

Maria Bergamo

**Between Apophatic and Epiphanic:
Reflections on the Iconographer and the Artist, from Cretan *madonneri*
to Russian Mystics**

The reflections presented here refer to the painting *Martyrium of Saint Paraskevi* by Michail **Damaskinòs**, dated 1605 and kept at the Kanelloupuolos Museum in Athens. In the midst of a vibrant crowd created in a clear mannerist matrix, the figure of the saint stands out as a perfect icon. Her hieratic face against the two-dimensional halo creates an interruption, and opens a metahistorical and metaphysical gash: she is a “dissimilar figure” which, as Dionysius the Areopagite says “much more than those for homogeneity of nature, lifts our minds up”, and raises questions. In the first part of the text, an attempt is made to contextualize the painting by placing it in relation to the production of the *madonneri* workshops on Crete, and producing the relative artistic historiography. As a subject of a great critical debate on stylistic “hybridism”, on the division between ‘Greek’ and ‘Latin’ manner, this work needs to be looked at in a different way, shifting the judgment from the merely ‘artistic’ level towards a more complex hermeneutics, which takes into account the ontological status of the image itself. In fact, the form does not disregard the content, and this dialectic, entirely internal to the icon, is all the more interesting as it is consubstantial with the radically antinomian character of the Christian faith in the Incarnation. In the central part, the text focuses on the different dimensions in which the Christian sacred image is projected from its origins: iconoclasm, the search for orthodoxy and the continuous reflections of the fathers and theologians are born from the intrinsic theophanic and transfiguring power of art. This is the link that leads to the questioning of the apophatic act, of retraction, of the author and of his own personality. The reference to the theoretical writings of important modern artists, and the comparison with mystical literature, enable us to understand how obedience to the traditional corpus becomes for the author a real investiture, the responsibility of guaranteeing the epiphanic value of art: it makes itself invisible so that the Invisible becomes visible. This ambiguous role, between norm and freedom, creation and subtraction, also challenge the contemporaneity which generates the last part of this essay.