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TRANSCENDENT AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE OF RELIGIOUS ART IN EASTERN ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY: ICONOGRAPHY, RITUAL, AND PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract. Religious art, particularly Eastern Orthodox Christian iconography and liturgical practice, plays a crucial role in shaping the spiritual and aesthetic experience of believers. This paper examines how religious art is perceived on a subjective level, analysing the interplay of aesthetic, cognitive, emotional, and transcendent elements. Grounded in the Orthodox tradition, the study explores a model of Orthodox aesthetics encompassing divine, worldly, human, and artistic beauty, before introducing the concept of the transaesthetic experience (Ott, 2013). Through the lens of psychology of art, aesthetic experience, and religious rituals, the study investigates the mechanisms by which Orthodox art serves as a mediator between the material and the spiritual. By analysing Orthodox iconography, liturgical gestures, and worship experiences, this paper also proposes an extended model of subjective experience in religious art. This model comprises six key dimensions: emotional, visual-aesthetic, cognitive, communicative, spiritual-transformative, and sociocultural. Preliminary research suggests that believers experience religious art through a multi-layered relationship with faith, culture, and personal identity, whereas for non-religious observers, the aesthetic dimension remains primary. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of religious art not only as an aesthetic phenomenon but also as a medium for profound spiritual and psychological introspection.

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Introduction

Art and religion have long been intertwined, both serving as pathways for human attempts to interpret and make sense of the world. In their efforts to decipher the ambiguous signs encountered throughout life, both art and religion have developed strategies that have led to the creation of religious and artistic representations of the world, placing emphasis on its comprehension (Guthrie, 2015).

Sensory experiences have played a role in religious practice since late antiquity and early Christianity. However, it was not until the fourteenth century that the aesthetic dimension of religious art gained prominence alongside its symbolic and theological significance, particularly among spiritually inclined individuals. This shift is presumed to have been influenced by the increasing realism in the depiction of the divine (Bychkov, 2019). Did artists aim to make religious content more accessible to believers, evoke abstract theological interpretations of the divine, or guide the viewer's gaze toward aesthetic elements that invite deeper contemplation?

A general observation is that art can be seen as a means through which religion communicates with the wider public. At the same time, art also serves as a medium for individuals to engage with religion—whether through visiting places of worship, observing iconostases, or contemplating individual icons and frescoes—as a way of transforming themselves and drawing closer to the ideal prototype of their faith (Avdyusheva & Egorova, 2016).

Despite being divided into fourteen autocephalous churches, Eastern Orthodoxy maintains a shared foundation in faith, the Holy Scriptures, the Ecumenical Councils, and the canons of early saints. However, interpretations of these canons and the religious practices of clergy and believers can vary across different Orthodox traditions. Scholars have sought to highlight not only the aesthetic value of Orthodox iconography, which is a defining feature of the tradition, but also the aesthetic significance of the daily religious rituals performed by Orthodox clergy and believers, which vary depending on their specific ecclesiastical affiliation (Carroll, 2015, 2016, 2017).

Building on these premises, this paper examines how Orthodox art—iconography, liturgical rituals, and the multisensory aspects of worship—shapes the subjective aesthetic and spiritual experience of believers and observers. Through an analysis of Orthodox aesthetics, the transaesthetic experience, and the psychology of art, this study seeks to illustrate that Orthodox art is not merely visual representation but an immersive medium that bridges the material and the divine, fostering both personal spiritual introspection and collective religious engagement.

The paper is structured into several sections. The first section explores the aesthetic principles of Orthodox Christianity and the concept of transcendental experience within the context of religious art. The next section examines the cognitive, emotional, and perceptual mechanisms underlying the reception of frescoes and liturgical rituals. This is followed by an analysis of iconography, focusing on its theological and artistic significance. The paper then discusses gestures within Orthodox worship, highlighting their ritualistic and symbolic functions. Finally, the section on liturgy investigates how different sensory modalities contribute to both the aesthetic and spiritual perception of religious practices.

