



## An Expressionist Painter of the Fourteenth Century

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### *Abstract*

Theophanes the Greek was one of the well-known artists of exceptional personality who lived in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. His talent stood out on account of the expressionist manner in which he portrayed his art creations and their impact on the school of Russian religious painting. His artistic talent, “swift brush” painting manner and life adventure can be compared with those of Doménikos Theotokópoulos (El Greco), another famous Greek painter, who brought the Cretan dramatic and expressionistic style to the West, influencing the Spanish Renaissance two hundred years after Theophanes. The artistic heritage of Theophanes stands between the short vibrant period of the Palaeologan Renaissance when the Byzantine Empire went through a terminal crisis, and the European Proto-Italian Renaissance. The artist seized the opportunity to unleash his creative work in the ancient Russian cities, unfolding his talent in the creation of large mural paintings. Characterized by his contemporaries as “Theophanes the Greek, icon painter and philosopher”, he enjoyed a high reputation in medieval Russian society. Present article questions Theophanes’ belonging to the hesychast movement and the attribution of the Muscovite icons and manuscripts to the painter. Considering the impact of Theophanes on Russian visual art, D. Talbot Rice stated: “It was thanks to the teaching of Greek immigrants like Theophanes that a sound foundation was established Russian painting, and it was on this basis that local styles were founded.” And it was in the Russian principalities that Theophanes developed his very distinctive style, enjoying *carte blanche* from the princes and boyars (aristocracy) to apply his creativity in various domains.

**Keywords:** icon painting, Greek icon painting, Orthodox Christianity, Hesychasm, Palaeologan Renaissance, Byzantine artists, liturgical art, fresco painting, Theophanes the Greek.

### 1. Emigrant artist

It is hard to underestimate the impact of the titanic authenticity of Theophanes the Greek on the Russian artistic and cultural heritage of the medieval era. His biography is one of very few recorded in a Russian historical chronicle contemporary with the artist: the letter of Epiphanius the Wise to Cyril of Tver. This letter, written around 1415, not only contains most interesting biographical material, but also gives its readers a startlingly vivid portrayal of Theophanes, skilfully described by a man who had personally communicated with the great artist. Epiphanius’ letter stands out among fifteenth-century documents as being of paramount importance, testifying to a subtle understanding of artistic phenomena and providing observations on the working process of the painter.

Epiphanius was a hieromonk, possibly a former monk of the Trinity-Sergius Monastery, who lived in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries (he died around 1420). He must have been a very educated scholar, given that his contemporaries honoured his literary talent by awarding him the epithet – “the Wise”.

This article addresses a number of questions concerning the artist’s personality and his emigration to Russia, and investigates his philosophical convictions in possible reference to the hesychast<sup>1</sup> movement, as well as presenting an image of Theophanes as a philosopher and discussing his influence on Russian art.

Unfortunately, only a very few paintings by Theophanes survive today, as a result of constant fires in medieval Russia, destructive wars (especially World War II), and frequent rebuilding of churches. Nevertheless, despite the small number of surviving works,<sup>2</sup> Theophanes’ artistic legacy is considered to be an intrinsic part of Russian cultural heritage.

## 2. Russianized Greek

From the letter of Epiphanius the Wise, we learn that, prior to his arrival in Novgorod, Theophanes was already a famous painter, who had completed the painting of “about forty churches”. Even if we are dealing here with the characteristic exaggeration of a fifteenth-century writer, it is still clear that Theophanes was an extraordinarily prolific artist, and therefore his frescoes in Novgorod and the Deësis<sup>3</sup> row of the iconostasis of Moscow’s Annunciation Cathedral must represent only a small proportion of his works. The chronicler wrote:

When I was in Moscow, there was a glorious sage, a clever philosopher, Theophanes the Greek, an experienced book isographer and an excellent painter among the icon painters, who had painted with his own hand more than forty different stone churches in various cities: in Constantinople and in Chalcedon [*Bithynian, now Turkey*], and in Galata [*an area of Constantinople*], and in Kaffa [*Feodosiya, Crimea*], and in Great Novgorod, and in Nizhny [*Novgorod*] ...<sup>4</sup>

Due to the absence of other sources than the letter quoted above, it is nearly impossible to verify this list. But according to the information given by Epiphanius, we are able to quite accurately restore the biography of Theophanes the Greek. The most probable date of his birth is the third decade of the fourteenth century. This conclusion is based on the fact that, before arriving in Novgorod, where Theophanes certainly was in 1378, he had already painted over forty churches and consequently he must have been middle-aged. Different researchers have various ideas about the painting school from which the artist may have originated. There is no definitive answer, but most scholars believe that Theophanes could only have been trained in Constantinople, because of the freedom of his artistic expression and colour scheme. His refined and dynamic artistic style of painting can be compared with Early Palaiologan art – for example, in the mosaics of the Church

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<sup>1</sup> Hesychia (gr. ἡσυχία) or silent meditation.

