

# The Use of Symbolic Signs in Modern Ukrainian Monumental Church Painting: Classification and Hidden Semantics

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**Abstract**—Monumental church paintings are often perceived either as the interior decoration of the temple or as the "Gospel for the illiterate," as the temple painting often contains scenes from Holy Scripture. In science the painting of the Orthodox Church is mainly the subject of study of art critics, but from the point of view of culturology and semiotics, it is insufficiently studied. The symbolism of monumental church painting is insufficiently revealed. The aim of this paper is to give a description of symbolic signs, to classify them, to give examples for each type of sign from the paintings of modern temples of Eastern Ukraine, on the basis of semiotic analysis of iconographic plots used in monumental church painting. We offer own classification of symbols of monumental church painting, using examples from the murals of modern Orthodox churches in Eastern Ukraine, mainly from the Donetsk region. When analyzing the semantics of symbolic signs, the following methods of the culturological approach were used: semiotic, iconological, iconographic, hermeneutic, culturological, descriptive, comparative-historical, visual-analytical. When interpreting the meanings of symbolic signs, scientific, cultural and theological literature were used. Photos taken by the author have been added to the article.

**Keywords**—Iconography, painting of Orthodox Church, Orthodox Church, semiotic signs in modern iconography, classification of symbols in painting of Orthodox Church.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE language of icon painting and monumental church painting cannot be understood without studying their symbolism. The analysis of symbolic signs not only includes the definition of the referent behind one or another sign but also helps to read the same symbol in different contexts, which emphasizes the importance of cultural memory and knowledge of the language of Christian culture. The study of symbolic signs in the painting of the church is especially significant at the present stage of the development of Ukrainian monumental church painting, which is characterized by the desire to preserve the traditions of icon painting and the search for new styles.

All Christian art, especially icon painting, from the first centuries of its existence was deeply symbolic. This symbolism is inseparable from church art because the spiritual reality it expresses cannot be conveyed other than by symbols.

In the history of the church there were periods of fascination with symbolism, when the symbolism of icon painting grew. Baroque icons are an example of how the introduced elements of culture (XVII-XVIII centuries) were reworked by local

isographs and woven into the canvas of religious veneration of icons. In the late twentieth and early twentieth centuries, the temples of Eastern Ukraine were painted mainly in the Byzantine style and in the style of academic painting, which is also characterized by symbolism, however, to a much lesser extent than in the Baroque era.

The painting of the Orthodox Church, as one of the types of church art, is an integral part of Christian culture and, having its own language, can be studied as a sign system – in terms of semiotics. We will use the classification of signs, which originates in the ideas of the American philosopher and logician Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914) on the relationship of the sign situation and the properties of signs, such as the probability of their use and the nature of connection with the object, signs indicate [1].

In the painting of the Orthodox Church, if we treat it as a special kind of text, there are all three types of signs included in the classification of Peirce: iconic, indexal and symbolic. The main focus of this article will be symbolic signs in modern Ukrainian monumental church painting.

According to Charles Peirce, a symbolic sign, like any other, indicates something in the frenzy of himself (the object of instruction is always absent in the direct experience of communication), unthinkable without use and understanding, always has material expression [1]. Giving a general description of symbolic images, it should be said that symbols are signs of abstract referents: ideas, representations, and concepts. Unlike an index or icon, the referent of a symbol is not perceived by the senses. In the definition and understanding of symbolic signs (symbols) semiotics are unanimous in one thing: they are signs of "consent and establishment", nothing like what they replace [2]. The semantics of the symbol arises as a result of the "agreement" and implies knowledge of the convention.

Answering the question of how to show abstraction, Makhov writes that "everything that is not dressed in the "likeness of the flesh", i.e., not depicted in images, remains incomprehensible to the mind" [3]. That is why the symbols always include a mandatory iconic component in the structure of the media.

## II. CLASSIFICATION OF SYMBOLIC SIGNS IN MODERN MONUMENTAL CHURCH PAINTING

Symbols of monumental church painting can be divided into several types.

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1. Personalized images, which include the so-called secret signs that appeared in the paintings of the catacombs in the first centuries of Christianity (for example: fish, lamb, shepherd, vine, dove, chrysanthemum, cross, peacock), as well as symbols of the Evangelists, etc. The use of symbols of this kind in modern temple painting is not identical to their use in the ancient church, when the meaning of these signs was hidden from the uninitiated, from all who were not part of the Christian community.

As an example from modern monumental church painting we can consider the image of the Lamb in the painting of the altar apse of the church of St. Zosima and Savatij Solovetsky in the village Zeleny gai, Donetsk region, see Fig. 1.