Between Faith and Beauty:

The Transcendent Experience of Orthodox Art

The aesthetic experience of Orthodox religious art is deeply intertwined with spiritual perception. According to some researchers (Dominte & Onica, 2006), such experiences can be classified into four distinct domains, each reflecting a different dimension of religious beauty. These domains differ based on whether the aesthetic experience arises from a concrete or abstract subject. However, even when the beauty of a concrete subject is examined—such as an icon or fresco—it is always interpreted through the lens of abstract theological understanding.

According to Dominte and Onica (2006), Orthodox aesthetics encompasses four domains of beauty: *divine beauty*, which represents the absolute and infinite perfection of God; *the beauty of the world*, reflecting God's creation; *human beauty*, expressed through spiritual purity and the pursuit of higher values; and *artistic beauty*, which serves as a symbolic medium for conveying religious truths. These domains highlight that, within Orthodox tradition, art is not merely a visual representation but a spiritual bridge between the material and the divine.

The development of religious art appears to follow a trajectory: from the belief in divine beauty, to the recognition of the world as a reflection of God's creation, and finally to the artistic depiction of this beauty in religious works such as icons and frescoes. Through its accessibility to ordinary people—the recipients of religious art—this process enables the cultivation of aesthetic sensitivity towards human beauty. It also fosters a moral commitment: by recognising the beauty of their own existence, believers are encouraged to reject sin and embrace the spiritual

harmony of the world around them. Ultimately, this leads to an aspiration to align oneself with the prototype of faith—divine beauty itself.

When viewed through this lens, the experience of religious art aligns closely with the concept of the *transaesthetic experience*, as described by Konrad Ott (2013). Ott's theory provides valuable insight into how believers and observers react to Orthodox religious art. According to Ott, transaesthetic experience involves a sense of *sublimity*, *ineffability*, and *mysticism* in response to artistic encounters. This type of reaction is frequently documented within Orthodox tradition, particularly in the contemplation of icons and participation in liturgical rituals. For believers, frescoes and icons are not merely aesthetic objects; they serve as windows into the divine. This directly corresponds with Ott's argument that the artistic experience can act as a medium for transcendence.

Descriptions of transaesthetic experience reveal that not all aesthetic experiences are transaesthetic. Most remain purely sensory. However, what distinguishes transaesthetic experience is the profound emotional and cognitive response it elicits. This response is characterised by *intuition*, *ineffability*, *mysticism*, and *sublimity*—qualities that closely align with the highest domain of Orthodox aesthetics: divine beauty (Dominte & Onica, 2006). Ultimately, the spiritual aspiration of the Orthodox believer is to move beyond mere aesthetic appreciation and strive for a direct encounter with the ineffable beauty of the divine.

How do these aesthetic and spiritual experiences take shape within human perception? The answer lies in contemporary psychology of art, which provides insight into the cognitive and emotional mechanisms that shape the perception of religious art. Understanding these psychological processes is essential to fully grasp how religious imagery and rituals influence both believers and non-religious observers.

Psychological Mechanisms of Experiencing Orthodox Art

The experience of Orthodox art is a complex psychological process, integrating emotional, cognitive, perceptual, and spiritual components. Contemporary psychological research indicates that believers often perceive frescoes and liturgical rituals as profoundly transcendent experiences, whereas non-believers primarily engage with them through aesthetic appreciation. What are the underlying mechanisms of these experiences, and what drives them? These questions can be explored through the psychological concepts of absorption, flow, and transformative experience.

