

IMAGINING THE BYZANTINE ICON

EKPHRASIS OF THE MIND

Diana Marietta Papas

Icon with the Heavenly Ladder of St John Klimakos: Constantinople or Sinai, late twelfth century.

Dimensions: 41.1 x 29.5cm

By permission of Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent does ekphrasis, with its emphasis on processes of vivid visuality, function in the brain's default mode network?
2. What role does ekphrasis play in the literary mind? Does ekphrasis act as the mental rendering of experience?

Research pathways:

1. Byzantine icon theory
2. Classical and medieval interpretations of ekphrasis and enargeia
3. The cognitive literary theory of the brain's default mode network.



Late Byzantine, ca. 1400

Dimensions: Height: 390mm x Width: 310 mm x Depth: 53mm

Credit: By permission © The Trustees of the British Museum.

DEFINITIONS & THEIR SCOPE

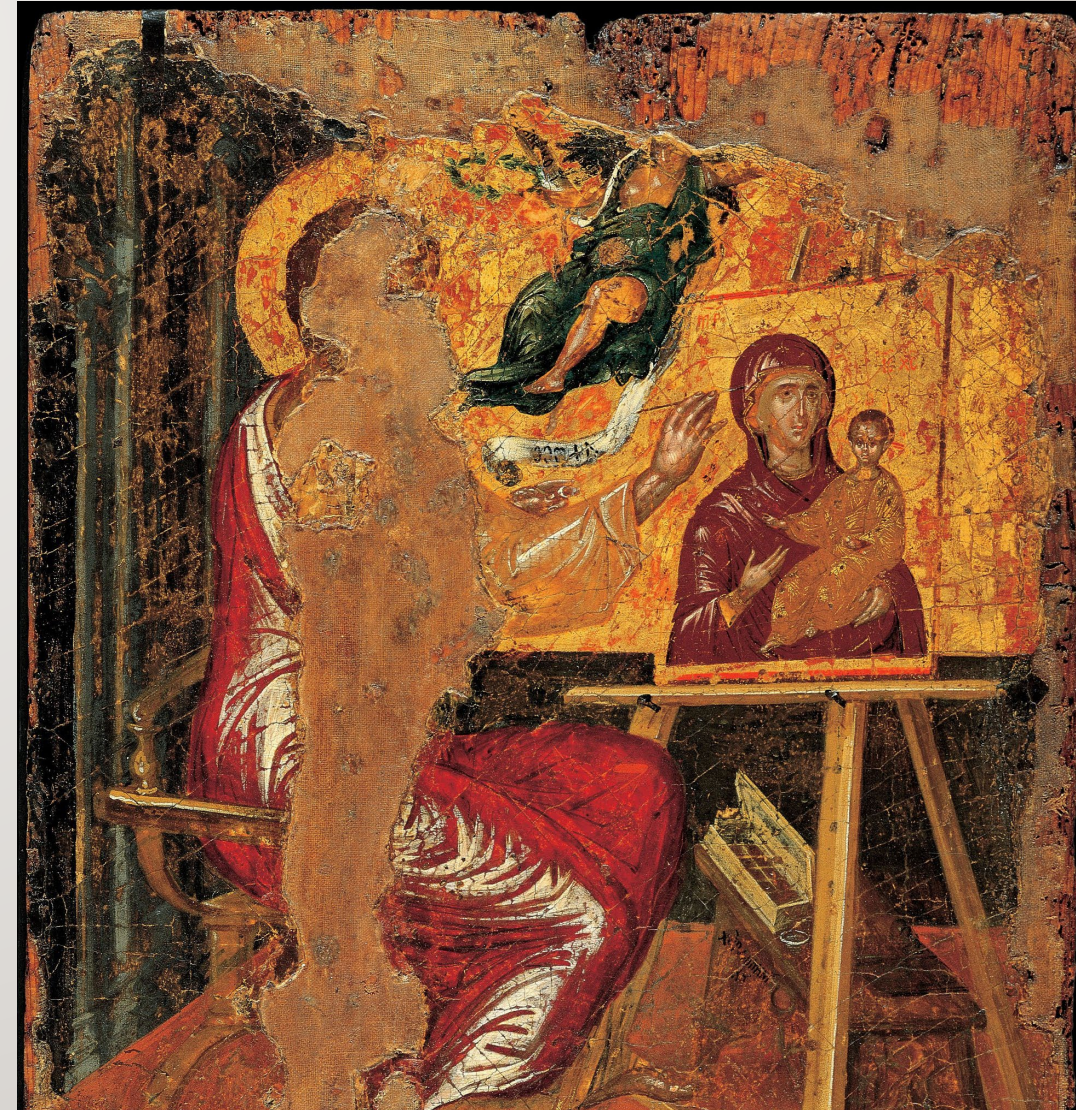
Icon - portraiture of holy saints used for spiritual purposes in devotional settings (Cormack, *Icons* 8).