<sup>2</sup> Epiphanius the Wise mentions numerous works of the artist in fresco and icon painting, and illuminated manuscripts.

<sup>3</sup> Gr. δέησις – literary: “prayer” or “supplication”. The row of icons placed on the extension of the templon till the full separation of the altar from the naos in Russian Orthodox churches.

<sup>4</sup> The full text of the letter is available in original Old Russian: Выписано из послания иеромонаха Епифания, писавшего к некоему другу своему Кириллу, with a contemporary Russian translation: Письмо Епифания Премудрого к Кириллу Тверскому, on the website of the Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House). URL: <http://lib2.pushkinskijdom.ru/tabid-4992>.

of the Saviour in Chora (Kahriye Camii, present-day Turkey) or Peribleptos Monastery, Mystras (present-day Greece).

By the second half of the fourteenth century, Palaeologan art was noticeably declining, and the school of Constantinople was no exception. Most hypotheses regarding this decline of Byzantine art in the late Palaeologan era point to the hesychast controversy between the supporters of Gregory Palamas and Barlaam as the cause of the ideological crisis in the middle of the fourteenth century. Ultimately, the gloomy monastic worldview of the hesychasts defeated the early-century Palaeologan neo-Hellenism, defended by Barlaam. According to Mikhail Alpatov, hesychasm undermined, and eventually eliminated, the development of the free-flourishing philosophical schools of the capital.<sup>5</sup> Could this be the reason for Theophanes' emigration to Russia, or was it because the declining and crumbling Empire could no longer afford the expense of large architectural projects? One will never know for certain.

For whichever reason, Theophanes left the centre of Constantinople and moved to Galata and then to Kaffa. It is worth noting that both cities belonged to the Genoese Republic and were mainly controlled by the rich maritime trade communities. In the 1360s' rapid growth of the Genoese colonies attracted traders, craftsmen and artists from all around the Black Sea to Kaffa. Theophanes is likely to have had close interaction with the Genoese in Galata and may therefore have subsequently been invited to Kaffa. At that time, he may have studied or even worked with Italian masters of the Proto-Renaissance, who may also have been invited by the Genoese. Unfortunately, there are no traces of Theophanes' works in Galata and Kaffa. Since Kaffa had developed trade routes with the Russian principalities, it seems most likely that merchants from Novgorod, after seeing Theophanes' works, invited the artist to paint the churches in their city, and as the result the Church of the Transfiguration of the Saviour on Ilyina Street was painted by the master in 1378.

Epiphanius' letter claims that Theophanes also worked in Nizhny Novgorod, but there is no evidence of his works there. The chronicler gives not the slightest hint as to the duration of the artist's stay in any of the cities mentioned. What is certain is that the painter moved to Moscow in the last decade of the fourteenth century or the early years of the fifteenth century. And it was in Moscow that Theophanes found the most extensive field for his creativity, due to the fact that Metropolitan Cyprian<sup>6</sup> was a passionate Grecophile and gave his complete support to the painter. In Moscow Theophanes was evidently overloaded with orders. He painted most of the churches of Moscow's Kremlin: the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin in 1395, the Archangel Cathedral in 1399 where he "depicted the city", and the Cathedral of the Annunciation in 1405 where he worked on the theme of "the Tree of Jesse" and scenes from the Apocalypse. He also carried out a number of private royal orders, including a wall painting with a depiction of Moscow in the palace of

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<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Alpatov, *The Art of Theophanes the Greek and the Teachings of the Hesychasts* [Искусство Феофана Грека и Учение Исихастов], *Byzantine Calendar*, vol. 33, ed. Moscow University, pp. 190–202.

<sup>6</sup> Saint Cyprian, Russian Kiprian (c. 1336, Bulgaria–died 15th century), was the metropolitan of Moscow in 1381-82 and 1390-1406. Educated in Greece, Cyprian was appointed by Constantinople to be the metropolitan of Kiev and Lithuania in 1375 and then of Moscow in 1381.

