

Analysis of the Sense Perception in the Fresco Painting of the Dečani Monastery

Analiza čutnega zaznavanja na freski v samostanu Dečani

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Abstract

This study explores the visual paradigm of art in the Middle Ages as a carrier of narrative media through sensory perception, particularly in the context of religious and ontological representations. The analysis focuses on the frescoes of the Dečani monastery as an authentic manifestation of written narrative contextualization. In medieval painting, there is a tendency to faithfully depict biblical words, inviting the viewer to participate through sensory perceptions, thus leading to the adoption of an exegetical message interpreted today through phenomenological archaeology. The frescoes of the Dečani monastery represent a monument of late Byzantine art in Serbia, characterized by a rich oeuvre of painters who merge liturgical word and image into a unique symbiosis aimed at the believer's "co-signing" and complete acceptance and understanding of the liturgical word through often personified representations and abstract painting, which was not an isolated case among Byzantine artists. We believe the perception of specific artistic expression in the Orthodox monastery of Dečani abounds in sensory sensations and theological-mystical reflections. Through a detailed analysis of various aspects of fresco painting in the monastery, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the medieval Orthodox tradition's artistic, religious, and cultural elements and their influence on the perception of spirituality and faith during that period.

Keywords: perception of the senses, fresco painting, Dečani Monastery, religion

Izvleček

Raziskava raziskuje vizualno paradigmo srednjeveške umetnosti kot nosilca pripovednih medijev preko čutnega zaznavanja, zlasti v kontekstu religioznih in ontoloških reprezentacij. Analiza je osredotočena na freske samostana Dečani, ki predstavljajo avtentično manifestacijo pisne pripovedne kontekstualizacije. V srednjeveškem slikarstvu je opazna težnja po zvestem upodabljanju svetopisemskih vsebin, ki gledalca spodbuja k aktivnemu sodelovanju preko čutnega doživljanja. To vodi k sprejetju eksegetskega sporočila, ki ga danes interpretiramo s pomočjo fenomenološke arheologije. Freske v samostanu Dečani so pomemben spomenik poznobizantinske umetnosti v Srbiji, za katero je značilen bogat opus slikarjev, ki liturgično besedo in podobo združujejo v edinstveno simbiozo. Ta simbioza verniku omogoča »sopodpisovanje« liturgične besede in njeno polno sprejemanje ter razumevanje. Umetniki pogosto uporabljajo personificirane upodobitve in abstraktno slikarstvo, kar med bizantinskimi ustvarjalci ni bil osamljen pojav. Menimo, da zaznavanje specifičnega umetniškega izraza v pravoslavnem samostanu Dečani prekipeva od čutnih zaznav ter teološko-mističnih razmišljanj. S podrobno analizo različnih vidikov freskoslikarstva pričujoča raziskava prispeva h globljemu razumevanju umetniških, verskih in kulturnih elementov srednjeveške pravoslavne tradicije ter njihovega vpliva na dojemanje duhovnosti in vere v tistem obdobju.

Ključne besede: zaznavanje čutov, freskoslikarstvo, samostan Dečani, religija

Nothing is in the intellect that was not first
in the senses, except the intellect itself.
Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz
[Leibniz 1989, 49]

Introduction

In the beginning was the Word, and the
Word was with God, and the Word was
God...Through him all things were made;
without him nothing was made that has
been made [Jn 1: 1–3]¹

Suppose we understand the initial verses of the Gospel of John as the fundamental generic aspect of the liturgical message about the creation of humanity. We can assert that they embody the paradigm for all material and immaterial testimonies manifested through various media modalities. Interpreted through artistic creation, the Word can invoke a multiplicity of interpretations. One of the primary functions of art is to stimulate sensory experiences in the observer, inspiring the faithful by conveying a message, in the case of fresco painting at the Dečani Monastery, exegetical content. During the Middle Ages, sensory perception was highly valued. Medieval visual objects, especially those of a sacred nature, were designed to engage all the senses. The essence and core of these visual representations lay in the richness of sensory experience. The senses of sight, smell, and touch profoundly influence the observer's body, shaping a reality where empirical knowledge is intertwined with spiritual imagination (Bagnoli 2017b, 32). The wall paintings of sacred objects in medieval Serbia, particularly biblical depictions, were significantly influenced by the written word of the Old and New Testaments, liturgical content, and the lives of saints. The perceptual exchange of interpreted religious content plays a causal role: sacred art encourages religious beliefs while utilizing Biblical verses to interpret and