Byzantine Iconoclasm - the abolition of religious depictions of holy figures, and the invisible God.

Ekphrasis – a descriptive response to an image, imagined or otherwise (Johnston et al. 1–2; Webb 1; Heffernan, 2–3).

Enargeia - a quality of language to describe vivid action, or the word-portrait of a person, actual or imaginary (Carruthers, 130). The life force of an image (Tsakiridou, 20).

Brain's Default Mode Network - when left unfocused the mind tends to ruminate on the past, plan for the future, daydream about unlikely events, and dwell on the true meaning of what other people say or think (Raichle et al.; Richardson; Shulman et al.; Carroll).



Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin

Museum: Benaki Museum, Athens

Artist: El Greco, Dominico (1541 – 1614)

Dimensions: 35.5 x 44.9 cm

Photograph Credit: Heritage Image Partnership Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

THE INVISIBLE & TRANSCENDENT REALM

The visual arts helped shape the Byzantine worshipper's perceptions of the **unknowable and unseeable**, offering them transcendence from an earthly existence (Cormack, *Writing* 44,146; Maguire, *Bodies* 3;)

The religious icon served as an intercessory channel between **invisible and visible worlds**.



Icon with the Heavenly Ladder of St John Klimakos: Constantinople or Sinai, late 12th century.
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Saint Luke Writing at His Desk

Codex 163, folio 199v, 12th century

Museum: National Library, Athens, Greece.

Photograph Credit: Heritage Image Partnership Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

THE ICONOGRAPHER, SCRIBE

Iconographia includes the root word graphé which encompasses the meaning to *write*

To the devout Byzantine, the biblical meaning of Logos is “the word of God” or “Christ as the Word” being the image of God himself (N/V John 1:1; Revelation 19:13).

The word embodies God according to the scripture: “the Word became Flesh” (N/V John 1:1).

Word and image are therefore analogous in the Byzantine mind (Drpić 338).