Vladimir Andreyevich the Bold (1353-1410),<sup>7</sup> and paintings in the terem<sup>8</sup> of Grand Duke Vasily I Dmitriyevich<sup>9</sup> which were described by Epiphanius as works of “unprecedented beauty”.

In his epistle, Epiphanius also described the artist as an “experienced isographer”. Hence, one can conclude that the artist was not only a fresco and icon painter, but was also engaged in the decoration of manuscripts. Epiphanius described an image of part of the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, which Theophanes sketched at Epiphanius’ request on a separate sheet to be inserted in the flyleaves of his bible.

There is no information on the date of Theophanes’ death. The last note about him goes back to 1405, when the artist was already of advanced years. In 1415, Epiphanius spoke of Theophanes in the past tense – “there lived ...” – and therefore it can be presumed that the artist died between 1405 and 1415. Neither do Moscow’s chronicles say anything about the last years of the life of this “Russianized” Greek. Mikhail Alpatov suggested that he may have returned to one of the monasteries on Mount Athos,<sup>10</sup> but there are no Greek sources to confirm it.

These are the short undoubted data on the biography of Theophanes. He was one of those great Byzantine emigrants, along with Doménikos Theotokópoulos,<sup>11</sup> the last brilliant Greek painter, who achieved the realization of his talent in a foreign land. Both of these masters received abroad the surname “Greek”, and were estimated equally as philosophers<sup>12</sup> and painters and as people of exceptional intelligence and wisdom.

### 3. The light of transfiguration in the works of Theophanes

Epiphanius’ imaginative praise of the artist for his wisdom – “glorious sage, extremely clever philosopher”<sup>13</sup> – literally classifies Theophanes in the rank of the religious and theological elite of his century. Nikita Goleizovsky<sup>14</sup> concludes that, for the Byzantine rite, theology was primary while art was a derivative –that is, the theologians were the givers while the artists were the receivers,<sup>15</sup> but in many cases, one can observe that the artist could be a philosopher whereas there is no record of a philosopher being a practising artist. Viktor Lazarev<sup>16</sup> outlines the “fundamental stylistic breakpoint” in Byzantine art from the end of the tenth to the twelfth century, leading to the “sequential spiritualization of the visual forms”. The mystical ideas of post-

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<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Andreyevich the Bold (1353-1410) was the prince of the Serpukhov-Borovsky district, the grandson of Ivan Kalita and his cousin Dimitri Donskoy. The boyars and the metropolitan fixed the relations between two cousins by an agreement, according to which Vladimir Andreyevich became the younger brother of Demetrius, despite being of similar age, and he recognized the supremacy of Dimitri Donskoy.

<sup>8</sup> Teremnon (Greek: τέρεμνον) means a chamber or abode. Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime*, Charles Scribner, New York, 1974, p. 205.

<sup>9</sup> Vasily I Dmitriyevich, Grand Prince of Moscow 1389-1425, was the heir of Dmitry Donskoy (r. 1359-1389).

<sup>10</sup> Mikhail Alpatov, *Theophanes the Greek* [Феофан Грек], ed. Izobrazitelnoe Iskusstvo, Moscow, 1979, web copy 2007, Stavropol.

<sup>11</sup> Doménikos Theotokópoulos (Δομήνικος Θεοτοκόπουλος) known as El Greco (1541-1614).

<sup>12</sup> Pacheco writes about Theotokópoulos: “He was a great philosopher” 2; 2F. Sanchez Canton, *Fuentes literarias para la historia del Arte espanol*, II, Madrid, p. 193.

<sup>13</sup> «преславный мудрокъ, зѣло философ хитръ, Феофан, гречин».

<sup>14</sup> Nikita Goleizovsky, *Hesychasm and Russian Painting of the XIV–XV Centuries*. [Исихазм и русская живопись XIV–XV вв.], *Byzantine Calendar*, Vol. 29, ed. Moscow University, 1968, p. 199.

<sup>15</sup> Mikhail Alpatov, *The Art of Theophanes the Greek and the Teaching of the Hesychasts in Byzantine*, *Byzantine Calendar*, Vol. 33, ed. Moscow University, 1972, p. 195.