inspire artistic creations. Over the centuries, sacred art has had the dual purpose of embodying biblical testimonies through visual and applied arts and educating observers theologically, thereby strengthening religious beliefs through visual manifestations. In medieval Serbia, particularly from the 12th to the 15th centuries, painting focused on iconographic representations within sacred structures – churches and monasteries. Icons and frescoes were not merely aesthetic; they functioned as tools to guide the faithful toward a deeper understanding of faith. Unlike Protestant doctrine, which, through the Reformation, clearly emphasized the absence of visual depictions and an inclination towards asceticism, such as Calvinism, the Orthodox Church encouraged the development of artistic tendencies and other exegetical 'instruments' that stimulated all senses, fully facilitating the presence and devotion of the faithful (MacCulloch 2003, 171). The eschatological dimension of the Orthodox Church and liturgical space is highlighted through the aesthetic adornment with frescoes, icons, priestly vestments, and sacred vessels, aiming to emphasize the presence of the Heavenly Kingdom. Fresco paintings, icons, and the overall architecture of the church, along with the internal design, are conceived to evoke a sense of divine presence in every worshipper entering this sacred space. Orthodox liturgy has retained and developed a rich visual tradition. It is indisputable that these religious elements, manifested through art, influenced the senses and undeniably stimulated and reinforced the spiritual message. The paradigm of religious and ontological interpretations in medieval compositions represents a foundation for further understanding of biblical content and the mystification of experiences through the senses, placing us within the context of the perceptual reality of a given time through the analysis of phenomenological archaeology. In this case study, we will examine the perception of the senses in the iconographic representations of the Dečani Monastery, characterized by a specific, symbolic, and abstract artistic style with rich thematic compositions.

¹ All Biblical citations according to *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (2011).



Figure 1: The exterior of Dečani Monastery, Courtesy of BLAGO Fund, Inc

Through a historical-comparative method, we will analyse the iconographic representations from different cycles of the monastery concerning biblical sources to uncover deviations and highlight specific artistic expressions. Given that the narratives of the *Old* and *New Testament* offer multiple sources on certain scenes, this study will focus on particular scenes from the rich artistic corpus such as *The Creation of Adam*, *Annunciation*, *The Birth of Christ*, *The Baptism of Christ*, *The Transfiguration*, *The Betrayal of Judas*, *The Resurrection*, and *The Second Coming* as isolated examples of a rich artistic oeuvre. In our view, the iconographic solutions of these examples demonstrate a refined freedom in the artistic interpretation of the written word. Following this, the analysis will explore the sensory percep-

tion in the previously discussed representations to identify sensory experiences in the interpretations of ontological depictions.

Monastery of Dečani

The development and flourishing of architectural, artistic, and craft skills, influenced by Eastern and Western ecclesiastical art and reaching their zenith under the Palaiologos dynasty (ruled between 1261 and 1453), gave rise to remarkable achievements in the construction of Serbian spiritual centers – churches and monasteries – particularly at the beginning of the 14th century (Đurić and Babić-Đorđević 1997, 48). The construction of the Dečani Monastery started under the patronage of King Stefan Uroš III Dečanski Nemanjić, his future mauso-

leum. The entire construction process was entrusted to Archbishop Danilo II. The monastery is a major Serbian Orthodox institution located in a valley by the Pećka Bistrica River, situated in Kosovo and Metohija, within the Republic of Serbia.² The monastery's construction was completed in 1335, while the fresco painting continued until 1347-1348. The monastic church is dedicated to Christ the Creator and, as a dedication and funerary church of the ruler, represents a traditional dynastic order of sacred art. The wealth of Byzantine tradition is reflected in the twenty or so cycles depicted. The monumental nature of the Monastery required a significant number of painters, which is also evident in the stylistic inconsistencies of the artistic language (Đurić and Babić-Đorđević 1997, 53). New generations of artists relied on the models of their predecessors, striving to improve their skills and education, often finding this a challenging and elusive task. Given that the opus of the monastery is exceptionally rich and includes some infrequent themes from the Old Testament, calendar scenes, the life of the Mother of God, saints, and others, it is clear that such an undertaking was led by the theologically educated Archbishop Danilo II, advisor to the Nemanjić royal house (Fig. 1). This is supported by the following statement: 'In about a decade, around a thousand scenes and individual figures of saints were painted in Dečani, collected into twenty hagiographic and liturgical cycles and in even more meaningful wholes' (Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 31). The multifaceted significance of the Dečani Monastery was internationally recognized when it was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004, as a cultural and historical heritage preserving a distinctive form of fresco painting inherited from Byzantine traditions (UNESCO World Heritage Centre n.d.).

2 According to Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, the Province of Kosovo and Metohija is an integral part of the territory of Serbia and holds a status of substantial autonomy, notwithstanding UNESCO's designation of the territory as "Kosovo" in its official statements.

Sensory Experiences in Iconographic Representations

Although the Dečani Monastery engages the senses through the aroma of incense and the chanting of priests during the liturgy and through its refined architectural and sculptural artistry, the frescoes stand out as one of the most significant examples of Byzantine painting from the Renaissance era of the Palaiologos dynasty. The iconography of the monastery reflects not only historical and political contexts but also theological aspects of the *Old* and *New Testament*, liturgical content, and the hagiographies of the Serbian Orthodox Church as represented in the first half of the 14th century. When we speak about senses in archaeology, 'it is fair to say, however, that dominant and influential versions in Western modernist archaeology relied on a philosophical and social framework which consistently denigrated sensory experience, set out the framework of the five senses commonly known today, constructed a distinctive hierarchy within the Western sensorium (lower senses: touch, smell, taste; higher senses: vision, hearing), and elevated the autonomous vision to the highest position. Of course, this framework is part and parcel of a Cartesian view of the world, with its well-known binarism of mind/body, mental/material, culture/nature, and male/female, to name but a few' (Hamilakis 2014, 2010). Contemporary Western archaeology is still primarily visual; one only needs to reflect (another visual word) on its vocabulary, but it harbours at the same time a tension: a tension between this ocular-centric tradition on the one hand and the inherently multisensory nature of both material culture, and of the archaeological processes on the other. Beyond its historical and artistic heritage, the frescoes encapsulate the political and cultural climate, blending artistic techniques with theological premises in the religious scenes of authentic artistic expression. The sensory manifestations depicted in the frescoes dominate in accordance with theological reflections of biblical and sacramental narratives. Skilled ar-