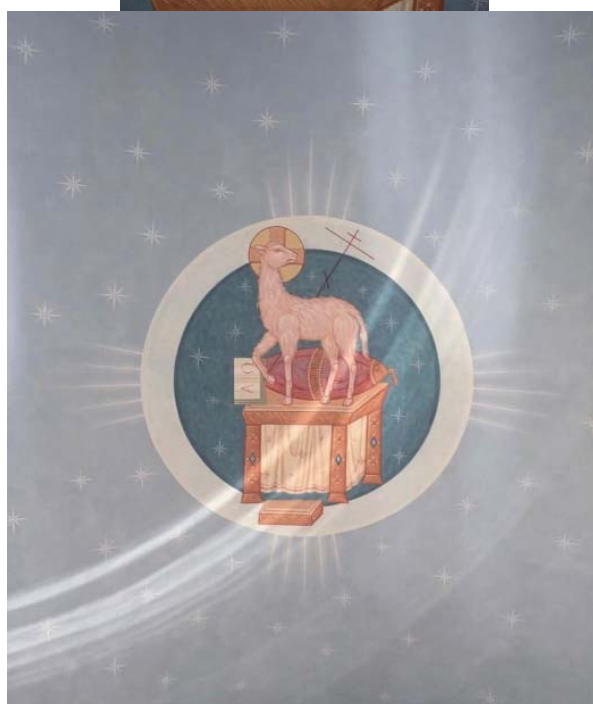


Fig. 1 The Lamb (Fragment of the painting of the altar apse of the temple of Saints Zosima and Savvaty of Solovetsky in the village of Zeleny gai, Donetsk region)

The image of the Lamb is a symbolic image of Jesus Christ and is an Old Testament prototype of his sacrifice on the cross.

In the New Testament, John the Baptist calls Jesus Christ a lamb (John 1:29). In this iconographic plot, this is emphasized by the crucified halo of the Lamb, the image of the cross, the Greek letters "alpha and omega" in the open book on the throne. The Lamb is one of the Eucharistic images, which also explains His writing on the altar apse.

It should be noted that the 82nd rule of the Council of Trulli (680) forbids depicting the Savior in the symbolic image of the Lamb, explaining that with the advent of Christianity there was no need for a symbolic image of Christ through this Old Testament image [4].

The use of "forbidden symbols" in modern temple painting can be explained by the desire to preserve cultural memory. This emphasizes the importance of knowing the language of Christian culture (that is knowledge of the convention of symbols).

Lotman points out that "the abstract model of communication implies not only the use of the same code, but also the same amount of memory in the one who transmits and receives" [5].

The iconographic composition "Christ the True Vine" or "Christ the Vine" is often found in Orthodox churches (one of the symbolic names of Christ, based on the words of the Gospel: "I am the True Grape, and My Father is the Vinedresser" (John 15: 1). Christ in the image of Pantocrator is surrounded by a vine, in the branches of which the apostles are depicted (see Fig. 2), which reminds of the following Gospel words: "I am the vine, and you are the branches; he who is in Me and I am in him begets abundantly, for without Me you cannot to do nothing" (John 15: 5). Grape in Christian iconography is a symbol of the wine of life and immortality, but it also symbolizes sacrifice, because wine is associated with blood.



Fig. 2 Christ the Vine (Painting on the southern wall of the choir of the Church of All Russian Saints in the village of Nikolskoye)

The symbols of this species include the symbols of the four evangelists (eagle, lion, calf and angel). They are most often depicted in the sails of the temple, but there is also a combined image of these four symbols ("tetramorph"), as, for example, in the painting of the arch of the Cathedral of St. Alexander Nevsky in Slavyansk, Donetsk region, see Fig. 3.



Fig. 3 Fragment of the painting of the vault of the Cathedral of St. Alexander Nevsky in the city of Slavyansk, Donetsk region

2. Liturgical symbols are signs that refer to any words from liturgical texts. For example, images of the sun and moon (found in the painting of the cross in the vestibule of the Cathedral of St. Alexander Nevsky in Slavyansk, Donetsk region, see Fig. 4) refer to the words of the psalm: "Praise Him, sun and moon, praise Him, all the stars and light" (Ps. 148: 3).