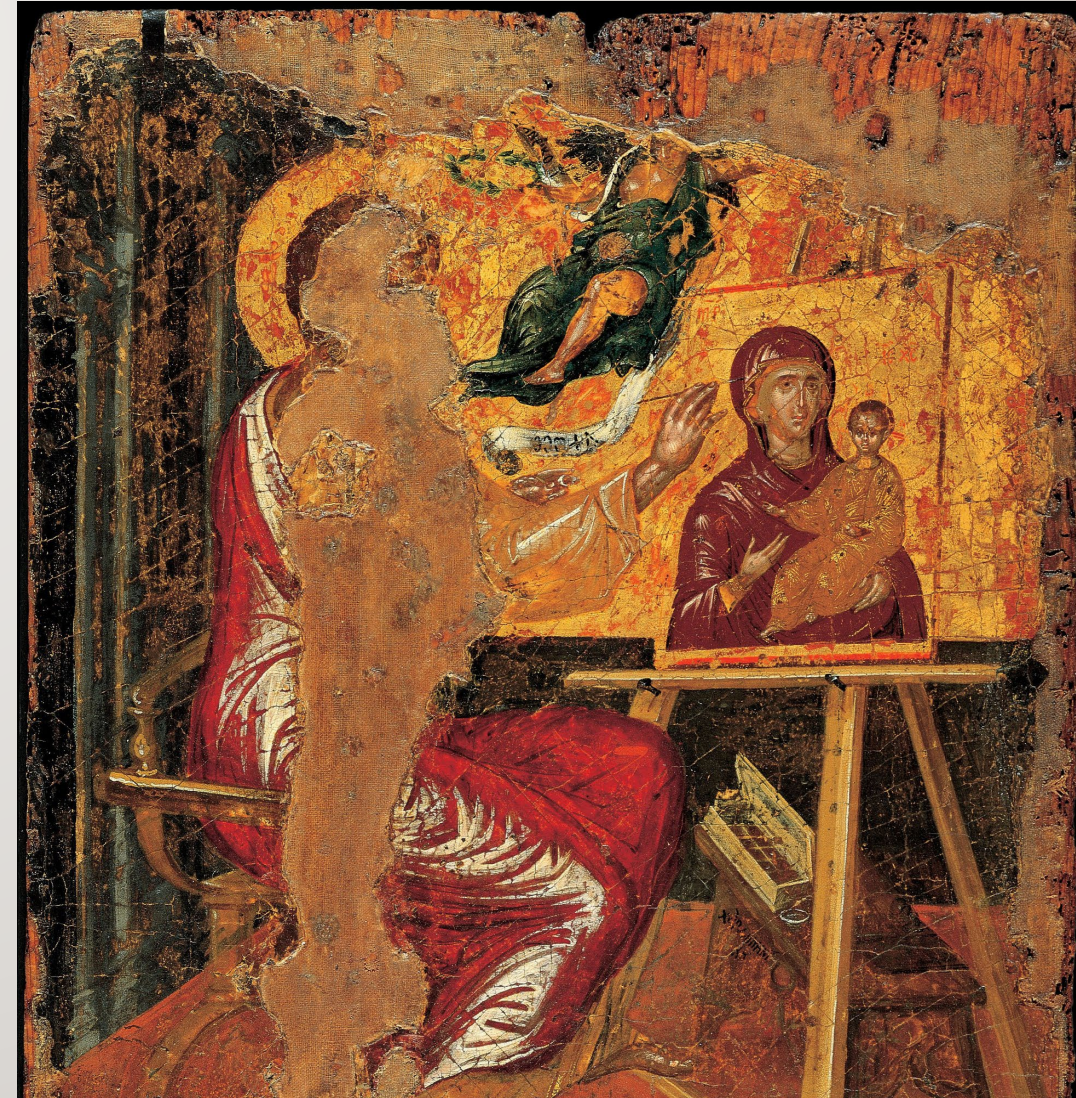
THE MIRACULOUS ICON

In the Byzantine Christian context, the exemplar religious icon was referred to as *acheiropoietai*, or “an image not made with human hands” (Tsakiridou, 33). According to belief, *acheiropoietai* were capable of bleeding, weeping, sweating, lactating, emitting fragrant odours, healing etc.

Icon depicting Saint Luke painting the Virgin with Child from life: the *Hodegetria* icon (Cormack, *Icons* 14).

Letter of the Three Patriarchs to Emperor Theophilus (ca. 715-730) outlining the deep troubles of Patriarch Germanos at the religious destruction of icons and images during the first Byzantine iconoclastic period (Peers, 15).

The narrative is an ekphrasis, a descriptive response to an icon depicting Christ known as the icon T'Amantiou.



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HAGIOGRAPHY: EKPHRASTIC PORTRAITS

The seventh-century hagiography of **Saints Cosmas and Damian**, the patron saints of medicine (Miracle 15). The narrative describes a woman who was “healed” of various afflictions (Mango, 139, Miller, 171–72).

Upon her return home, the woman painted images of the saints on all the walls of her house, being, as she was, insatiable in her desire to see them:

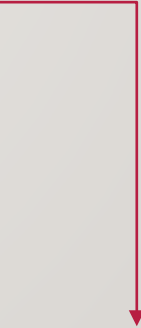
Perceiving herself to be in danger, she crawled out of bed and, upon reaching the place where these most wise Saints were depicted on the wall, she stood up leaning on her faith as upon a stick and scraped off with her fingernails some plaster. This she put into water and, after drinking the mixture, she was immediately cured of her pains by the visitation of the Saints. (Qtd in Mango 139)



THE BRAIN'S DEFAULT MODE

Rose Addis and colleagues (2020): memory and imagination are considered fundamentally the same process, referred to as **constructive episodic simulation** (233).

Addis has also introduced a new principle into the study of the brain's default mode, that is the “**mental rendering of experience**” to “re-experience the past, pre-experience the future, also comprehend the complexities of the present” (233).



Literary critics Nigel Krauth and Christopher Bowman (2018): ekphrasis is a **temporal continuum during the writing process**.

In their view, “the production of a mental image occurs in many kinds of writing situations and that the transfer of its evocative emotional presence from one mind (the writer's) to another (the reader's) is a key part of the writing process generally in all forms...” (12–13).

