

Twentieth Century Developments in European Icon-painting

In the first half on the twentieth century icon-painting in Europe - especially in France and Czechoslovakia where many Russian theologians and some iconographers lived, and also in Greece - underwent a resurgence, which has been called the icon's renaissance. Leonid Ouspensky (1902-1987), an iconographer and a celebrated author on the theology of the icon, painted in Paris in the same group with Gregory Kroug (1909-1969) and Sister Joanna Reitlinger (1898-1988) who left Russia immediately after the revolution. They are so-called Russian "revivalists." In addition to Paris, on the initiative of the Czechoslovakian President Thomas Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937), Prague sheltered a part of the Russian intellectuals who were forced to flee their country in early 1930's. Around Uspenie Memorial Church and The Kondakov Institute, both in Prague, artists, among them iconographers such as Kiril Katkov, gathered. Russian intelligentsia of the time there was a debate whether their style of icon painting constituted a survival of the pre-Revolutionary peasant iconographic tradition, or a revival. Mostly, as Kotkavaara that "it constituted a revival and not a survival", but Pimen Sofronov's icon-painting school in Rakovica Monastery, Yugoslavia was a continuation of the mediaeval Russian tradition.

In Greece Photios Kontoglou (1896-1965) urged his fellow iconographers to paint in a style much closer to the original Byzantine. The phenomenon of return to what was called by the ecclesiastical authorities of the time "the Byzantine style of icon-painting" took place in Romania, but much earlier than it happened in Greece or in the Russian Diaspora. It began with a Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1889, and it was a reaction to Gheorghe Tăttărescu's style of painting. Tăttărescu studied in Italy between 1845 and 1851 and on his arrival back he painted churches in a Mannerist style reminiscent of the Italian Renaissance. He was also a professor at the School of Fine Arts in Bucharest, where he promoted his style of painting. After his death in 1894, the Church authorities began white-washing his frescoes and urged people to remove from their homes icons written in that style.

The paper attempts to ascertain if there is any connection among these developments, and at the moment the answer seems to be negative. But future research may succeed in discovering new evidence to substantiate such a link.