Figure 2: *The Creation of Man*, Dečani Monastery, Courtesy of BLAGO Fund, Inc.

tistic representations aimed to profoundly influence the faithful through emotions, intending that their prayers would be inspired by sensory and visual content. Martina Bagnoli highlighted the importance and impact of iconography on the faithful: 'Medieval theologians recognized that sensation elicited emotional responses which could distract the mind from intellectual pursuits. For this reason, church interiors were designed to stimulate emotions conducive to pure thoughts and spiritual growth' (Bagnoli 2017a, 33). The iconography of the Dečani Monastery represents an illustrative form of spiritual discourse with a centuries-old tradition of educating and conveying exegetical messages. Supported by visualizations through the senses, we arrive at Kant's conclusion that 'All our knowledge begins with sense, proceeds thence to understanding, and ends with reason, beyond which nothing higher can be discovered in the human mind for elaborating the matter of in-

tuition and subjecting it to the highest unity of thought' (Kant 1990, 1989). From the extensive corpus of the monastery's artwork, we highlight specific iconographic solutions of a dogmatic nature to analyse sensory perception and reinterpret various concepts that are often allegorically depicted. This analysis will provide insights into how sensory elements in frescoes contribute to the theological and spiritual experience, reinforcing the connection between art and faith in medieval Serbian Orthodox tradition.

The Creation of Adam

Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being [Gn 2:7].

The iconographic scene of *The Creation of Man* belongs to the cycle painted according to the First Chapter of Genesis, which de-

scribes the Creation. This depiction of the Genesis cycle in the Dečani Monastery represents not only the oldest but also the only thematic representation in Serbian medieval painting, and it stands as the sole preserved monumental example in Eastern Christian tradition (Marković and Marković 1995, 323). This scene is located in the northern chapel of the monastery. In the lower-left corner, we see the naked human body (Adam) lying on his back, with his legs stretched out on the rocks. Above his body, in the central zone, we observe Jesus Christ in a mandorla, surrounded by rays, blessing Adam. The presentation of Jesus Christ should not surprise us in this scene considering the following verse: 'Very truly I tell you,' Jesus answered, 'before Abraham was born, I am' (Jn 8:58). Beyond the visual contrast of warm and cool tones and the distinctly sculpted drawing, there is a clear distinction in the representation of the First Book of Moses. Recall the verse: '...and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.' The ray, directed by the right hand of Christ, unmistakably points to Adam's navel. This interesting depiction does not follow the literal text. Still, it offers a unique approach that does not find analogies in other interpretations of the sensory experiences emerging from the Dečani Monastery scene. This portrayal of the transcendental touch of Christ and Adam through the 'breath of life' symbolized by the ray introduces us to the ontological tactility between God and man. Assuming that the artist intentionally directed Christ's ray toward Adam's navel, an analogy can be found in the term 'Even Ha'Shtiya,' which in Jewish tradition denotes the place in the Jerusalem Temple where God began the creation of the world. The 'navel of the world' represents the central point around which everything revolves, just as the navel is the central point of the body. This stone is also associated with the myth of the foundation of the world, as it is believed that the world emanated from this stone (Sefaria n.d.). Although the concept of the 'navel of the world' appears in Greek mythology, Hinduism, Buddhism, and even Native American cultures, the idea of a central

point in the world with spiritual or mythological significance presents a fascinating point of convergence. While unconventional for Byzantine painters, this hypothesis is not unimaginable within the context of cosmological symbols that were not foreign to them (Fig. 2).

Annunciation

The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.' Mary was greatly troubled by his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel told her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus [Lk 1:28–31].

As the depiction that initiates the cycle of Great Feasts, the interpretation of the Annunciation is located in the lunette beneath the eastern pair of pendentives. This scene is rich with sensory perceptions, as Mary is brought into a direct and immediate relationship with the Archangel Gabriel, who brings her unexpected news. The representation has a solemn and celebratory character, fitting for the event's significance, with an elaborately painted architectural backdrop that reflects the announcement's importance. Its compositional construction and aesthetic elements underscore the scene's grandeur. The Archangel Gabriel, depicted with pronounced movement and almost mid-stride, appears on the left side in festive attire, addressing Mary and proclaiming that she is blessed among women. Mary, seated on a chest, seems surprised by the Archangel's presence, her head bowed in contemplation. At the moment of the announcement, a ray of light from the heavens descends upon the figurative depiction of Mary, symbolizing the divine intervention. Although Mary speaks only two sentences in the Gospel of Luke (one question and one affirmation (Lk 1:34, Lk 1:38)), the entire composition does not diminish in importance; instead, it emphasizes the miraculous nature of the encounter and highlights Mary's free will in her acceptance of the supernatural conception. The Arch-