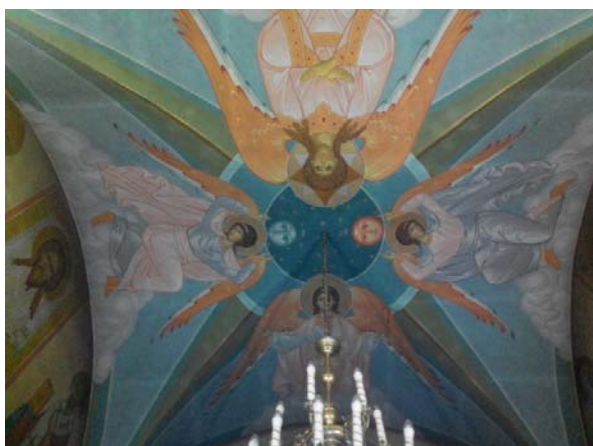


Fig. 4 Painting of the cross vault in the vestibule of the Cathedral of St. Alexander Nevsky in Slavyansk, Donetsk region.

Liturgical symbols include images derived from poetic epithets used by hymnographers in the Akathist. It should be noted that the poetic language of the Akathist could not but influence the iconography, which developed in close cooperation with the hymnography. And in the history of church art, the images and themes of the Akathist have repeatedly become the subject of icons and paintings of temples.

The specificity of Akathist images is the exact reference to the liturgical texts. For example, the ikos 11 of the great Akathist (the Blessed Virgin): "The light-receiving candle, which appears in darkness, the Holy Virgin is seen" is illustrated by the image of the Virgin with a candle standing at the foot as on a candlestick.

Some poetic epithets (like "Ladder", "Shroud", "Kyoto", "Mountain", "Bridge", "Cup"), glorifying the Mother of God, allowed artists to fill the iconic image with symbols designed to emphasize the special role of God's Mother in the story of salvation.

The theme of the Akathist was first used in monumental painting in Serbia in the XIV century. These are cycles of frescoes of the monasteries of Decani, Markov, Mateich. Probably, this tradition came to Russia through Athos. The most striking example is the frescoes in the Cathedral of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin of the Ferapontov Monastery, made by Dionysius in 1502 [6].

In modern Ukrainian monumental church painting, the theme of the Akathist is present, for example, on the northern wall of the Assumption Cathedral in the Nikolskoye village, Donetsk region, which was painted in 2012.

3. Apocalyptic symbols: signs that indicate the Second Coming of Christ (for example, the icon of light, Etimasia, the vision of the prophet Daniel). The book of Revelation of John the Theologian (or Apocalypse) is not used in worship, so the symbolic signs associated with it cannot be fully attributed to the liturgical.

The throne is prepared (Etimasia, from the Greek *Ἐτοιμασία* - readiness) – the theological concept of the throne, prepared for the second coming of Jesus Christ, who will come to judge the living and the dead. The concept is based on the following verses of the Psalms: "Thou didst sit on the throne, O righteous Judge" (Ps. 9: 5-8). The symbolism of the throne prepared, first of all, is connected with the theme of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. The image of the Throne prepared most often consists of the following elements: the church throne, the closed Gospel (as a symbol of the book of Revelation of John the Theologian), the instrument of passions lying on the throne or standing nearby (in this case – a crown of thorns); a dove (symbol of the Holy Spirit) or a crown crowning the Gospel.

In iconographic plot Etimasia, the image of the sun and the moon, as well as two seraphim, refer to the words of Jesus Christ from the Gospel: to be disturbed. Then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory" (Mark 13: 24-26).

In modern Ukrainian monumental church painting, images of the Prepared Throne are found both independently (as, for example, in the painting of the vault of the Church of the Resurrection in Slovyansk, Donetsk region (see Fig. 5), in the painting of the Church of the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin in Boyove, Donetsk region) and composition of complex compositions (for example, in the iconography of the Last Judgment on the western wall of the Assumption Cathedral in the Nikolskoye village, Donetsk region).

The event of the Second Coming of Christ is symbolized by the icon of light (one of the earliest examples of such symbolic images is found in the mosaics of the mid-V century in the Baptistery of Albenga, Liguria [6]), which is a disk of concentric circles of dark blue, blue and white, and in the center of the disk - the image of the chrism (one of the symbols of Jesus Christ), to the right and left of which are the Greek letters "alpha" and "omega", directly refer to the words of the Grand

Judge of the Apocalypse: "I am Alpha and Omega the beginning and the end, the first and the last" (Rev. 22: 12-13). The disk is surrounded by 12 white birds - the obvious symbols of the 12 apostles who spread the light of the Gospel teachings throughout the world. Six-winged seraphim are depicted on four sides of the disk. Such an image is present in the painting of the Church of All Russian Saints in the Nikolskoye village, Donetsk region, see Fig. 6.