<sup>16</sup> Viktor Lazarev, *Sketches about Theophanes the Greek*. *Byzantine Calendar*, Vol. 9, ed. Moscow University, 1953, pp. 193–209.

iconoclasm, endorsed earlier by John of Damascus and the Cappadocian Fathers, gave the Byzantine and then the Slavic artists rich material for stylistic interpretations. The contemplative nature of the ideas of an “unseen reality” was more accessible for visual than for poetic experimentation. The basic element of the visual challenges was the doctrine of grace, which became the connective tissue between humankind and manifestations of the divine; in other words, artists were expected to show the transfigured human body.

According to this idea, the bodily structure should be used as the façade due to its physical visual properties, but the content should be replaced with a subtle substance. During deification (or theosis), the human body does not lose its earthly nature, as Augustine of Hippo proclaimed: “*corpora carnis habitura substantiam*”.<sup>17</sup> An imperishable person would be surrounded by the known world, where the essence of each object would be manifested by the movement of energy and where each form would reveal the effect of grace.<sup>18</sup> According to the teachings of the Byzantine mystics, a single source of light (grace) transmitted to a man was placed inside him and this divine light could be perceived.<sup>19</sup> Gregory Palamas asserts that this divine light is immaterial and inexpressible but that it nevertheless manifests itself not only spiritually but also visually as, for example, the glory shining from the face of Moses or the light on Mount Tabor on the occasion of the Transfiguration of the Lord, as seen by the eyes of the apostles. Palamas summarizes:

God Himself makes the Apostles able to see His light through their spirit (nous), not outside the body, but in the body: The light, then, became accessible to their eyes, but to eyes which saw in a way superior to that of natural sight, and had acquired the spiritual power of the spiritual light. This mysterious light, inaccessible, immaterial, uncreated, deifying, eternal, this radiance of the Divine Nature, this glory of the divinity, this beauty of the heavenly kingdom, is at once accessible to sense perception and yet transcends it.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, the pictorial interpretation of light provided only an earthly “created” image of an immaterial prototype. Ideally, this image related to the artist’s personal spiritual experience.

Unlike Palamas, St Gregory of Sinai<sup>21</sup> emphasizes the change not in metaphysical properties, but in the properties of real flesh, as a result of a primarily subjective free action will. Other Byzantine mystics of the fourteenth century, but not Gregory of Sinai, fall into the category of the predecessors or followers of Palamas. After the victory of the hesychast doctrine, all the territories of the Byzantine Empire followed Palamite dominance and only the Slavic principalities and Russia adopted the ideas of Gregory of Sinai. The Barlaam-Palamite disputes became known in Russia only in the second quarter of the fourteenth century.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> PL, Vol. 41, col. 396.

<sup>18</sup> Goleizovsky, *Hesychasm and Russian Painting of the XIV–XV Centuries*, p. 199.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory Palamas, PG, t. 150, col. 1083. “He who has been rewarded with the light ... connects the mind to the body and transmits multiple evidences of divine beauty, reconciling the divine grace and the weakness of the flesh and flesh is capable of perceiving this.”

<sup>20</sup> Palamas, *Hyper tōn hierōs hesychazontōn* 3.1.23.

<sup>21</sup> Gregory of Sinai (1260s–1346), teacher of Gregory Palamas and the forerunner of hesychasm on Mount Athos in the early 14th century. He was the first “Bulgarian and Serb teacher of deeds” according to the legend. We cannot know about Palamas, only two insignificant works of his being mentioned, which are not directly related to his theory of hesychia. Old Russian writers seem to avoid quoting Palamas. Even mentions of his name by ancient Russian scribes are extremely rare (they testify only to the official cult of Palamas on Mount Athos).

<sup>22</sup> Viktor Lazarev, Andrei Rublev and his School, *History of Russian Art*, vol. III. Moscow/Leningrad, 1955, pp. 108–112.

According to Viktor Lazarev, hesychasm, “having become an official teaching of the church ... quickly degenerated into a dogma, deeply hostile to any individual interpretations”.<sup>23</sup> Defending himself against his attackers, Palamas found it necessary to apply scholastic methods himself, thereby provoking the dogmatism in his teaching which reigned in Byzantium after his death. These dogmatic restrictions turned out to be disastrous for Byzantine painting and were internally alien to the teaching of Gregory of Sinai; nevertheless, the Palamists can hardly take the sole responsibility for the decline of the art of the Palaeologan dynasty.