Absorption (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974) refers to the ability to fully immerse oneself in an artwork, experiencing a deep state of concentration and engagement. A religious observer may feel as though they are “entering” an icon, while

non-believers are less likely to experience this phenomenon. Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) describes a state of intense focus and immersion in an aesthetic experience, where time and space become irrelevant. Believers frequently describe losing their sense of time when gazing at frescoes or participating in liturgical rituals, highlighting this phenomenon. For non-believers, flow may manifest as aesthetic engagement with the visual appeal of frescoes, but without the accompanying spiritual dimension. Finally, transformative experience (Pelowski, 2015) refers to a moment in which the observer undergoes an internal cognitive and emotional shift through engagement with art. This explains why some believers report a sense of spiritual enlightenment after prayer in front of a fresco or icon.

One of the most relevant psychological concepts for understanding the experience of Orthodox art is *flow*—a state of deep concentration and immersion (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). According to Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990), the state of flow in artistic perception can be triggered through four primary dimensions (or content areas) or their combination: perceptual, emotional, cognitive, and communicative. Our literature review demonstrated the usefulness of this model in explaining the multidimensional nature of aesthetic experiences, particularly those associated with sacred art. However, due to the unique qualities of religious art, we identified the need to expand the model to account for spiritual and transformative dimensions frequently reported by observers of Orthodox frescoes.

The Adapted Model of Transcendent Experience in Religious Art

To test these theoretical assumptions, we conducted interviews and online surveys with a sample of 90 participants, whose responses were qualitatively analysed. The aim was to evaluate the applicability of the Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) model in the specific context of religious art perception. The revised model consists of six interconnected dimensions that shape the subjective experience of Orthodox religious art:

1. The emotional dimension encompasses a broad range of emotions that frescoes evoke in observers, including peace, tranquillity, joy, sorrow, hope, and awe. It examines how different artistic elements—such as colour, light, composition, and symbolism—stimulate emotional responses and integrate into the observer's overall perception of sacred art.
2. The visual-aesthetic dimension captures the sensory perception and aesthetic appreciation of frescoes. It extends beyond the recognition of colours and forms to include a deep engagement with artistic symbolism and value. Colours are perceived as symbolic and expressive, contributing to an immersive visual and emotional impact. Light plays a crucial role in the spiritual interpretation of

frescoes, particularly in its reflection on gold surfaces and shadowing, creating an aura of divine presence. Composition and perspective establish a sense of harmony and order, while fine details—such as facial expressions, textures, and symbolic elements—heighten the observer's sense of immediacy and presence. The architectural placement of frescoes within church interiors enhances the spatial and sensory immersion, reinforcing the integration of art and sacred space.

3. The cognitive dimension explores the intellectual engagement of the observer with frescoes, including personal reflection on their meaning, symbolism, historical context, and theological messages. Frescoes are not merely decorative visuals but complex symbolic systems that encourage analytical thinking. Observers engage with iconographic motifs and historical narratives, attempting to decode their significance. Theological reflections emerge as frescoes stimulate contemplation on faith, redemption, divine presence, and spiritual identity.

4. The communicative dimension investigates how frescoes serve as visual channels of communication between the artwork and the observer. Meaning is conveyed through symbolic gestures, facial expressions, bodily postures of saints, and overall scene composition. Viewers interpret religious messages through the iconographic language embedded in the artistic tradition.

5. The spiritual-transformative dimension encompasses experiences that extend beyond aesthetic and emotional reactions, involving profound spiritual introspection and transformation. Observers frequently describe a sense of connection with the divine, often experiencing moments of silence and reflection in front of frescoes. Some report a feeling of divine presence, leading to spiritual insights and long-term shifts in personal beliefs and values. Frescoes act as mediators between the material and the sacred, inspiring a deeper understanding of faith and transcendence.

6. The sociocultural dimension examines how frescoes function as cultural and historical artefacts, serving as symbols of communal identity and religious heritage. Frescoes transmit historical and theological knowledge across generations, reinforcing spiritual continuity within Orthodox traditions. They play a role in preserving religious narratives, offering insights into societal values and artistic evolution.

In the next phase of research, we will focus on further refining this adapted model in diverse religious and cultural contexts.

