BYZANTINE AND POST-BYZANTINE ART: CROSSING BORDERS

ART READINGS
Thematic Peer-reviewed Annual in Art Studies, Volumes I–II
2017.I – Old Art

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София, 2018
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Painters of Western Training Working for Orthodox Patrons – Remarks on the Evidence of Late-medieval Transylvania (14th–15th Century)

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Abstract. The article deals with the question of medieval painters trained in the West, who decorated murals in Eastern-rite churches and who received their commissions from Orthodox patrons. It focuses on two case studies – the mural decoration of the sanctuaries of the Orthodox churches in Strei (first half of the 14th century) and Hâlmagiu (late-14th – early-15th century) – coming from the Voivodate of Transylvania and the Kingdom of Hungary, respectively, regions where Orthodox Romanians lived alongside Catholics but under the Latin rule of the latter. Such context led to the emergence of frequent phenomena of hybridization in the sphere of religious art.

Key words: church decoration, religious iconography, Byzantine painting, Catholic painting, artistic hybridity, patronage.

The southern area of the Voivodate of Transylvania and the south-western counties of the Kingdom of Hungary, respectively, represented during the Middle Ages regions where several ethnic and confessional groups coexisted, each of them bringing into play...
their own cultural and religious traditions. Under the Hungarians’ Latin rule, Orthodox Romanians3 lived together with Catholic Hungarians, Szeklers, and Saxons, creating a long-lasting conviventia which generated many cultural contacts with the ‘other’. These frequent encounters have left meaningful traces in the religious art of both confessional groups.

Orthodox patrons had a complex relationship with Western art, often commissioning builders who were active on nearby Catholic sites. These masters created religious edifices with prevailing Western appearance for their patrons, but which, in fact, served the Orthodox rite. Accordingly, the churches of Orthodox Romanians in 14th- and 15th-century Transylvania often have rectangular sanctuaries separated from the nave by built iconostases; their architectural structures are dominated by tall western towers, and their windows and portals are decorated with Gothic stonework4. Most of the time, Orthodox patrons entrusted the mural decoration of their rural churches to painters of Byzantine tradition who – as their work attests – unevenly mastered their craft. Regardless of their abilities, these painters’ diverse skills and techniques were acquired somewhere within the Eastern/Orthodox world. Given their peripheral position in relation to the center(s) of Byzantine art and their integration into a Latin state, these painters also proved to be highly receptive to themes and motifs typical for Western/Catholic iconography5.

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3 This conventional term designates the Romance-speaking people living in medieval Transylvania, and it does not refer to present-day Romanian national identity. There are no self-referential sources of this people, to whom others referred to as “Vlachs”. On Romanian cultural specificity during the Middle Ages, see: Panaitescu, P. P. Perioada slavonă la români şi ruperea de cultură Apusului. In: Silvia Panaitescu (ed.). Interpretări româneşti. Studii de istorie economică şi socială. Bucharest, 1971, 33-59; Pop, Ioan-Aurel, The Romanians as a Border People during the Middle Ages. Between Slavonianism and Latinity. – Eurolimes, 2008, No. 5, 21-27.


Given the multicultural and bi-confessional situation of Transylvania and Hungary during the Late Middle Ages, it is not surprising that borders – understood both artistically and confessionally – were often easily crossed in the field of religious art. Subsequently, one can find a significant number of cases where Western painters worked for Orthodox patrons or, vice versa, painters of Byzantine tradition working for Catholic commissioners. In the text that follows, I shall briefly discuss two instances of this paradigm, emphasizing the most striking cases of artistic hybridity. A comprehensive analysis, as well as a discussion of the latter model will be the subject of another paper.

The church in Strei (Hunyad County), built sometime after 1300 and serving the local Orthodox community, was probably dedicated to St Nicholas and decorated with frescoes sometime during the first half of the 14th century by a workshop that employed several painters. Judging by their linear-narrative manner, all of them received their training in a Western milieu, where they acquired formal features specific for a provincial, early-Gothic style unevenly mixing elements of Romanesque-Gothic, Italian Trecento, and even Byzantine style. In an attempt to adapt their modest skill and knowledge to the requirements of their Orthodox commissioners, this eclectic workshop created a hybrid iconographic programme, which combined Western and Byzantine themes and motifs. However, to a great extent the painters retained the iconographic layout specific to Catholic sanctuaries, which seemingly did not pose a great challenge to be understood by their Orthodox patrons (Fig. 1).