First of all, it is necessary to remind oneself of the fact, ignored by many historians and scholars, that hesychasm was not born in the fourteenth century. The doctrine of the hesychasts popularized by Gregory Palamas and which triumphed over his opponents in the middle of the fourteenth century was an ancient and central phenomenon of all the Eastern religions, Christianity being no exception. The Palamas-Barlaam dispute was used more for political than ideological purposes, which is why many true hesychasts, such as Gregory of Sinai, refused to take part.

Theophanes, being contemporary to these events, could not have remained unaffected by the greatest ideological crisis of his time. The true position of the artist regarding the Barlaam-Palamas dispute cannot be known, though Lazarev has expressed the certainty that the painter was deeply dissatisfied with the hesychasts’ teachings and practices.<sup>24</sup> But it is easy to notice that the characters of Theophanes the Greek are based on the idea of the absolute triumph of spirit over matter and his interpretation inevitably leads to a dramatic clash of two timeless forces: the active spiritual principle – light; and the passive, dark principle, personifying the “old” (corrupted) human soul and flesh, this clash reflected in hesychast doctrine.

The artistic qualities of Theophanes’ paintings cast doubt over the idea of “the rigid scheme” of the evolution of Byzantine painting in the first half of the fourteenth century and its sudden decline in the second half of the same century in relation to the triumph of hesychasm. In Byzantino-Russian icon painting, heavily influenced by hesychasm, the faces were laden with emotional experiences and psychological tension and were portrayed with great subtlety and depth. This demonstrates how the hesychasts drew attention to the personality of the characters and made space for the independent development by the artist of the doctrine of perfection.<sup>25</sup>

It has been noted that the theme of the Transfiguration became extremely popular in Russia during this period, and consequently many newly constructed churches were dedicated to the Feast of the Transfiguration. A client of Theophanes the Greek, the boyar Vasily Danilovich, who, like many other Novgorod merchants, would have been well-educated for his time, was patron of the Church of the Transfiguration on Ilyina Street. Curiosity may have motivated him to invite the artist from the school of Constantinople to create the authentic visuals, known only by hearsay in Russia. Theophanes, in his turn, may have been attracted by the unique opportunity of free and creative work in the ancient city, where he produced a large monumental series of paintings. Perhaps the reason for Theophanes being invited first to Novgorod and not directly to Moscovite Russia was that, during these years, the construction of the stone Kremlin in Moscow was only in its initial stages while Novgorod needed experienced and skilful painters.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>24</sup> Viktor Lazarev, *Theophanes the Greek and His School* [Феофан Грек и его школа], *Iskusstvo*, Moscow, 1961, p. 29.

<sup>25</sup> Goleizovsky, *Hesychasm and Russian Painting of the XIV–XV Centuries*, p. 210.

Theophanes was not the only historically known foreigner to be invited to the Russian principality, the ruling princes having a need to immortalize in stone their military victories over the Golden Horde and having sufficient funds to do so, thanks to the rising economy.

#### 4. Expressionist painter

The characteristics of Theophanes' painting were close in spirit to the rebellious spirit of the Novgorodians.<sup>26</sup> The principality was able to offer *carte blanche* to the painter and valued his talent. The Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street is the only monument to have been undoubtedly decorated by Theophanes the Greek and the author of this article based her research on this masterpiece. The swift brush strokes and expressive outlines are still impressive to every viewer at a distance of centuries. Every depiction in his paintings is an explosion of emotions: the highlights of a Stylite's beard resembling the tumbling of waterfalls, or the pleats of garments depicted like arrows shooting in all directions (see the robe of St Olympius the Stylite).<sup>27</sup> It can be observed that the viewer's gaze follows the swift brush of the artist, such a fast-sketching technique being totally unknown even in Byzantine fresco painting. Theophanes managed to convey the impression of a fresh, even sometimes unfinished, painting, reminiscent of the ink drawings of Far Eastern artists. He finishes these paintings with the illumination of light strokes, giving the impression of movement. His contemporaries observed that he appeared to be "painting with a broom", in reference to his broad strokes, but the skilled experienced artist used small fine brushes for the faces of the characters and large flat brushes only for the garments. The figures of the Stylites (Simeon Junior and Senior, Olympius, Daniel, etc.) illumined by heavenly light resemble lit candles, burning through the ghostly shell of flesh until the body is totally absorbed in light, as in the image of St Macarius of Egypt.<sup>28</sup> Theophanes' characters are admirable but almost incomprehensible, their individual faces seeming austere and unapproachable. They are messengers from the unknowable spiritual world enlightened by beauty and perfection. Light played the major role in Theophanes' compositions, becoming his signature style, in contrast to Rublev's icons, where there are no sharp reflections and the ochre colour is replaced by *sankir*.<sup>29</sup>