The experience of Orthodox art is shaped by emotions, perception, and cognitive processes, but also by the observer's willingness to engage with the artistic and spiritual world. While believers frequently described their experience as sublime, divine, and mystical, non-believers are more likely to evaluate Orthodox art from a historical or aesthetic perspective. This distinction underscores the idea that religious art is not merely a visual phenomenon but a psychological and spiritual medium that connects individuals to deeper existential meanings.

In an attempt to clarify the basis of the difference in experience between the believer and the observer, the initial assumption is that the intensity of the

experience of Orthodox art depends largely on the symbolism that material (icons, frescoes) and immaterial (liturgy, gestures) goods carry with them. The size, colour, and position of the object on the icon, the tone of the priest's voice, the smell of the candle, and the act of bowing to the icon are perceived in a certain way depending on the attributed symbolism of the Orthodox faith. Therefore, it is necessary to devote attention to some of the aforementioned contents.

Iconography

In an effort to encompass a comprehensive interpretation of the aesthetic content associated with Orthodox faith, this analysis begins by examining the concept of beauty and the various domains of Orthodox aesthetics. The following section focuses on exploring the aesthetic values of both material and immaterial elements that shape the life of an Orthodox community, starting with iconography. This choice is based on its prominent role in Orthodox tradition, as well as Carroll's argument that icons influence human consciousness through sensory perception, creating a suprasensory reality (Carroll, 2015).

Iconography does not primarily focus on historical facts or the artistic value of a work, but rather on the broader aspects that define its religious significance. The earliest traces of an iconographic approach to visual art can be found in Greek literature, but systematic research in this field began with Aby Warburg, regarded as the founder of iconology. His successor, Erwin Panofsky, along with Ernst Gombrich, further developed iconographic and iconological methodologies. Warburg's contributions to the formation of the iconological method established him as a pioneer of a new interpretative approach to art (Vicelja-Matijašić, 2013).

In his studies, Panofsky argued that a comprehensive understanding of an artwork requires a broad knowledge of art, iconography, history, and culture. He proposed a three-layer model for interpreting art:

1. The first layer, or natural content, involves identifying and naming visual elements within an artwork and linking them to everyday scenes and objects from nature. Additionally, expressive properties, emotions, postures, and gestures can be discerned from the composition. Panofsky referred to shapes resembling natural forms as artistic motifs, while the process of identifying these motifs was termed pre-iconographic description. In this sense, lines, colours, and volumes form a system of motifs that are understood through practical experience (Panofsky, 1975).

2. The second layer, or conventional content, enables the recognition of culturally and historically significant themes. For example, a group of people seated around a table in a specific arrangement can be identified as a representation of the Last Supper. In this phase, motifs acquire secondary or conventional meaning, often functioning as allegories, personifications, or symbolic combinations. Panofsky referred to this stage as iconographic analysis, which involves ascribing

meaning to the visual elements identified in the first phase. Iconographic analysis thus goes beyond mere recognition of objects and events based on everyday experience; it focuses on representations, narratives, and allegories (Panofsky, 1975).

3. The third layer, or intrinsic meaning, represents the deepest level of iconographic interpretation. It involves deciphering the fundamental principles that reveal the core worldview of a nation, historical period, social class, or religious and philosophical belief system. According to Panofsky, intrinsic meaning is revealed by identifying the fundamental principles that express the essential worldview of a nation, a period, a class, or a religious or philosophical belief—unconsciously reflected in an individual and condensed into a single work of art (Panofsky, 1975, p. 23).

The iconographic method emerged from the recognition that visual art is shaped by religious and mythological traditions of its time. It was further developed through comparisons of artistic works with historical texts, allowing scholars to identify depicted scenes and figures, as well as determine their geographical and stylistic origins. Scholars applying the iconographic method examine themes, motifs, figures, objects, and their relationships, linking them to historical and theological contexts. Uspensky argued that icons reflect an aesthetic that does not impose subjective experience but instead strives for an objective representation of reality (Uspenski, 1979).