The painters represented Christ in Glory (Maiestas Domini) in a mandorla supported by two angels on the eastern webbing of the quadripartite rib vault. The same depiction could usually be found in

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6 For the secondary literature on this monument, see: Porumb, Marius. Dicţionar de pictură veche românească din Transilvania sec. XIII–XVIII. Bucharest, 1998.

7 Prioteasa, Elena Dana. Western and Eastern Themes in the Iconography of the Sanctuary of the Church of Strei (Hunedoara County, Romania).– Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU, No. 9, 2003, 181-196.
a similar position in Catholic churches across medieval Hungary⁸, but it was in fact an iconographic solution occurring predominant-

ly in Transylvania’s Orthodox churches⁹. The customary image of the Virgin with the Child in the sanctuary’s conch¹⁰ was sometimes replaced by that of the Pantokrator in Byzantine churches without a dome¹¹, or in religious edifices built in the eastern periphery of Byzantium (e.g., Cappadocia or Georgia¹²). In Transylvania, however, the Pantokrator type, occurring only in Densuş, was usually dropped in favor of the types of Maiestas Domini or Christ in Glory¹³. In Strei, medallions with busts of Old Testament Prophets are portrayed on the intrados of the triumphal arch, whereas standing figures of apostles are shown conversing and holding each of their own attributes on the side walls. Both types of depictions are encountered in the sanctuary of many Hungarian Catholic churches, displaying similar iconographic arrangements and compositional devices¹⁴.

Following most likely their Orthodox commissioners’ request, the Western painters in Strei depicted holy bishops in the sanctuary’s lowermost register (Fig. 1-4), as was customary in the altar space of Byzantine churches¹⁵. Five out of six figures of holy bishops are identified by inscriptions in Old Church Slavonic which give their names and are placed next to their heads: St Callinicus (of Constantinople), St John (Chrysostom), St Cyril (of Alexandria or Jerusalem), St Peter

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¹⁴ Drăguţ. Iconografia picturilor, 15-17, 63, 80.

Fig. 2. Sts Cyril and Peter flanking the model of a Romanesque church, lower register of the eastern and southern walls of the sanctuary, Orthodox church in Strei.

Fig. 3. Sts John and Cyril flanking the Man of Sorrows, lower register of the eastern wall of the sanctuary, Orthodox church in Strei.

Fig. 4. Model of Romanesque church, St Nicholas, and supplicant Grozie, lower register of the southern wall of the sanctuary, Orthodox church in Strei.
(of Alexandria), and St Nicholas. However, the Church Fathers are dressed in Latin episcopal vestments composed of albs and chasubles decorated with Latin crosses; some of them wear mitres and hold either closed or open books (Fig. 2-4). Four of them stand on the side walls next to the models of Romanesque churches with two western towers, whereas the remaining two flank the symbolic depiction of the Man of Sorrows depicted in the sanctuary’s axis (i.e., below the eastern window and above the former altar table). The symbolic image of the Melismos typical of Byzantine sanctuaries was most likely unknown to these Western-trained painters, who replaced it with another depiction endowed with strong Eucharistic meaning, namely, the Man of Sorrows (Fig. 3). The Eucharistic component of this representation prevailed in the Latin West ever since the transfer of this iconography from Byzantium to the West. This is most likely the reason why the Western-trained painters in Strei, unfamiliar with the Byzantine depiction of the Melismos (i.e., the symbolic image of the Transubstantiation occurring during the Liturgy and representing the sacrificed Christ as a naked baby on the altar or on a bowl-shaped paten), resorted to their own (Catholic) iconography of the Eucharist (i.e., the Man of Sorrows). Subsequently, having been requested by their Orthodox patrons to represent in the sanctuary a symbolic image of the Transubstantiation, the Western-trained painters in Strei came up with a literal version of it, namely, the depiction of a sacrificed, wounded Christ placed actually above the medieval altar table of the sanctuary (now vanished).

