

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this essay is to discover and define some basic principles underlying representations of the human figure and composite pictures in Byzantine Church art and which can occasionally also be met with in medieval art in the Latin West.

The inquiry concerns images of single figures, generally in frontal position, and pictures composed of a symmetrical arrangement of such single figures (I have in mind what in German terminology are called *Repräsentationsbilder*). Moreover, it examines the manner in which these essentially 'hierarchical' and 'iconic' images were built up into larger schemes of decoration. Scenic or narrative pictures are not included in the study. The essay is based mainly on analyses of monumental works of art; arguments or statements regarding representations in fresco and mosaic, however, may in principle also be valid for corresponding representations in moveable icons. Conversely, in accordance with Byzantine usage, the word 'icon' is used to denote not only this latter category of moveable images but also wall paintings and mosaics that form part of the monumental decoration of a sacred building.

As the following shows, the principles to be studied constitute a particular system of proportion. From a practical point of view, this system manifests itself as a method of artistic execution. Correspondingly, my point of departure was not a theoretical interest in the problem of proportion but, rather to the contrary, a first hand examination of medieval wall paintings and mosaics. The study has grown out of art historical field work. While engaged in measuring, surveying and tracing the earliest, 8th-century layer of wall paintings decorating the so-called 'Tempietto Longobardo' at Cividale del Friuli in Northern Italy, the recurrence of certain measurements and their multiples seemed to indicate something like a geometrically defined lay-out of the decoration as a whole and a system of proportion for the individual figures. The subsequent analysis of this and other material confirmed what was

originally a mere impression or, at best, a hypothesis for inquiry, and provided the elements necessary for formulating at least the general principles of a medieval system of proportion, previously only imperfectly known¹.

For a study of this kind, the archaeological and art historical evidence often proves most unreliable. The investigation 'all too frequently succumbs to the temptation of reading out of the objects just what it has put into them' (Panofsky). It seems a sound general criterion for judging the plausibility of a geometrical or proportional formula 'rediscovered' on the basis of analysis of the monuments, that the lines and forms assumed to have resulted from specific operations on the part of the artists mainly coincide with and are contained in the lines and forms of the actual work of art. If in addition literary sources pertaining to the problems can be adduced, there is hope that some of the inevitable pitfalls may be avoided.

I am fully aware of the provisional character of much of the research contained in this study. Its subtitle, 'An Essay . . .', refers less to its form than to its content: an attempt at a preliminary description and an interpretation of a once important, but now hardly recognized system of proportion.

A more detailed investigation of the problems involved would require material which unfortunately is not at present available — accurate surveys, copies and tracings of the single units and the whole of at least one of the major Byzantine church decorations still in existence. It is my hope that the very shortcomings of the present account of the Byzantine image painters' method may perhaps lead to the necessary work being put in hand.

(1) N. SPEICH, *Die Proportionslehre des menschlichen Körpers. Antike, Mittelalter, Renaissance*, Diss., Zürich 1957, p. 105: 'Zusammenfassend bleibt uns noch festzuhalten, dass es bis jetzt nicht möglich ist, die byzantinisch-griechischen Proportionslehren des Mittelalters, deren Existenz eine Reihe von Indizien vermuten lässt, in konkreter Form zu fassen und zu belegen'.