Figure 3, *Annunciation*, Dečani Monastery, Courtesy of BLAGO Fund, Inc

angel Gabriel addresses Mary as an equal, fully aware of her earthly role, without eliciting fear or similar emotions. This interaction is depicted as an unrestrained dialogue, and according to the testimony of the evangelist, it unfolds dynamically, as between two human beings. This scene thus represents the first episode of the good news in the New Testament concerning the Messiah and Savior. Sensory perceptions extend beyond the auditory dimension of this conversation; they are also vividly present in the materialization of the Archangel, who visually appears before Mary to deliver the message of eschatological and historical significance (fig. 3). The historical-eschatological narrative embodies a synthesis between the Old Testament, whose laws were encapsulated in the Ark of the Covenant, and the Virgin Mary, who carries within her womb the one who fulfils the contents of the Ark. In an allegorical sense, Mary thus represents the new covenant (Ex 25:10–21) between God and humanity,

centered not in the law but in grace, and pointing towards the future described by the apostle John in the Book of Revelation (Rev 12:1–6). This profound theological shift marks the transition from the Old Testament’s legalistic framework to the New Testament’s emphasis on divine grace, making the Annunciation a pivotal moment in Christian iconography and theology.

The Birth of Christ

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them [Lk 2:6–7].

The depiction of the Birth of Christ, as part of the Great Feasts cycle, is located in the lower part of the dome in the southern lunette. The scene is a composite of several episodes, rich in



Figure 4: *The Birth of Christ*, Dečani Monastery; a. entire scene, b. detail of Birth, Courtesy of BLAGO Fund, Inc

details characteristic of 14th-century Eastern Christian iconography. According to M. Marković, 'an explanation can be found in the primary textual sources (Lk 2:4–19; cf. Mt 1:25 and Lk 2:9–11), as the Dečani painters, just like their predecessors, had in mind numerous poetic, homiletic, and apocryphal works inspired by the Christmas festival' (Marković 1995, 108). The scene itself is "constructed" to be abundant in sensory experiences, immersing the viewer in a very dynamic depiction (fig. 4a). At the centre of the composition is the figure of the Virgin Mary in the cave, with both arms around the baby Christ, who is lying in the manger. Christ is wrapped in a cloth, and the Virgin Mary has protectively placed her hands on him while her gaze meets the eyes of the three Magi positioned to the left of the manger, richly dressed and holding gifts. These intimate touches visually enhance the bond between mother and son on the fresco, conveying sensory and emotional depth that viewers can relate to (fig. 4b). Above the infant Christ are the figures of the ox and donkey, who 'warm' him with their breath (Marković 1995, 108). A beam of light descends from the segment of the sky down to Christ, rendered in the distinctive painting style of the Dečani artists. In the lower part of the scene, two female figures are preparing a bath for the infant Christ: one on the left is pouring water from a jug and holding the cloth in which Christ will later be wrapped, while the other holds Christ and checks the water temperature with her hand.

The sceptical Joseph sits in the lower right part of the image, observing the event. Above the Virgin and Christ, a highly dynamic scene unfolds, with angels at the top of the rocky ledge praising the birth and delivering the good news to the shepherds. The depiction is vividly rendered to offer a rich sensory experience. In interpreting the Birth of Christ, the rich, symbolic use of colour dominates, particularly in depicting the fabrics worn by Mary. These garments are illustrated as luxurious and of exceptional quality, symbolizing the occasion's solemnity despite such luxury being unattainable in the ac-

tual circumstances. This artistic choice underscores the sacredness of the moment, as Mary is fully aware that she has given birth to the Messiah. Every element in the painting has a sensory dimension, from the warmth of the bath to the angelic hymn, all designed to evoke an emotional response from the viewer, marking the beginning of a profound emotional narrative. Christ is depicted as an ordinary child in one sense, being prepared for a warm bath and cradled in his mother's arms, a scene that does not differ from any other child. Yet, the upper part of the image emphasizes his divine nature. This duality is captured in a vertical composition: from the birth/earthly realm, through the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets represented by Mary, to the heavenly realm of God, symbolized by the angels in glorification. The intricate composition invites the viewer to consider both the human and divine aspects of Christ's birth, creating a layered and immersive visual narrative beyond a mere depiction of an event, offering a theological reflection through art. Thus, the fresco tells the story of Christ's nativity and engages the senses and emotions, drawing the observer into a deeper contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation.

The Baptism of Christ

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" [Mt 3:16–17].