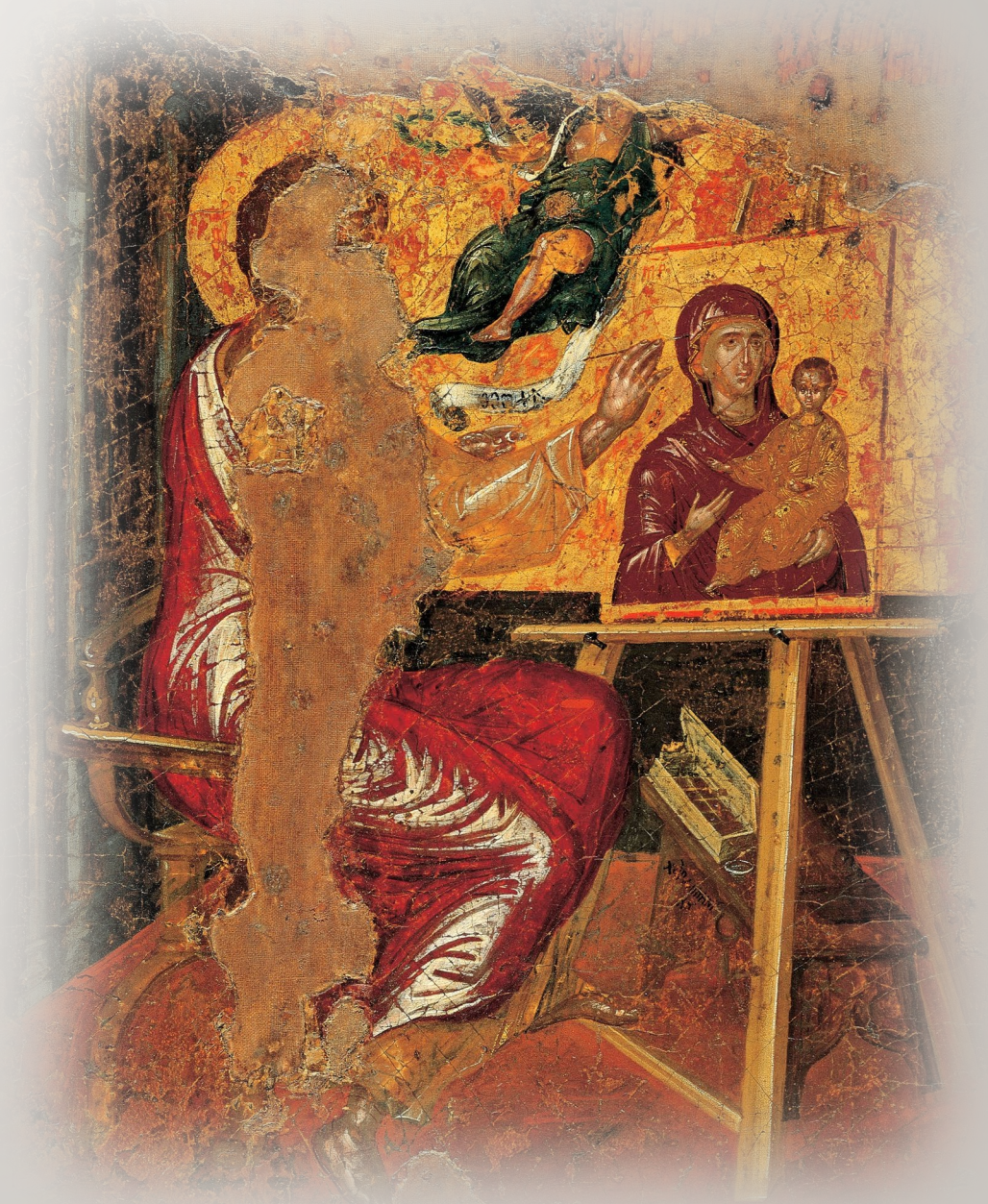
EIKON: A FICTION NOVELLA

The inclusion of women painters in the patriarchal society of Byzantium is extremely rare (Cormack, *Icons* 33).

Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives edited by Alice-Mary Talbot (2006).

Transgender nuns and female hermits flourished in the fifth and sixth centuries. The stories of female transgender monks provide fertile ground for a contemporary narrative reimagining in my novella *Eikon*.

Deuteronomy 22:5 forbade cross-dressing: "A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear woman's clothing" (NIV Deut. 22.5)



EKPHRASIS OF THE MIND

the One

A wondrous scene [...]

I have never seen [...]

on a piece of a tomb painted

belonging to idolaters [...]

[...]

[...]

[...]

[...]

[...]

[...]

a spine, gold, pigment of the earth [...]

an underworld forest [...]

a tree in a current [...]

porifera, a crop of sponge [...]

a vein on a rock [...]

[...] waves

[...] thrown into the sea

No gold. No gemstones. [...] in ochre. The icon of a diver. How long can she hold her breath? How I marvelled at this gift [...] before God.

XP

ochre [...]

a naked diver

red-leaping

from his tower

swallow-black

wings-up

falling to the sea

fingers of leaves

THE TOMB OF THE DIVER



Tomb of the Diver, 480—470 BC

Museum: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Paestum, Italy.

Dimensions: 215×112×20 cm

Photograph Credit: courtesy of akg- images/ Erich Lessing

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