Fig. 5 Etimasia (Painting in the vault of the Church of the Resurrection of Christ in the city of Slavyansk, Donetsk region)



Fig. 6 The Icon of light (Painting in the Church of All Russian Saints in the village of Nikolskoye, Donetsk region)

Apocalyptic symbols include the iconographic plot "The First Vision of the Prophet Daniel" or "Vision of the Four Apocalyptic Animals", which is part of the iconography of the Last Judgment (as in the painting of the western wall of the Assumption Cathedral in the Nikolskoye village, Donetsk region, see Fig. 7).

According to the Orthodox interpretation, the vision of four animals by the prophet Daniel points to four kingdoms in their pleasant sequence: Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Macedonian (Greek) and Roman. The prophet Daniel in his book reveals the doctrine of the universal kingdom of God and the Son of Man in their triumph over paganism [7].



Fig. 7 A vision of four apocalyptic animals (The western wall of the Assumption Cathedral in the village of Nikolskoye)

4. Mystical symbols are symbols whose origin are not so much connected with the Holy Scriptures, as with "folk ideas" about the afterlife. These include symbols associated with the afterlife of the soul, which are most common in the iconography of the Last Judgment (the appearance of a symbolic image of a man at the column is associated with the legend of a merciful sinner who did not get rid of one passion that did not allow him to enter Paradise, see Fig. 8), serpents of exile, depicted on the west wall of the Assumption Cathedral in Nikolskoye village, Donetsk region, see Fig. 9), "All-Seeing Eye", which symbolizes the omnipresence of God (as, for example, in the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin in the village of Novy Svit, Kramatorsk, Donetsk region, see Fig. 10). It should be noted that the iconography of the Last Judgment received a special development in the seventeenth century, when the fascination with mysticism became popular and widespread.

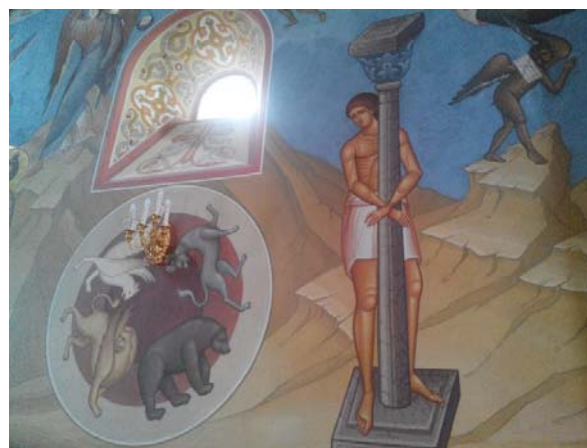


Fig. 8 The man at the column. Fragment of the iconography of the Last Judgment (western wall of the Assumption Cathedral)



Fig. 9 The serpent of ordeals. Fragment of the iconography of the Last Judgment (western wall of the Assumption Cathedral)



Fig. 10 "All-Seeing Eye" (Painting in the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin in the village of Novy Svit, Kramatorsk city, Donetsk region)

5. Abstract-spiritualist symbols are symbols that include geometric figures on the icon of the Savior in Power (or the Savior in Strength). This image of Jesus Christ is found both on the iconostasis and in the painting of the church, for example, in the vault of the Church of the Resurrection of Christ in the city of Slavyansk, Donetsk region, see Fig. 11.



Fig. 11 The Savior in Strength. (Painting in the vault of the Church of the Resurrection of Christ in the city of Slavyansk, Donetsk region)

A characteristic feature of the icon of the Savior in power is

that the Savior sitting on the throne is depicted against the background of three special geometric shapes: a red rhombus (square), inscribed in a blue (or green) oval (circle, ellipse), which, in turn, "Superimposed" on a red quadrangle, in the corners of which, protruding through the contour of the oval, can be located the symbols of the four evangelists, one in each corner. The red rhombus framing the figure of the Savior signifies the fire of the Godhead and indicates the Divine dignity of the Messiah; the blue oval symbolizes Heaven, the angelic world, and the outer and largest quadrangle, which includes evangelical symbols, points to the preaching of the gospel throughout the world. The green oval symbolizes the emerald (emerald). Circle means the celestial sphere, the world of disembodied forces or angelic ranks, the celestial hierarchy [8].

Christ blesses with his right hand, holding the Book in his left (a symbol of the gospel and the Book of Life). The iconography of this plot reflects the eschatological motif, representing the Messiah in the greatness of Heavenly glory, as He will appear at the end of the centuries to judge the world. The plot is partly borrowed from the vision of the prophet Ezekiel, who beheld the Lord carried by angelic forces represented in the image of mysterious animals (Ezek. 1: 4-28).