The extreme contrast of light and shade, and the bold powerful drawing with large agitated lines in the images of faces and draperies, were noticeable deviations from the Byzantine-classical schemes, while at the same time the gradual building up of the thinnest coats of lighter layers of ochre belongs to the Byzantine tradition. The first thing that catches the eye of the viewer is the subordination of the whole composition to one colour (a silvery orange-purple), which is unusual for Novgorod paintings. Theophanes used neutral colours for the background; he put terracotta colours on the first layer and then lightened it with shades of ochre, finishing with the dark shadows and very graphic highlights. The dark shadows were probably added at the end.

During the recent restoration of the Church of the Transfiguration, the part of the frescoes which had been untouched by fire was discovered. The newly cleaned painting looks much

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<sup>26</sup> Here two facts deserve be mentioned: in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Novgorod opposed in the heretical Russian sect, the "strigolniki", who revolted against the politics of the official Church and ecclesiastical hierarchy and rejected the Old Testament. Nowadays researchers classify them as the first reformers. The Novgorodians were looked down on, since they had not sent their military troops to the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380.

<sup>27</sup> See figure N°6.

<sup>28</sup> See figure N°7.

<sup>29</sup> *Sankir* – Old Russian *санкиръ*, gr. *σαρκινος* – "fleshly, flesh, body" – in Byzantine and Russian icon painting – the main undertone of the skin color of the characters; in Western European painting, the concept of *sankira* corresponds to underpainting.

brighter in colour, which logically leads to the conclusion that the colour scheme of Theophanes' frescoes changed as a result of fire.

In comparison with the frescoes of the famous Manuel Panselinos,<sup>30</sup> Theophanes' wall painting style is a phenomenon for Palaeologan art. Panselinos makes the heads on his frescoes look highly realistic, yet they give the impression of a still mask. Panselinos' technique is dense and pasty, the brush movements are smooth and slow; his style was undoubtedly borrowed later by Proto-Renaissance Italian artists. By contrast, the heads in Theophanes' frescoes are sketchy, ethereal, almost ghostly, yet they are imbued with movement and bubbling with life.

The precious letter of Epiphanius contains a precise description of the working process of Theophanes the Greek:

When he drew or painted all this, no one saw him looking at samples, as some of our icon painters do, who, due to their lack of understanding, constantly stare at them, moving their gaze from here to there, and not painting much with the paints but looking for samples; it seemed as though someone else was writing [*not Theophanes*], painting with his hands, creating the image, standing tirelessly on his feet, talking with visitors with his tongue, but with his mind pondering something distant and wise, because with his wise and sensitive eyes he saw the palpable beauty.<sup>31</sup>

No examples similar to the painting style of Theophanes in the Byzantine art of this period having been found, the works of the local Novgorodian painters should be looked at. André Grabar has suggested that the free interpretation of canonical iconographic themes was previously and locally adopted by the Novgorodian artists. He mentions the Church of the Assumption in Volotovo, dated 1351–1360/63. The decoration of this church was previously credited to Theophanes the Greek himself, or to his student, but a close analysis finally attributed the works to an unknown painter, who lived before Theophanes. The author admits that this is still a hypothesis but two other churches – the Church of St. Theodore Stratelates on the Brook and the Church of St. Panteleimon in Nerezi near Skopje – were decorated in the twelfth century, two centuries before the works of Theophanes.

A range of icons and manuscripts have also been attributed to Theophanes, but none of these was signed by the hand of the master. Grabar in his short article proposed three

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<sup>30</sup> Panselinos' wall-paintings (ca. 1300) of the Church of the Dormition of the Virgin Protaton, Mount Athos, are considered to be the finest samples of Palaeologan art, later copied by the monks. His works are close to the Macedonian school.

