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Martyrs, Prophets, Monks

Calendar Icons in the Collection of St Catherine's Monastery at Sinai (11th-12th Centuries)

The author discusses four groups of Byzantine calendar icons kept in the collection of St Catherine's monastery at Mt Sinai, each differing from the others according to format, number of panels, and in its visual approach to the menologion imagery. The result is a strong sense of distinction between the icons, perhaps suggestive of their different functions. A set of four panels which once formed part of a hexptych is particularly intriguing. This calendar cycle was made by the Georgian painter Ioannes (John) in the second half of the 11th-early 12th century. These icons were originally placed at the center of a polyptych, flanked by an icon of the Last Judgment on the right side, and a second panel containing a unique combination of five miraculous icons of the Virgin and a narrative cycle dedicated to the Miracles and Passions of Christ on the left. Every image of the calendar series stands for three months of the year and combines around 90 scenes. All martyrs are represented at the moment of their death, while other saints are depicted standing front-on bearing attributes. This contribution offers new insights into the nature of painted hagiographical cycles and different approaches applied for calendar imagery in Byzantine panel painting. It is argued that book illumination developed in parallel with the calendar icon tradition and clear links can be drawn between the menologion imagery in these two media. The unique style and approach of the painter Ioannes opens up possibilities for deciphering the mysterious world of Byzantine art making, the process of devising new kind of imagery, and the embedding of new meanings into well-known compositions. A detailed analysis of this important group of icons can help to unveil the different connections among book illumination, icon painting, and church decoration, as well as provide an almost endless supply of images of saints, some of which are unique or possess very few representations in the surviving corpus of Byzantine art.