanting lines, below the footstool and above the top of doomed structure and the roofs of the flanking buildings. The reverse perspective becomes especially explicit in the depiction of architecture (Antonova 2010b: 40). There are two sides-doors leading to two entrances, which in fact are on two lateral sides. The two entrances give the false impression of a frontal view.

- Annunciation, 19th century, Sydnaia

This icon, (Fig. 8), is one of nine icons placed in the apse of the church of Sydnaia monastery, all of them were painted by the disciples of Michael of Crete or by himself. The Annunciation icon represents Archangel Gabriel visiting the Virgin Mary. He is stranding on a cloud, and indicating the sky by his right hand, while in his left hand he hold a roll with an inscription in Arabic: “The Holy Spirit will come over you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you”. Mary sits, her head bowed him, and her hands crossed. A tent is close to Mary: it represents a decorative element connected with the theophanic nature of the event, and it is borrowed from the iconographic language of the Old Testament. Against the golden background, there is a column with two arches, representing the wall of the garden, visible through these arches. In the foreground of the icon, an inverted perspective depicts the paved floor, which seems to rise up toward the spectator.
Fig. 8: Annunciation icon, Sydnaia monastery, Michael of Crete school, 19th century (by author)
- Annunciation, 19th century, Al-Homeyra

As mentioned previously, the icons of the Annunciation changed from depicting the action of the Annunciation itself from outside the building into the inside, the house of the Virgin, thus following the norms of Western art (Purtle 1999). Here, (Fig. 9), the iconographic depiction shows two movements: Archangel Gabriel and his greeting, standing on the cloud, holding a lilly and the Virgin’s concern, her slightly bowed head, the raising of her hand in acceptance or obedience while sitting on the chair. The architectural backgrounds are a wall, one or more columns, or a door and windows (Fig.10); all of these elements refer to the event of the Annunciation is taking place inside. This type was repeated during the second half of the nineteenth century, especially with the works of the Jerusalem School; but at the end of the century, the icons depict the event without any architectural background.

Fig. 9: The Annunciation icon, Al Homeyra monastery, 32x47.6 cm, 19th century (Archives of DGAM)
These observations need to be completed by analysing icons from the 17th to the 19th centuries and painted by Melkite iconographers and covering other thematics than those of the Annunciation. However, the following points can be highlighted for the Melkite Annunciation icons:

- In Melkite icons and especially in icons that belong to the Aleppo School, or Melkite icons of the eighteenth century, the iconographers followed the Byzantine and post-Byzantine painting norms which portrayed very little spatial depth. As with Byzantine paintings (Sendler 1988: 133), in Melkite icons of the eighteenth century, space is often limited to the foreground and closed off toward the background by secondary scenes containing buildings or landscapes. There is no three-dimensional illusion, depth, or bodies.
- In Byzantine paintings, the represented event in the icon takes place in the foreground (Sendler 1988: 135) and this is characteristic in Melkite icons.
- Architectural elements and objects, seats, lecterns, etc., are drawn either in isometry or inversed perspective. Their sides are thus bent forward and even the parts normally invisible are represented. In order to avoid the representation of the interior of a building, which would necessarily require depth, the scenes always take place outside the building. The landscape of rocks are shown with same principle of forward movement.
- The line of movement is from the interior of the icon outward, towards the spectator.
- In the nineteenth century, most of the Annunciation icons had been depicted without backgrounds, and the event takes place inside the house of Mary. In other words, the iconographer accepted the idea of “box-space”, which was refused by Byzantine art (Sendler 1988: 129).

**Conclusion**

Inclusion of architecture within the pictorial representation in the Annunciation scenes was always a deliberate choice during the eighteenth century but had become incidental after the middle of the nineteenth century. Perceptions and representations of architecture, which depended on reverse perspective, however, differ sharply from our visual expectations, largely on account of our visual training, which is strongly dominated by the legacy of Renaissance art and theory.

The Annunciation in Melkite art was very diverse, varying in details and iconographic versions during the first of seventeenth century and becoming frequent from the second half of nineteenth century. The canonical depictions of the Annunciation existed, in parallel with the ones based on apocryphal accounts of the event, producing varied types of backgrounds depending on the event represented: at the spring, in the house-church, in the garden, or in the city of Nazareth. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Melkite depictions of the Annunciation show all the figures motionless against a shallow “spaceless” background, which allow a more complex interpretation of the facts represented.

April 2017


The construction of the architectural background in melkite annunciation icons


SANDERS E.P., 1993, The Historical Figure of Jesus, London, Allen Lane, 337 p.