<sup>31</sup> Author's translation, original text: «Сия же вся егда назнаменуяшу ему или пишушу, никогда же нигдѣ же на образцы видяще его когда взирающа, яко же нѣцѣи наши творят иконописцы, иже недоумѣния наполнишася присно приницающе, очима мещуще, сѣмо и овамо, не толма образуяще шарми, елико нудяхуся на образ часто взирающе; но мняшеся яко иному пишушу, рукама убо изообразуя писаше, ногама же бес покоя стояше, языком же бесѣдуя с приходящими глаголаше, а умом дальная и разумная обгадываше, чувственныма бо очима разумныма разумную видяше доброту си...» URL: <http://lib2.pushkinskijdom.ru/tabid-4992>. This description can be compared with the notes of the art, left by another contemporary of Theophanes, Nikolas Kabasilas (1322–1392), who was obviously an adherent of hesychasm: “for the painters contemplate the samples making their own masterpiece, and everyone knows that this happens not only to painters, but also to the sculptors, and to any craftsmen. And if there was an opportunity to contemplate the artist's soul with the eyes, you would see the same house, or a statue, or any other work, but only without the substance.” Николай Кавасила. *Семь слов о жизни во Христе*. Nikolai Kavasila. *Seven Words About Life in Christ*. Moscow, 1874, pp. 113–114. Author's translation. The hesychasts fully embraced the doctrine of icons, which merged for them with the doctrine of divine energy, as according to them the true artist became not a mindless copyist, but an artist-creator who creates directly from divine inspiration, as if he was contemplating them inside. The letter of Epiphanius does not give any hint of Theophanes the Greek's opinion about the hesychasts' doctrine.



hypotheses regarding the problem of authorship, which are discussed in the next section of this paper.<sup>32</sup>

##### 5. Problems of attribution: Impact on Russian painters

If all the works of Theophanes the Greek mentioned by the chronicler Epiphanius were to have survived, the artist would undoubtedly have been considered a central figure of fourteenth-century art. But even with those masterpieces which do remain, accidentally preserved and with very few of them actually signed by the master, the work of Theophanes strikes anyone with the strength of its emotional impact. Novgorodians liked the works of Theophanes the Greek mainly for their rebellious and realistic aspects, and Moscovites for the depth of the psychological interpretation of the characters and their artistic perfection. The artistic approach of Theophanes the Greek can be likened to that of the expressionists, where:

the artist seeks to depict not objective reality but rather the subjective emotions and responses that objects and events arouse within a person. The artist accomplishes this aim through distortion, exaggeration, primitivism, and fantasy and through the vivid, jarring, violent, or dynamic application of formal elements.<sup>33</sup>

We need to admit that Rublev's hermits in the frescoes of the Cathedral of the Assumption are significantly inferior in strength of character to those of Theophanes' Stylites.

Grabar concludes his short cornerstone article by considering the problem of authorship,<sup>34</sup> and his hypotheses appear to me definitive, clear and fair. For judging the authenticity of the original works, art historians have only:

- (1) the genuine mural painting in Novgorod;
- (2) two icons and several contouring drawings, probably going back to his initial sketch;
- (3) a number of other icons and miniatures traditionally added to Theophanes' art heritage.

The absence of clear signatures or cross references, confirming the authenticity of the works, makes the attribution very spurious and doubtful. The style and technique of the icons and miniatures attributed to Theophanes are not strikingly similar to those of the frescoes of the Church of the Transfiguration, even taking into account the change of artistic medium.<sup>35</sup>

The iconostasis of the Cathedral of the Annunciation was done by a team of artists and craftsmen. Three painters<sup>36</sup> were mentioned, including Theophanes, and so it is impossible to know which part of the paintings was done by Theophanes.<sup>37</sup> There is also no valid proof that the iconostasis was produced in 1405. Viktor Lazarev<sup>38</sup> argues with André Grabar, defending the

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<sup>32</sup> André Grabar, A Few Notes on the Art of Theophanes the Greek [Несколько заметок об искусстве Феофана Грека], *Kazan Museum News*, No. 1, Kazan, 1922, pp. 83–90.

<sup>33</sup> Article: Expressionism. artistic style, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Expressionism>, accessed: 6 February 2021.

<sup>34</sup> André Grabar, A Few Notes on the Art of Theophanes the Greek.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>36</sup> Theophanes the Greek, Prokhor of Gorodets and Andrei Rublev were mentioned in the Trinity Chronicle. See note 42.