The icon has played a crucial role in art, liturgical practice, and medieval religious beliefs. The phenomenon of Byzantine iconography emerged from the complex relationship between Christian theology and Hellenistic cultural heritage (Miljković, 2017). The Old and New Testaments contain references to icons, primarily in the context of prohibitions against their creation and veneration. However, within Christianity, the incarnation of Christ transformed the meaning of the icon. For Christians, the embodiment of the Logos and His crucifixion cleansed humanity of ancestral sin, allowing humankind to become the image of God and thus representable through figuration (Miljković, 2017).

For this reason, numerous theologians advised that the altar—the holiest part of the church—should be adorned with the cross, a symbol of human salvation, while other areas of the church should feature scenes from the Old and New Testaments, as they would serve as visual instruction for the uneducated in understanding divine works.

Key Elements in the Process of Icon Painting

The practice of creating and using icons in Orthodox Christianity was formally established in 787 and reaffirmed in 843 (Carroll, 2015). Research suggests that Orthodox iconography not only depicts the lives of saints but also includes historical figures and events significant to national history. During periods of political

and social turmoil, such iconographic representations played a role in preserving spiritual and national identity (Avdyusheva & Egorova, 2016).

The icon or fresco represents the fusion of human creativity and divine inspiration. However, its beauty is spiritual rather than sensory and is therefore inseparable from goodness (Carroll, 2015; Dominte & Onica, 2006). The process of creating icons involves specific materials (wooden panels, natural pigments), artistic techniques, and unique compositional elements (perspective, use of colour, light, arrangement of figures, and painting sequences). Furthermore, the spiritual state of the iconographer is embedded in the icon itself.

Thus, copies of original icons retain the same spiritual value as the original, regardless of artistic or historical differences (Carroll, 2015). Additionally, an iconographer must be a believer and experience God not only in theory but also in practice. For this reason, each stage of icon creation is accompanied by prayer, fasting, and other devotional acts. Only artworks created in accordance with established iconographic traditions are accepted for use in liturgical practices. A crucial aspect of this process is the inscription of God's name on the icon, which consecrates it and removes it from secular use.

The belief that an icon is a theanthropic creation, reflecting heavenly beauty and intended for prayer, has resulted in many icons remaining unsigned, as the true creator is considered to be God acting through the artist's consciousness. Consequently, many famous icons are anonymous (Carroll, 2015).

Ultimately, in Orthodox iconography, ontological and theological dimensions take precedence over aesthetics. Beauty is not understood as mere visual appeal or subjective experience but as an objective expression of divine truth and goodness (Carroll, 2015).

Gestures

According to de la Fuente (2007), who introduces the concept of the *aesthetic threshold*, aesthetically pleasing social behaviour—often described in everyday language as “beautiful”—is based on subjective satisfaction. However, in the context of religious art and ritual aesthetics, the purpose of beauty and aesthetic qualities in certain behaviours is not limited to personal enjoyment but is directed towards a transcendent relationship between the believer and the divine (de la Fuente, 2007). The following section explores common ritual behaviours among members of various Orthodox churches, which can be classified as individual experiences of transcendence (Carroll, 2016, 2017).

One of the most distinctive expressions of reverence in Orthodox tradition is the gesture of veneration upon entering a place of worship. In the Russian Orthodox Church, believers often bow their heads forward and kiss the church doorway before entering, while some make a deep bow before stepping over the

threshold. In contrast, Greek believers typically cross themselves as they enter the church, and some also touch the doorframe as a sign of respect.

During liturgical services, Romanian believers, like their Greek counterparts, actively participate in the prayers and rituals. As the service reaches its climax, many Romanians and Greeks kneel in devotion, with Greek believers also bowing their heads slightly forward as a sign of humility.