The mandorla also belongs to abstract-spiritualist symbols. Mandorla (from the Italian. Mandorla "almond") – in Christian art, a special form of the halo, an oval glow, elongated in the vertical direction, inside which is the image of the Savior. Most scholars see the origins of the mandorla in the art of ancient Rome and Palestine [9]. The oldest images of mandorlas in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore date back to the V century BC.

The image of Christ in the mandorla is especially characteristic of the iconography of the Transfiguration of the Lord, the Ascension of the Lord and the Second Coming, which are present in almost every temple. Mandorla conveys here the radiance of His Glory and symbolizes the "Favorite Light". The mandorla has the same meaning of glorification in the iconography of the Assumption of the Mother of God. From the end of the XII century the mandorla began to be used in the iconography of the Resurrection of Christ. A detailed theological interpretation of the "Favorite Light" was received by the Hesychasts.

The mandorla can have both an elongated, oval shape and a circle shape. The color of the mandorla, as it symbolizes radiance, consists of rings arranged in the order of illumination – either to the center or to the edges. The dark color inside the mandorla symbolizes the so-called "divine darkness". The mandorla itself is often depicted as permeated with thin golden rays, or these rays can also be painted white. The color of the mandorla is usually blue-blue or red, sometimes gold.

6. Landscape symbols are symbols that include "slides", which have become an invariable "iconic landscape" in the iconography of holidays and in the iconography of other events of sacred history, because canonical iconography does not seek to accurately convey the landscape inherent in an event. "Slides" with a few trees and stingy grass ornaments give the image a special asceticism, regardless

of historical authenticity, see Fig. 12. The image of the house in iconography can symbolize the city.



Fig. 12 Painting of the northern part of the vault in the Intercession Church in the village of Boevoe, Donetsk region

- Decorative symbols present in the painting of each temple, for example: tablecloths, symbols of purity, which are depicted under iconographic subjects; flowers, fruits that symbolize the invisible fruits and flowers of heavenly abodes, see Fig. 13. In some cases, the symbols of this species include vines and peacocks.



Fig. 13 The interior decoration of the Church of St. George in the village of Georgievka, Donetsk region

- Symbolic elements are non-independent symbolic signs that complement iconic images. Thus, in some icons the apostle Peter is depicted with keys in his hands, and the apostle Paul - with a naked sword. The keys are a sign of the authority to forgive and forgive sins, that is, symbolically, to open the door to the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 16:19). The keys in the hand of the Apostle Peter are, first of all, a symbol of the remission of sins, the right to which the Lord gave to his disciples, and through them to all priests. The Apostle Paul is depicted with a naked sword in his hand. The sword is the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17), penetrating to the very depths of the

human heart. This is the sermon of the apostles.

In iconography, the Resurrection of Christ the Savior is often depicted with a flag in his hand, which symbolizes victory over death.

### III. OTHER SEMANTICS OF SYMBOLS

Analyzing the symbolic signs in the painting of the Orthodox Church, it should be noted that the iconic component included in the structure of the symbolic sign is aimed at actualizing the idea, which without visualization cannot become part of the physical world. Perception of visual text occurs as switching the iconic code to symbolic. In the primary form of reflection (perception of the signifier) is the actual recognition of the referent behind the visual image.

The semantics of a character vary depending on the context in which it is included. When including a symbol in a new context, we can say that in semiotics is called "text in text". According to the description of "text in text" given by Lotman, in the new semantic space, this text "... can perform a number of functions: play the role of semantic catalyst, change the nature of the main meaning, go unnoticed, etc." [5]. As "text in text" can be considered, for example, included in the iconography of the Last Judgment, the plot of "The First Vision of the Prophet Daniel", or "The Vision of the Four Apocalyptic Animals".

### IV. CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that most of the images in the paintings of the Orthodox Church are iconic signs, in the monumental church painting symbolic signs have a special place.

Iconographic symbols are signs with a hidden motivation, occupying a marginal position in the class of conventional signs, i.e., the same signifier can be considered as an index and as a symbol. Symbolic signs of modern Ukrainian monumental church painting can be divided into the following types: personified, liturgical, apocalyptic, mystical, decorative, abstract-spiritualistic, landscape and symbolic elements.

The reason for the appearance of a symbolic sign may be a metaphorical image from the text of Scripture or from a liturgical text (for example, from an akathist).

Decorative and landscape symbols are less sacred than, for example, liturgical, abstract-spiritualistic or apocalyptic. The inclusion of a symbol in a new context can change the semantics of the iconographic plot. Depending on the context, the same symbol can be interpreted differently, for example, as personified, liturgical or decorative (vine).

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