16 For the holy bishops’ identifying inscriptions, see: Popescu, Tugearu. Biserica ortodoxă, 268-270.
19 The white, trapezoidal area without paint below the image of the Man of Sorrows marks the place where the medieval altar table was originally attached to the wall.
Equally peculiar is the integration of the lay supplicant Grozie into the sanctuary’s register of Church Fathers (Fig. 4). He is dressed according to the Western fashion, makes a prayer gesture typical for the Catholics (i.e., hands joined in front of his chest), and stands next to St Nicholas. The supplicant together with the holy bishop, who is depicted in the proximity of one of the four idealized church models, recalls remotely the iconographic layout of Byzantine votive compositions. This was probably another result of the Western painters’ attempt at adjusting their existing patterns to new Orthodox circumstances, even though the inclusion of laymen in the register of the Church Fathers and, moreover, in a size comparable to that of the holy bishops would have hardly been possible in the most sacred space of Byzantine sanctuaries.\(^{20}\)

\(^{20}\) For the recent discussion on the image, see Năstăsoiu, Dragoș Gh. The Social Status of Romanian Orthodox Noblemen According to Donor Portraits and Church Inscriptions. In: Nicolae-Șerban Tanașoca, Alexandru Madgearu (eds.). Études Byzantines et Post-Byzantines. Bucharest and
The decoration of the sanctuary and triumphal arch of St Nicholas Church in Hălmagiu (Zarând County) was commissioned by jac-pan Moga and his brother from a workshop, which seems to have been trained in a Central-European artistic milieu21 (Fig. 5). Its provincial, late-Gothic manner deriving from the so-called “School of Friul” has close parallels with the murals of a significant number of Hungarian Catholic churches, which were painted at the turn of the 14th and 15th century22. The iconographic program of the sanctuary

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21 For the monument’s literature, see: Porumb, Dicționar de pictură, 185. The most comprehensive study on the murals is: Cincheza-Buculei, Ecaterina. L’ensemble de peinture murale de Hălmagiu (XVe siècle). Iconographie et fondateurs. – Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes, No. 1, 1984, 3-25. For historical data on the settlement’s noble owners, see: Rusu and Hurezan, Biserici medievale, 97-105.

22 Stylistic analogies in Prioteasa, Elena Dana. Medieval Wall Paintings in Transylvanian Orthodox Churches and Their Donors. PhD diss., Central European University, Budapest, 2011, 149, fig. 7.56-7.61.
in Hălmagiu is closely related to that of the sanctuary of St Nicholas Church in Ribița (Zarând County), another religious foundation patronized by Romanian Orthodox noblemen and which had its sanctuary decorated probably in 1393\textsuperscript{23}. Iconographically, the two sanctuaries in Hălmagiu and Ribița, respectively, are similar in their selection of themes and their distribution on church walls. Whereas the sanctuary in Hălmagiu was decorated by a workshop composed most likely of Western-trained painters, the sanctuary in Ribița was undoubtedly decorated by painters of Byzantine tradition. Judging by the similarity between the iconographic programs of both the sanctuaries in Hălmagiu and Ribița, the Western painters of the former church followed more closely the directions set out by their Orthodox commissioner/iconographer, even though they relied partly on more familiar iconographic solutions.

In Hălmagiu, the apocalyptic vision of Christ in Glory shown blessing with two hands in-between the Sun and Moon is placed on the barrel vault of the rectangular sanctuary\textsuperscript{24} (Fig. 6). The busts of the Old Testament Prophets who foresaw Christ’s Second Coming are depicted in the medallions on the vault’s western side\textsuperscript{25} and flank the Agnus Dei in the apex\textsuperscript{26}. Eucharistic and eschatological symbol alike, this image appears rarely in Byzantine iconography, and, if it does, it occurs only under Western influence\textsuperscript{27}. This was possibly