Practices surrounding the sacrament of Holy Communion also vary across Orthodox traditions. Members of Arab parishes partake in communion weekly, while Greek and Romanian believers receive it only a few times a year. Ritual differences are also evident in the method of administering communion: in Russian churches, the priest places bread soaked in wine directly into the believer's mouth without touching their lips with the spoon. After receiving communion, Russian believers kiss the chalice (a liturgical vessel holding the consecrated wine) as an act of reverence. In Arab and Greek churches, however, the priest places a spoon containing soaked bread directly into the believer's mouth without the additional act of kissing the chalice.

The use of sacred plants is another essential aspect of Orthodox Christian ritual practice. Depending on the geographical and ecological setting, believers incorporate palm leaves, oak branches, willow twigs, basil, and laurel leaves into their religious ceremonies. After these plants are used in blessings or sacraments, they are treated with great reverence rather than discarded. For example, basil is commonly used in the blessing of water during baptisms, and believers honour its sacred role by preserving it in various ways. Greek believers place blessed basil in their wardrobes to sanctify the clothing they wear. Syrian believers consume the blessed basil before eating any other food, seeing it as a continuation of the sacred act. Women in Arab parishes incorporate laurel leaves into their cooking, symbolically extending the blessing into their daily lives.

Across Orthodox traditions, acts of devotion and reverence are expressed not only through formal worship but also in the ritual aesthetics of daily activities. These expressions of faith take the form of ritualised body postures, movements, and gestures, transforming ordinary actions into sacred experiences.

One particularly intriguing aspect of Orthodox tradition is that, although the process of creating and using icons in worship was precisely defined as early as 787 AD, there was no formal standardisation of how believers should express reverence toward icons. As a result, practices differ: some believers kiss or touch icons, while others bow with greater or lesser degrees of metania (prostration) as an act of veneration. When an icon becomes damaged or irreparably worn, it is not disposed of in a mundane way but instead given a sacred farewell—typically by burning or burial, in a ritual akin to a religious burial (Carroll, 2016, 2017).

Liturgy

Church poetry, enriched through annual cycles of worship, has significantly influenced ecclesiastical art. From the 11th century onwards, the liturgical mystery became a profound source of inspiration not only for liturgical commentators but also for visual interpretations and the study of literary and ritual aspects of the liturgy (Бадркић, 2025, p. 711). As a form of artistic expression, iconography brings the cosmological and eschatological dimensions of the Eucharist closer to the faithful. Through this interplay of iconography and liturgy, the deeper meaning hidden in the words of prayers is conveyed both visually and ritually, elevating the experience to its highest spiritual level (Бадркић, 2025, p. 711). The visual language of iconography mirrors the liturgical ethos with equal grandeur, expressing the ontological unity between the heavenly and earthly realms. The liturgical use of texts defines the semantic field within which the artist operates (Бадркић, 2025, p. 711). The liturgy, as a ritual of heavenly reality, is complemented by frescoes and icons, which present an idea and image of this divine reality to the believers, while iconography provides a visual interpretation of it (Бадркић, 2025, p. 711).

In Orthodox churches, the liturgy is performed twice daily. During the service, the sacred chanting of priests is intended to evoke both emotional and physical engagement from the congregation. A crucial aspect of liturgical singing and prayer is the use of the parishioners' native language, which enhances the emotional impact on individuals while also reinforcing a sense of communal unity (Price & Snow, 1998). Research has shown that 49% of respondents identify music and hymnody as the primary trigger for religious experience and a sense of connection with God (Miller & Strongman, 2002). Among the most frequently reported religious experiences during the liturgy, respondents mentioned: awareness of the divine (e.g., a sense of God's presence), intense sensory stimulation (e.g., feeling detached from one's physical body), and spiritual growth or transformation (e.g., gaining new theological insights or experiencing enlightenment (Spilka et al., 1996).