The composition of the Baptism primarily relies on traditional representations where multiple sensory elements are present. The central figure is Christ standing in the Jordan River, depicted schematically yet plastic. John the Baptist, positioned on the left side of the composition, stands on a rock with his right hand on Christ's head, while his left hand is raised with an open palm and gaze directed towards heaven (fig. 5). Although, according to Matthew's



Figure 5: *The Baptism of Christ*, Dečani Monastery, Courtesy of BLAGO Fund, Inc

verses, the Spirit of God in the form of a dove descends upon Christ after emerges from the Jordan River, in the fresco of the Dečani Monastery, we see a segment of heaven depicted as a semi-circle with open doors and the hand of the Father blessing Christ during the act of baptism. While the tactile aspect in the portrayal of John and Christ is evident when discussing the senses, we again encounter an example of transcendental touch. The Father's blessing is depicted in a sensory manner, emphasizing the third person of the Trinity as an element embodied in the form of a ray, representing the continuous spiritual connection between Father and Son, as well as the presence in the liturgical invocation of transforming the material into the spiritual, into the blood and body of Christ. The one who performs the transubstantiation in the liturgy transforms the material into the immaterial. In this scene, not only is Christ baptized, but it also fulfils Christian Trinitarian theology, where all three persons of the Holy Trinity

are simultaneously present in a sensory unity, creating a unique scene where all three faces are united. We must not overlook the sensory, auditory-visual moment as the Father addresses the Son (Mt 3:13–17), affirming his sonship by sending the Holy Spirit. Although angels are never depicted with wings in the Bible, they are messengers with different iconographic positions. The scene is enriched with motifs inspired by poetic texts read during the feast of Theophany (Marković 1995, 109). These include the personifications of the Jordan River (as an older man) and the sea (as a woman with exposed breasts), painted in the water in the foreground. On the left is depicted the conversation between Christ and John before the baptism, a scene based on Matthew's description of the event (Mt 3: 13–15).

The Transfiguration of Christ

After six days, Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John the brother of James, and



Figure 6: *The Transfiguration of Christ*, Dečani Monastery; a. entire scene, b. detail of the scene, Courtesy of BLAGO Fund, Inc

led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. [Mt 17:1–9; Mk 9:2–9; Lk 9:28–36].

The scene of the Transfiguration is depicted in all the synoptic Gospels. The composition of the Transfiguration is presented narratively in three distinct parts. On the left side, Christ is shown addressing John, Peter, and James as they ascend the mountain (Mt 17:1; Mk 9:2; Lk 9:28). On the right side, Christ is depicted returning from Mount Tabor, commanding the disciples not to tell anyone about the event they witnessed. The central part of the composition captures the moment of Christ's Transfiguration before the disciples, revealing His divine nature. Christ is the central figure, clothed in white, surrounded by a mandorla from which rays of light emanate, rendered in a distinctive painterly manner. To the left and right of Christ stand Moses, holding the tablets, and the prophet Elijah, a customary feature of this composition (fig. 6a). The disciples, depicted at the bottom of the scene, are shown recoiling from the sight, overwhelmed by the brilliance of the light and the divine revelation. This represents a dynamic and dramatic moment in the Holy Scriptures, characterized by its intense sensory experience. The sensory impressions are vividly depicted in this composition. The dialogue between Christ and the apostles is illustrated in an exceptionally narrative form, supported by the scriptural sources, specifically the synoptic Gospels. Christ fulfils the role of the Creator from the Pentateuch and the realization of all the messianic prophecies found in the Old Testament. The significance of this composition is underscored by the radical presence of light, symbolizing the absolute and eternal glory of the Holy Son, which was concealed during His earthly life (fig. 6b). Abstract sensory experience materializes through the depiction of the apostles' reaction to the Transfiguration itself, as they are blinded by the light and filled with fear, an almost instantaneous response. Recognizing

Christ as the Holy Son, the apostles are depicted with halos during the Transfiguration, unlike the figures on the left and right sides of the composition. This indicates the unique nature of this Biblical scene. The Apostle Peter, one of the witnesses, describes the event as follows, emphasizing the sensory aspect of the experience: 'For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain' (2 Pt. 1:16–18). This statement highlights the sense of hearing, given that the disciples were blinded by the light yet amazed by the opportunity to hear the voice of God directly. The sensory presence of light, depicted from the Tabernacle and Solomon's Temple to the Transfiguration, represents God's presence in the world and the manifestation of divine sensory perception through light (Lv 24:3).

The Betrayal of Judas

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: 'The one I kiss is the man; arrest him.' Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him. Jesus replied, 'Do what you came for, friend' [Mt 26:47–50].

The cycle of the Betrayal of Judas is marked by a strong narrative character and dramatization of the events, almost resembling the graphic novel style, a characteristic technique of the Dečani painters. Although this event is described in all four Gospels, the depictions of the scene vary significantly. The Betrayal of Judas follows the serene scenes of Christ's prayer in



Figure 7: *The Betrayal of Judas*, Dečani Monastery; a. Judas leading a Great multitude with swords and staves, b. Soldiers fall to the ground in front of Christ, c. Kiss of Judas, d. Peter cutting off Malchus' ear, Courtesy of BLAGO Fund, Inc

the Garden of Gethsemane, a dramatic counter-balance filled with tension and sensory imagery. The scene where Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve

apostles, betrays Christ for thirty pieces of silver to the Roman authorities is one of the New Testament's pivotal moments. The Dečani art-

ists, through their composition of Judas's Kiss, capture an extraordinary intensity of emotion and sensory experience, encapsulating these elements in almost a single instant. The scenes of this cycle commence with an episode where Judas leads a procession of Pharisees, servants, and soldiers, who, armed with spears and torches, come to seize Christ (fig. 7a). Judas addresses the group at that moment, indicating that he will identify Christ with a kiss.

This form of communication is among the first sensory perceptions observed in the cycle. In the following scene, three soldiers are depicted as having fallen before Christ, who extends His hand to them, affirming His identity (fig. 7b).