<sup>37</sup> André Grabar, A Few Notes on the Art of Theophanes the Greek, p. 88

<sup>38</sup> Lazarev, Sketches about Theophanes the Greek; Lazarev, Theophanes the Greek and His School, *Iskusstvo*.

attribution, assuming that the icons of the Cathedral of the Annunciation could have had the new stylistic features: figures with smooth silhouettes. The rhythm of lines is softer and smoother, Lazarev asserting that these new characteristics were developed by the artist on account of his long stay in Russia and his evident close communication with the Moscovite school of painting. Grabar<sup>39</sup> concludes clearly:

it even seems to me that there are the icons which are much closer in technique and style to Theophanes' frescoes in Novgorod than any of the icons of the iconostasis of the Cathedral of the Annunciation (for example, "The Assumption" on the back of "Our Lady of the Don"). This icon rather reduces the chances of attribution of these iconostasis icons to Theophanes. What if he did not paint any icons in the Cathedral of the Annunciation at all? Or if his icons are not among those that have been preserved?

There are also different opinions regarding the connection of Andrei Rublev and Theophanes the Greek. For a long time Rublev was considered to be the direct apprentice of Theophanes, but the fact that both artists were mentioned equally in the Trinity Chronicle<sup>40</sup> clearly shows that, by the time of the construction of the Cathedral of the Annunciation, Rublev was already a painter of repute. Rublev must have already been a trained master<sup>41</sup> by then, for otherwise he would not have been included in such an important work.

Theophanes the Greek was like a comet appearing on the horizon during the peak of early medieval Russian art, manifesting a previously unattainable level of creative interpretation and artistic skills, and then disappearing, possibly returning to his motherland at the end of his life. Epiphanius describes the painter as an independent creator who did not copy existing samples, a sage and an attentive interlocutor. He firmly entered into the history of Russian art, not as a transitory foreign artist, but as a painter who dedicated over thirty years of his life to Russia. For Russian culture, Theophanes was primarily a thinker, the depth of his knowledge and interests helping many Russian artists to take a fresh look at the role and significance of art, which ultimately led to a remarkable rise of Russian painting in the fifteenth century.

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<sup>39</sup> André Grabar, A Few Notes on the Art of Theophanes the Greek, p. 86.

<sup>40</sup> The Trinity Chronicle is a chronicle collection of the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, written on parchment, named after the Trinity-Sergius Monastery, where it was preserved. The chronicle was partly copied, but the original was lost in the fire of Moscow in 1812 (at the time of Napoleon's invasion).

<sup>41</sup> Moscow had their own school of painting. Grabar clearly names Prokhor of Gorodets as Rublev's mentor.

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## Appendix

1. *The Trinity*. Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina [Elijah] Street (1378)
  2. *The Trinity*, detail. The figure of the central angel, traditionally interrelated as the depiction of the son – Jesus Christ. Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street
  3. *Christ Pantocrator*, Detail of the fresco painted on the dome.  
Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street, Russia, 1378
  4. *Detail of Christ's face*.  
Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street
  5. *Figures of three stylites: Simeon Junior, Simeon Senior and Olympius*. South wall of the choir chamber of the chapel. Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street
  6. *Olympius the Stylite*. Detail of the fresco.  
Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street
  7. *St. Macarius of Alexandria*.  
Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street
  8. *Simon the Older the Stylite, face detail*.  
Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street
  9. *View of the corner paintings of the south and west walls of the chapel*.  
Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street
  10. *Seraphim* (heb. – “the burning ones”)  
Left: fresco of Theophanes the Greek, Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street  
Right: Hagia Sophia mosaic, 9<sup>th</sup> century, flanks of the central dome (uncovered at Hagia Sophia Museum in 2009) Istanbul, Turkey
- \*All pictures are from author's archives.



1. *The Trinity*. Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina [Elijah] Street (1378)



2. *The Trinity*, detail. The figure of the central angel, traditionally interrelated as the depiction of the son – Jesus Christ. Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street



3. *Christ Pantocrator*, Detail of the fresco painted on the dome. Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street, Russia, 1378



4. *Detail of Christ's face*. Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street



5. *Figures of three stylites: Simeon Junior, Simeon Senior and Olympius.* South wall of the choir chamber of the chapel. Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street



6. *Olympius the Stylite.* Detail of the fresco. Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street



7. *St. Macarius of Alexandria*. Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street



8. *Simon the Older the Stylite, face detail*. Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street



9. *View of the corner paintings of the south and west walls of the chapel.*  
Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street



10. *Seraphim* (heb. – “the burning ones”).

Left: fresco of Theophanes the Greek, Church of the Transfiguration on Novgorod's Ilyina Street

Right: Hagia Sophia mosaic, 9<sup>th</sup> century, flanks of the central dome (uncovered at Hagia Sophia Museum in 2009) Istanbul, Turkey