During a visit to an Orthodox church during a liturgical service, multiple sensory modalities are simultaneously engaged (Džalto, 2019). This multisensory engagement fulfils one of the core domains of Orthodox aesthetics—artistic beauty—which serves as the foundation for the development of other aesthetic and spiritual dimensions (Dominte & Onica, 2006). Visitors experience the scent of incense and burning wax candles (made from pure beeswax), the sound of sacred chanting (church singing), and the sight of the priest's vestments adorned in white, red, green, and gold—colours that visually correspond to the vibrant frescoes, ornaments, and icons displayed on the iconostasis and church walls. The taste and aroma of bread soaked in wine, symbolising the Body and Blood of Christ, further enrich the ritual experience.

However, when participants were asked to describe their experience of the liturgy, their responses did not focus on specific sensory stimuli or perceptual

details. Instead, they described their experience as sacred, invisible, and intangible. The believer perceives the liturgy as a state in which the spiritual (eschatological) and material (historical), the visible and the invisible, the sensory and the contemplative, the imaginable and the unimaginable merge into a single mystical reality. These descriptions align with Ott's concept of transaesthetic experience, which he defines through notions of mysticism, ineffability, and transcendence (Ott, 2013).

On the other hand, a non-believer may perceive the same liturgical and sensory experiences purely as aesthetic phenomena, no matter how intense they are or how deeply they provoke reflection and introspection. Such visitors experience a sense of aura in their encounter with religious settings, but they interpret this through the lens of historical and cultural significance, rather than spiritual revelation. Their perception of the liturgy can be likened to visiting a museum filled with historically and culturally significant artworks (Džalto, 2019).

Ultimately, the presence or absence of religious faith profoundly shapes the subjective experience of religious art. Even when encountering identical objective characteristics—such as olfactory, auditory, gustatory, and visual stimuli—believers and non-believers experience them in qualitatively distinct ways. For the believer, these elements form a transcendent reality, while for the non-believer, they remain aesthetic and historical artefacts.

Conclusion

Religious art in Orthodox Christianity is a multifaceted phenomenon that integrates aesthetic, spiritual, ritualistic, historical, and sociocultural dimensions. This study has examined how Orthodox art—particularly iconography and liturgical rituals—shapes the subjective experience of believers and observers, drawing from various psychological and aesthetic models. The findings reveal that religious art is not merely a visual or decorative element of faith but functions as a powerful medium for conveying spiritual messages, transcending everyday experience, and fostering communal unity within a sacred space.

A key insight from this study is the presence of four fundamental domains of beauty in Orthodox aesthetics: divine beauty, worldly beauty, human beauty, and artistic beauty. This framework demonstrates that Orthodox religious art is not purely representational but serves as a spiritual conduit that facilitates believers' connection with the divine. Within this context, Orthodox aesthetics is inherently tied to theology and religious experience, meaning that religious art is evaluated not solely on the basis of its formal qualities, but also by its ability to inspire spiritual reflection and participation in communal worship.

Furthermore, qualitative analysis of the subjective experience of religious art has shown that this experience can be structured across six interrelated dimensions: emotional, visual-aesthetic, cognitive, communicative, spiritual-transformative,

and sociocultural. The emotional and visual-aesthetic dimensions encompass sensory and affective responses to colours, composition, and artistic forms, while the cognitive dimension facilitates theological and symbolic interpretation of religious imagery. The communicative dimension highlights the role of iconography and liturgical rituals in transmitting religious meaning, while the spiritual-transformative dimension explores mystical experiences and perceived connection with the divine. Finally, the sociocultural dimension underscores how religious art shapes collective identity and serves as a custodian of tradition and historical continuity.

This study has also demonstrated that the experience of religious art can be understood within the framework of transaesthetic experience, as defined by Konrad Ott (Ott, 2013). His concept of transaesthetics suggests that religious art can evoke an intense sense of the sublime, which is both aesthetic and spiritual. This experience extends beyond sensory perception, encompassing a sense of mystery, intuitive understanding, and a profound connection to something beyond the self. This explains why believers often describe their experience of icons and liturgy as “ineffable,” “sublime,” or “a moment of contact with the sacred.” By contrast, non-believers tend to engage with religious art as an aesthetic and historical phenomenon, without the spiritual introspection that defines transaesthetic experience.