The crucial scene features Judas confirming Jesus Christ with a kiss, occupying a central position in the composition. Surrounding them is a procession equipped with weapons directed at Christ (fig. 7c).

While Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is solely focused on an inner communicative form between Christ and the Holy Father, characterized by the absence of external sensory inputs and impressions, reflecting a profound, mystical act of the main protagonist in relation to the surrounding environment, the narrative sharply introduces Judas and his entourage, thereby dramatically escalating the scene's intensity, shifting from spiritual tranquillity to an almost cinematic action scene. The impression is that everything unfolds very rapidly. The sound of footsteps, the clinking of spears, physical contact, and the crowd's shouts underscore a multisensory experience that enhances the tragic nature of this event and the entire cycle of the betrayal. The contrast is critical: tranquillity versus conflict; Christ's arrest is loud, shocking, and definitive. Judas's touch of Christ, his communication with Him, and the palpable contact between the teacher and the disciple, which is threatening, provokes an unexpected reaction from the apostle Peter, who resorts to violence. The subsequent scene portrays Peter cutting off the ear of a servant from the Jewish entourage (fig. 7d). This depiction is filled with

dramatization, given that the image of the severed ear closes the entire cycle of Judas's Betrayal while also serving as an introduction to a series of scenes filled with dramatic tension and violent narratives that culminate in the death of Christ's human nature, emphasizing His depiction as a martyr, which fulfils the mission of Jesus Christ on Earth. This mission is reflected in the resurrection and the Second Coming of Christ, thereby narratively unfolding the most significant Christian story. The emphasis on Christ's suffering, where the wounded body is foregrounded, holds a special place in Roman Catholicism, far more than in Orthodox iconography. Depictions of the Crucifixion in Roman Catholic sacred aesthetics often manifest in frequent sculptural representations highlighting suffering through pronounced, three-dimensional depictions of wounds. At the same time, the visual practice of the Orthodox Church relies on two-dimensional representations, behind which lies a mystical reflection of hope.

Crucifixion

When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' And they divided up his clothes by casting lots [Lk 23:33–34].

The Crucifixion, one of the most renowned and dramatic scenes in the cycle of Great Feasts, is depicted in the semi-dome of the western apse. This composition is dynamic and presented in multiple segments, following the core narrative of the Gospels. At the centre of the composition is the figure of Christ, crucified and bowed, his head resting on his right shoulder. Two groups of figures are densely packed on either side of him. On the left side of the composition, the Virgin Mary, the Apostle John, and a group of women are depicted in anguish and disbelief. Their sorrow is palpable, their faces etched with the profound grief of witnessing the suffering of their

beloved Christ. Their postures and expressions are deeply evocative, capturing the raw emotional weight of the moment. On the right side of the composition, a group consisting of soldiers, priests, and other onlookers is shown.

Among them are two significant figures for this scene: the soldier holding the spear that pierced Christ's side (Longinus) and the centurion with a halo, recognizing the Son of God (fig. 8). There has been considerable debate over the depiction of these two figures in the history of medieval fresco painting. Matthew, Mark, and Luke mention the centurion, not the soldier with the spear, while John's account is the reverse (Marković 1995, 111). In the lower-left corner, the scene of soldiers casting lots for Christ's garments (the tunic) is vividly illustrated, described in detail by John, and frequently appears in Byzantine iconography (Jn 19:23–24). This element underscores the brutal reality of the crucifixion, and the dehumanization Christ suffered. A detail in the lower right corner depicts human figures rising from their graves, a schematic element that aligns with the verses from Matthew (Mt 27:52). This inclusion highlights the theological implications of Christ's death, representing the resurrection of the dead and the victory over sin and death. In addition to the standard synoptic iconographic elements, traditional motifs such as the skull beneath the cross are included. These elements are inspired by apocryphal texts and the writings of the early Church Fathers, which speak of Adam's grave at Golgotha.³ In liturgical poetry, Christ's sacrifice is depicted as liberating Adam, representing all humanity (Marković 1995, 111). In the upper sections of the composition, four angels are painted weeping over the crucified Christ, alongside personifications of the Sun and Moon (Lk 23:44–45). The Sun and Moon are represented as miniature human figures within unusual, rounded shapes emitting rays, seemingly fleeing the scene

of the crucifixion. The combination of human figures and cosmic allegories is a well-established motif in medieval iconography, symbolizing cosmic upheaval and universal mourning at the moment of Christ's suffering and death. Sensory experience in this composition is manifested in a complex manner, mainly through the depiction of Christ's crucifixion, which is central to understanding this artistic scene. Christ's crucifixion is not only a representation of his physical suffering but also a profound symbol of the redemption of humankind. Exhausted and tormented, his body is portrayed with a unique artistic expression that captures the grandeur and depth of the event through minimalistic details and the symbolism of blood. Through this depiction, the artists convey the physical pain and the spiritual dimension of the suffering, highlighting the universal significance of Christ's sacrifice.