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{23} For a reevaluation of the murals’ various dating hypotheses (1393, 1404, 1407, 1414, 1414/5, and 1417, respectively), see Năstăsoiu, Dragoș Gh., Adashinskaya, Anna. O ipoteză privind datarea picturilor murale ale bisericii Sf. Nicolae din Ribița în lumina unor informații noi. In: Ioachim Lazăr, Florin Dobrei (eds.). Cultură şi spiritualitate în comuna Ribița (jud. Hunedoara). 600 de ani de la atestarea bisericii “Sfântul Ierarh Nicolae” din Ribița (1417) şi 25 de ani de la reactivarea Mănăstirii Crişan (1992). Cluj-Napoca and Deva, 2017, 54-92; a revised, English version of this study is going to be published this year in Museikon. For the secondary literature on the frescoes, see Porumb. Dicționar de pictură, 336. The murals’ uncovering and restoration is not completed yet, so the ensemble lacks a comprehensive study. Cincheza-Buculei, Ecaterina. Ipoteze și certitudini în frescele descoperite la Ribița. – Ars Transilvaniae, No. 5, 1995, 85-92; Prioteasa. Medieval Wall Paintings, passim.

\textsuperscript{24} For this iconography, see: Belting-Ihm, Christa. Die Programme der christlichen Apsismalerei vom vierten Jahrhundert bis zur Mitte des achten Jahrhunderts. Stuttgart, 1992; Poilpré, Anne-Orange. Maiestas Domini: Une image de l’église en Occident (Ve–IXe siècle). Paris, 2005. In Ribița, the image on the vault is largely destroyed, but remaining traces of a crucifer halo indicate that here, too, a representation of Christ was initially painted.

\textsuperscript{25} Streișângeregiu, Strei, and Ribița offer direct analogies.

\textsuperscript{26} The composition in Ribița is partly whitewashed and partly damaged, so one can no longer be certain what was depicted on the arch’s apex.

Fig. 7. Unknown holy bishop, lower register of the northern wall of the sanctuary, St Nicholas Orthodox Church in Hălmăgiu
the case with Hâlmai, too, as the Lamb of God was placed in a similar, lofty position and Old Testament-themed setting in many Catholic churches of medieval Hungary. Witnesses and disseminators of Christ’s redemptive work, the Evangelists in Hâlmai and Ribița, represented in the postures of sitting and writing, are depicted in the proximity of the *Maiaestas Domini*. Their placement on the sanctuary’s vault betrays yet another connection with Western iconography. This time, however, the model was adapted rath-

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29 Analogies in *Prioteasa, Medieval Wall Paintings*, 154-155, figs. 7.54-7.56, 7.58-7.66.
er than being directly followed, as it is a regular feature of Catholic iconography that the Latin Church Doctors are represented seated at their writing desks and not the Evangelists. The Evangelists are usually represented only through their symbols, and are often depicted in the company of the Latin Doctors\textsuperscript{30}. For obvious reasons, the Latin Doctors are absent from the vaults of the sanctuaries of the Orthodox churches in Hălmagiu and Ribița, but the Evangelists are represented instead, seated at their writing desks, that is, in the Latin Doctors’ usual hypostasis for Catholic iconography.

In the sanctuaries of Hălmagiu and Ribița, whose iconographic

\textsuperscript{30} Direct analogies in Chyžné, Rákoš, Rimavské Brezovo, Mălâncrav; when alone on the vault, the Evangelists are depicted only through their symbols (e.g., Kraskovo and Poniky). Dvořáková, Krása, and Stejskal, Stredoveká mal’ba, 107-112, 131-132, 135-136, 139-40; Drăguț, Vasile. Picturile murale din biserica evanghelică din Mălâncrav. – Studii și Cercetări de Istoria Artei. Seria Artă Plastică, No. 1, 1967, 87, 89.
programs display striking similarities despite their execution by Western and Byzantine painters respectively, the side walls are decorated with the holy bishops shown frontally, blessing, and holding inscribed scrolls or closed books (Fig. 7-8). In Hălmagiu, five of the six holy bishops dressed in Western liturgical vestments, including the alb, chasuble, and pallium, are identified by inscriptions in Old Church Slavonic offering their names: St Sylvester, St Clement, St John Chrysostom, St Basil the Great, and St Nicholas31 (Fig. 7). Dressed instead in the Eastern episcopal attire composed of the omophorion and either a simple sakkos or the polystavrion, only two of the six holy bishops in Ribița are currently identifiable (Fig. 8). They are Sts Basil and Nicholas, who occupy the same place as their namesakes in Hălmagiu. In both sanctuaries, a deacon (St. Stephen in Ribița) joins the Church Fathers on the eastern side of the southern wall. He is unusually close to the archangels with censers, who flank the Melismos in the sanctuary’s axis32 (Fig. 9). The patron of the two churches, St Nicholas, is similarly placed on the western side of the southern wall, and he stands in both cases next to a chalice placed on an altar table, in the lower part of which the bent figure of Arius is falling down33 (Fig. 8). The painters used the compositional scheme of the Vision of St Peter of Alexandria, but substituted the figure of the Alexandrian bishop with that of St Nicholas, transferring upon the holy bishop of Myra the Eucharistic and anti-heretical stance of the composition34. Trained in different traditions, the painters of the two sanctuaries created similar, highly original, and unparalleled representations. This supports the idea that a creative and specific iconographic canon existed in Orthodox Transylvania at the turn of the 14th and 15th century and, moreover, reinforces the idea that the Western-oriented workshop in Hălmagiu followed