A significant conclusion of this study is the impact of cultural and ritual context on the perception of religious art. Different Orthodox traditions exhibit distinct ritual practices that shape how believers engage with religious art. In Russian Orthodoxy, deep personal veneration of icons is expressed through bows and private prayers, whereas in Greek and Romanian traditions, there is a stronger communal dimension, where liturgical music and group participation play a central role in shaping religious experience. Additionally, bodily gestures—such as the way believers enter a church, their movements during the liturgy, and the manner in which icons are kissed or touched—further reinforce the integration of art into religious practice.

Another important aspect explored in this study is the multisensory experience of Orthodox liturgy. Unlike the predominantly visual experience of viewing artworks in museums, religious art within liturgical practice engages all the senses simultaneously. The scent of incense and beeswax candles, the sound of sacred chanting, the tactile awareness of space and movement, and even the taste of bread soaked in wine, symbolising the Body and Blood of Christ, contribute to an immersive and deeply embodied experience. This sensorial complexity fosters a heightened sense of belonging and spiritual transcendence, distinguishing Orthodox religious art from secular artistic experiences.

Based on these findings and the application of various theoretical models, this study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of religious art as a phenomenon that cannot be fully understood through a single disciplinary lens.

It demonstrates that religious art should not be studied in isolation—whether through artistic analysis, theological reflection, or psychological interpretation—but rather through an interdisciplinary approach that considers all these dimensions simultaneously.

Future research could further deepen our understanding of religious art by investigating individual differences in perception, particularly in relation to levels of religiosity, cultural background, and personal aesthetic sensibilities. The application of psychometric techniques in these investigations could aid in developing models that predict individual responses to religious art more accurately. Additionally, incorporating neuroscientific methodologies could provide deeper insights into the cognitive and emotional mechanisms underlying the experience of Orthodox iconography and liturgical rituals.

Ultimately, this study affirms that Orthodox religious art is not merely a historical or aesthetic artefact, but a living tradition that continues to shape the spiritual life of millions. Its significance lies not only in its visual splendour but also in its ability to serve as a medium for deep introspection, transcendence, and communion with the sacred. This confirms that art and religion share a fundamental purpose: the pursuit of meaning, the exploration of the human experience, and the continual shaping of spiritual and existential understanding.

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Трансцендентно и естетско искуство религиозне уметности у православљу: иконографија, ритуал и психологија

Резиме

Религиозна уметност, посебно православна иконографија и литургијска пракса, играју кључну улогу у обликовању духовног и естетског искуства верника. Овај рад испитује како се религиозна уметност доживљава на субјективном нивоу, анализирајући међусобно деловање естетских, когнитивних, емоционалних и трансцендентних елемената. Утемељена у православној традицији, студија истражује модел православне естетике који обухвата божанску, светску, људску и уметничку лепоту, пре него што уведе концепт трансестетског искуства (Ott, 2013). Кроз призму психологије уметности, естетског искуства и верских ритуала, студија истражује механизме којима православна уметност служи као посредник између материјалног и духовног.

Анализирајући православну иконографију, литургијске гестове и искуства богослужења, овај рад такође предлаже проширени модел субјективног искуства у религиозној уметности. Овај модел обухвата шест кључних димензија: емоционалну, визуелно-естетску, когнитивну, комуникативну, духовно-трансформативну и социокултурну. Прелиминарна истраживања сутеришу да верници доживљавају религиозну уметност кроз вишеслојни однос са вером, културом и личним идентитетом, док за нерелигиозне посматраче естетска димензија остаје примарна. Ова студија доприноси дубљем разумевању религиозне уметности не само као естетског феномена већ и као медијума за дубоку духовну и психолошку интроспекцију.

Кључне речи: православна уметност; трансестетско искуство; иконографија; естетско искуство; религиозни ритуали; психологија уметности.



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