Additionally, the absence of sensory elements in the personified representations of the sun and moon, which, according to the Gospel of Luke, further adds to the dramatic intensity of the moment. This darkening signifies a physical eclipse and symbolizes the sombre atmosphere surrounding Christ's death, foreshadowing the dramatic events. This artistic choice intensifies the scene's emotional impact, focusing on the internal anguish and spiritual dimension. The tearful faces of the Virgin Mary, the onlookers, and the angels in this depiction further emphasize the intensity of the emotions provoked by Christ's physical suffering. Their sorrow is not just an emotional reaction to the moment of crucifixion but also serves as a prelude to the climax of Christian faith – the Resurrection of the body. This profound and heavy sorrow is a precursor to the joy and celebration of the Resurrection, representing the pinnacle of Christian hope and faith. The Dečani painters authentically portrayed this transition from suffering to celebration, thus emphasizing not only the tragic aspects of the event but also their eschatological and spiritual dimensions.

3 Church Fathers who wrote about Adam's tomb beneath Golgotha are: St. Jerome (c. 347–420), St. Augustine (354–430), St. Epiphanius (c. 315–403), St. Paul of Trebizond (c. 1300–c. 1360), and St. Helena (c. 250–330).



Figure 8: *Crucifixion*, Dečani Monastery, Courtesy of BLAGO Fund, Inc

The Second Coming of Christ

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever [1 Thes 4:16–17].

The composition depicting the Second Coming of Christ represents one of the most sensory interpretations within Christian theology, encompassing all senses and extending its significance to humanity. No other global event, theological or otherwise, can compare its profound impact and universal importance to this specific New Testament event. The Revelation maintains the vibrant and rich imagery of the apocryphal books while simultaneously transcending the boundaries of non-canonical

sources by emphasizing the sensory experience that heralds the Second Coming of Christ. From the heavens descends a young, beardless Christ, seated on a throne, extending both arms in a gesture of blessing. The adorned throne, shaped like a chest with closed front and side panels, features a low backrest, behind which rises an ellipsoid mandorla of light, gradually brightening toward the edges. The throne is supported by two symmetrically curved angels in flight, facing the Fearsome Judge: each holds the throne with one hand while grasping the hem of their garments with the other. Beneath Christ's bare feet hovers a purple cushion, symbolizing his divine authority and the majestic nature of this event (fig. 9). According to the words of Aleksandra Davidov Temerinski, the primary biblical source for this scene is the text of the evangelist Matthew: "For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have



Figure 9: *The Second Coming of Christ*, Dečani Monastery, Courtesy of BLAGO Fund, Inc

done”; and “Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory” (Davidov Temerinski 1995, 193).

The trumpets the angels hold serve as the audible manifestation of God’s judgment at the end of time. There is a clear etiological connection between the Book of Life, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls of wrath, with the final, seventh trumpet signifying the commencement of God’s wrath (Rv 8:6–12; 9:1–21). The composition also includes the figures of the Mother of God, John the Baptist, the holy apostles, and notable figures from Serbian history, emphasizing the universal and timeless nature of the event. As Todić notes, the Second Coming of Christ is inevitable and assured, marking the final stage of salvation (Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 448). This eschatological belief profoundly perme-

ated all aspects of thought and spiritual activity in the medieval world, serving as a powerful and ever-present reminder of the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise. The sensory elements of this composition are striking and deliberate. Christ’s descent from heaven, surrounded by angels and enveloped in the radiant light of the mandorla, creates a visual spectacle that is both awe-inspiring and overwhelming. The sound of the trumpets, signalling the final judgment, resonates with a sense of urgency and inevitability, reminding the faithful of the seriousness of the moment/process. The presence of historical and biblical figures gazing upward in reverence and awe adds a layer of emotional intensity to the scene as they witness the culmination of divine prophecy. This depiction of the Second Coming is not just a visual narrative but an immersive experience that engages the viewer’s senses and emotions, drawing them into the anticipation and reverence that accompanies the return

of Christ. The sensory richness of the scene – from the brilliant light and vibrant colours to the resonant sound of the trumpets and the palpable tension in the expressions of the figures – all heighten the emotional impact of this profound moment in Christian eschatology.

Conclusion

The iconography of the Dečani Monastery offers a profound and intricate exploration of how sacred art employs sensory elements to bridge the material and spiritual realms. This analysis has elucidated how the frescoes at Dečani are not merely visual artifacts but are rich with sensory stimuli that engage the observer on multiple levels. The frescoes in the Dečani Monastery are a testament to the sophisticated integration of light, colour, and movement, each carefully orchestrated to enhance the visual and emotional impact of the scenes depicted. The strategic use of light in the frescoes is particularly noteworthy. It illuminates the narrative and symbolizes the divine presence, creating an aura of sanctity and transcendence. Similarly, vibrant colours and dynamic compositions convey complex theological messages and evoke a deep sense of spiritual reality. The sensory experience provided by these frescoes goes beyond mere aesthetic appreciation. It is intricately connected to the spiritual messages, inviting observers to engage with the divine narrative through their senses. The frescoes are a conduit for experiencing the sacred, making the divine more tangible and accessible to the faithful. This immersive quality of the frescoes enhances the observer's connection to the spiritual truths depicted, reinforcing and deepening their faith. In addition, the iconographic program of the Dečani Monastery serves as an exemplary model of how sacred art can transcend its physical medium to offer glimpses of the divine. The interplay between material beauty and spiritual meaning in these frescoes demonstrates the potential of religious art to bridge the gap between the earthly and the heavenly. The frescoes at Dečani do not simply represent divine narratives; they invite the ob-

server to enter these narratives, experiencing the divine presence in a profound and transformative manner. Ultimately, the iconography of the Dečani Monastery stands as a powerful example of the ability of sacred art to engage the senses in a way that reinforces and deepens religious understanding. The sensory experiences elicited by the frescoes are deeply embedded with theological significance, offering a vivid portrayal of the divine that leaves a lasting impression on the observer. This integration of sensory and spiritual elements underscores the enduring impact of sacred art on the faithful, illustrating how it can both transcend the material world and offer profound insights into the divine.