31 Cincheza-Buculei. Ensemble de peinture, 8.
32 Only the altar table has survived in both cases. On the upper register of the sanctuary’s eastern wall, there are seraphs/cherubs above the archangels’ figures. Cincheza-Buculei. Ensemble de peinture, 8; Cincheza-Buculei. Ipoteze și certitudini, 89-90.
33 The partially-preserved inscription in Hălmagiu contains an invocation of the Holy Trinity, Cincheza-Buculei. Ensemble de peinture murale, 10; additionally, the recently-uncovered inscription in Ribița features also Arius’ name.
Fig. 10. Holy Apostle Bartholomew, lower register of the northern wall of the sanctuary, St Nicholas Orthodox Church in Hâlmagiu
closely the recommendations of their Orthodox iconographers.

Additionally, near by the prothesis niche in Hălmagiu, there is the depiction of the Holy Apostle Bartholomew, who is oddly represented as a naked, flayed man holding his skin on a staff, i.e., according to his Western iconography\textsuperscript{35} (Fig. 10). This depiction was often encountered in Catholic churches across medieval Hungary, where the saint was venerated as the patron of animal-skin processing crafts and a protector against skin diseases and nervous disorders\textsuperscript{36}. The image is not unique in the context of Orthodox Transylvania, as this hypostasis of the holy apostle appears also in St Nicholas Church in Densuş (Hunyad County). This iconographic transfer from the West to the East occurred during the Late Middle Ages in other Orthodox territories found under Latin rule: St Bartholomew’s Western iconography appeared, thus, in several Orthodox churches of Venetian-ruled Crete\textsuperscript{37}. As cultural contact zones, both Catholic-ruled Crete and Transylvania experienced broadly comparable social, political, and confessional circumstances, and one should not be surprised if the hybridity of their religious art brings them together, too. In Hălmagiu, however, St Bartholomew’s sacrifice acquired an Eucharistic emphasis by being placed next to the prothesis niche, rather comparable to the significance of this holy apostle’s figure in the Western/Catholic iconography across medieval Hungary\textsuperscript{38}.

As it could be seen from the two case studies that have been put forward in this essay, when painters trained in the West worked for Orthodox patrons, they showed the tendency towards maintaining the general iconographic layouts specific for Catholic cult spaces.

