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From Heaven to Earth: perceptions of reality in icon painting

This article examines the emergence of an interest in the natural world and its rendering in art towards the end of the Byzantine period and up to the sixteenth century. Firstly, some literary works, known as *ekphraseis*, are discussed. They praise the depiction of nature in what are most probably Western works of art, whereas other writings, such as the Homilies of Symeon Bishop of Thessaloniki condemn naturalism in art as heresy. Everyone's opinions were affected on the one hand by the amazement Byzantine scholars felt on seeing the art of the Early Renaissance and on the other by the ideological arguments about the Union of the Churches.

Then selected examples will be used to examine how the Byzantine artists themselves enhanced their painting with expressions of human emotions and aspects of the real world. This often involved using Western models, which not only stimulated artists to confront reality as a subject for art but legitimized the practice.

Finally, new iconographic subjects introduce the world of mortals into works of religious art, in order to reinforce their didactic message. The Thebaid, a favourite subject from this period on, depicts the everyday occupations of the monks in order to extol their earthly paradise. Two icons with the rare subject of preaching attempt to chasten viewers through their unmitigated directness. One illustrates the content of a sermon and the other depicts the very moment a homily was being preached in an Orthodox church. They have in common the fact that they contrast the world of the pious with that of the sinners and, using the threat of Hell and the Day of Judgment, try to teach the viewer. Both works, though in the form of icons, have moved away from the usual meanings conveyed by Byzantine images. They are products of a society in whose religious life preaching played an important part. In Venetian Crete the sermon was really the main means through which not only the mendicants but Orthodox preachers too attempted to proselytize and to ensure that their interdenominational audiences remained in the bosom of their respective churches. But such works were exceptions and did not prove to have a future in Orthodox religious art.