Summary

This study examines sensory perception in the fresco paintings of the Dečani Monastery, focusing on integrating theological and artistic elements within the medieval Serbian Orthodox tradition. The analysis positions the monastery as a critical site where visual and sensory stimuli were utilized to reinforce theological teachings and evoke spiritual experiences.

The frescoes in the Dečani Monastery embody the late Byzantine artistic tradition, blending Eastern Orthodox liturgical elements with rich iconographic narratives. These depictions aim to engage the observer's senses—primarily sight but also invoking the imagination tied to other senses—thereby enhancing spiritual understanding. Through a combination of biblical, liturgical, and hagiographic content, the frescoes serve as tools for theological education and spiritual reflection.

These artworks' light, colour, and movement are deliberate, creating an immersive experience that bridges the material and the divine. Key cycles analysed include depictions from the *Old and New Testament*, such as *The Creation of Adam*, *The Annunciation*, *The Birth of Christ*, *The Baptism of Christ*, *The Transfiguration*, and *The Crucifixion*. Each narrative is enriched by unique sensory and symbolic elements that enhance theological interpretations. For instance, the ray of light symbolizing divine intervention in *The Annunciation* and the transcendental tactile connection in *The Creation of Adam* demonstrate the intentional merging of abstract spiritual concepts with physical representations. Simi-

larly, scenes like *The Second Coming of Christ* encapsulate eschatological themes with vivid sensory manifestations, such as angelic trumpets and divine light, underscoring the profound emotional and spiritual impact on the observer.

The frescoes present theological narratives and invite the faithful into a participatory experience. The artists achieved this through a sophisticated interplay of sensory stimuli and symbolic imagery, reflecting the Orthodox Church's emphasis on the material as a pathway to the spiritual. Unlike the ascetic visual practices of Protestantism, the Serbian Orthodox tradition celebrated a sensory engagement, making the divine more accessible and tangible to worshippers.

Povzetek

Raziskava obravnava čutno zaznavanje na freskah samostana Dečani, pri čemer se osredotoča na povezovanje teoloških in umetniških elementov v okviru srednjeveške srbske pravoslavne tradicije. Analiza postavlja samostan kot ključno prizorišče, kjer so vizualni in senzorični dražljaji uporabljeni za krepitev teoloških nauk ter vzbujanje duhovnih izkušenj.

Freske v samostanu Dečani utelešajo poznobizantinsko umetniško tradicijo, ki združuje vzhodnopравoslavne liturgične elemente z bogatimi ikonografskimi pripovedmi. Cilj teh upodobitev je nagovoriti čutne zaznave opazovalca – predvsem vid –, hkrati pa spodbuditi domišljijo, povezano z drugimi čutili, ter s tem poglobiti duhovno razumevanje. S kombinacijo svetopisemskih, liturgičnih in hagiografskih vsebin freske delujejo kot orodje za teološko izobraževanje ter duhovni razmislek.

Uporaba svetlobe, barv in gibanja v teh umetninah je premišljena, saj ustvarja poglobljeno izkušnjo, ki povezuje materialno in božansko. Ključni analizirani cikli vključujejo upodobitve iz *Stare in Nove zaveze*, kot so *Svarjenje Adama*, *Oznanjenje*, *Kristusovo rojstvo*, *Kristusov krst*, *Preobrazba in Križanje*. Vsaka pripoved je obogate na z edinstvenimi čutnimi in simbolnimi elementi, ki krepijo teološke razlage. Npr., žarek svetlobe, ki simbolizira božansko posredovanje v *Oznanjenju*, in transcendentna taktilna povezava v *Svarjenju Adama* kažeta na namerno združevanje abstraktnih duhovnih konceptov s fizičnimi predstavami. Podobno prizori, kot je *Drugi Kristusov prihod*, vključujejo eshatološke teme z živahnimi čutnimi manifestacijami, kot so angelške trobente in

božanska svetloba, ki poudarjajo globok čustveni in duhovni vpliv na opazovalca.

Freske ne predstavljajo zgolj teoloških pripovedi, temveč vernike tudi vabijo k aktivnemu sodelovanju. Umetniki so to dosegli z dovršenim prepletanjem čutnih dražljajev in simbolnih podob, kar odraža poudarek pravoslavne cerkve na materialnem kot poti do duhovnega. V nasprotju z asketskimi vizualnimi praksami protestantizma je srbska pravoslavna tradicija slavila čutno vpletenost, zaradi česar je božansko vernikom postalo dostopnejše in otipljivejše.

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