\textsuperscript{35} Cincheza-Buculei, Ensemble de peinture, 8-9.
\textsuperscript{36} Prioteasa, Medieval Wall Paintings, 182-191.
\textsuperscript{37} St Pelagia Church in Ano Viannos (1360) and Holy Apostles Church in Drys (1382–1391). Vassilikis-Mavrakakis, Maria. Western Influences in the Fourteenth Century Art of Crete. – Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik, No. 5, 1982, 303-304, fig. 7-8; Lymberopoulou, Angeliki. Regional Byzantine Monumental Art from Venetian Crete. In: Angeliki Lymberopoulou, Rembrandt Duits (eds.). Byzantine Art and Renaissance Europe. Burlington, 2013, 65, fig. 3.2, pl. IV.
This did not pose too great a challenge for the understanding of the Catholic iconography by the Orthodox faithful, as both Catholic and Orthodox systems of sanctuary decoration in late-medieval Transylvania shared a significant number of iconographic features (e.g., the selection and arrangement of scenes in the sanctuary’s upper side). The obvious formal differences between the visual traditions of the West and East proved to be unimportant, as they did not hinder, nor alter significantly the religious content meant to be communicated. Trying to meet the unfamiliar demands of commissioners belonging to a different confession than their own, the Western-trained painters followed two paths when making the decoration of the sanctuary’s lower register. They either adjusted their previously-learned patterns in order to meet the expectations of their Orthodox commissioners (e.g., the Vir Dolorum replacing the Melismos, the holy bishops with the models of Romanesque churches, or the pseudo-votive composition in Strei), or followed closely the directions prescribed by the Orthodox iconographers (e.g., the iconography of the sanctuary in Hâlmagiu reflecting faithfully the iconography of the sanctuary in Ribița or vice versa). Even when they took the latter path, they observed the prescriptions in their general lines and made sure to communicate the meaning they were supposed to. However, they allowed themselves certain variations, whenever they were not specifically instructed to do otherwise or when their innovations didn’t change radically the iconographic content of a program (e.g., the holy bishops’ Western and Eastern vestments in Hâlmagiu and Ribița, respectively). During these processes of “negotiation of meaning”, the Western-trained painters often adapted their iconographic and formal vocabulary, in order to respond to the requirements of the particular worship space they had to decorate or to their commissioners’ devotional sensibilities and demands. These processes of adjustment sometimes led to the phenomena of hybridization in the sphere of religious art, phenomena which, on the one hand, challenge traditional, art-historical labeling (i.e., Western versus Eastern/Byzantine or Catholic versus Orthodox) and, on the other hand, indicate that borders, understood either artistically or confessionally, are not so much dividing lines as they are, in fact, meeting points.
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През Средновековието южните и югозападните части на Войводство Трансилвания и Унгарското кралство са райони, в които съжителстват по няколко конфессионални групи, всичко от които има своя културна и религиозна традиция. При управлението на латините православните румънци (власи) живеели с унгарци католици, шеклери и саксонци, като тяхната *conviventia* генерира чести взаимодействия, а това оставя дълбoki следи в религиозното изкуство и на двете религиозни групи. Православните дарители имат сложна релация със западното изкуство, възлагайки често поръчки на строители, които работят в съседните земи с католически градове, като в резултат на това създават религиозни сгради със „западен“ облик. Въпреки че православните ктитори повеждат украсата на своите църкви на майстори, работещи във византийската традиция, тези художници проявяват висока степен на възприемчивост по отношение на сюжети и мотиви, характерни за западната/католическата иконография. А може да се добави, че православните дарители предоставят на западни ателиета да украсят техните религиозни сгради със стенописи.

Тази статия се фокусира върху два характерни казуса – стенописната украса на православните храмове в съседни области: в Стрей (област Хуняд, Войводство Трансилвания) и в Хълмаджю (област Заранд, Кралство Унгария), изпълнени епизодично през първата половина на XIV в. и между късния XIV в. и ранния XV в. При декорирането на олтарното пространство на тези православни храмове двете западни ателиета се принуждават последователно да пригодят своя иконографски и формален изказ, за да отговарят на изискванията на това специфично култово пространство или на чувствителността на поръчилите. Това „нагаждане“ често води до хибридизация на явленията в областта на църковното изкуство, което бяга от обичайните си категории, и представлява предизвикателство за традиционното изкуствоведско етикетиране на познатите ни опозиции: византийско/източно versus западно или православно versus католическо.

**Художници със западна школовка, работещи за православни поръчители – бележки върху данните от късносредновековна Трансилвания**

**Драгош Нъстъсою**
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BYZANTINE AND POST-BYZANTINE ART: CROSSING BORDERS

Institute of Art Studies, BAS

Edited by
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Copy-editor
Tereza Bacheva

Translation
Milena Lilova
Svetlana Lazarova

Proofreaders
Andrew Small (University of Oxford)
Hugh Jeffrey (University of Oxford)

Content Management
Lyubomir Marinchevski
Maya Lacheva

Press
Direct Services

ISBN 978-954-8594-70-7
ISSN 1313-2342