Some Remarks on the Significance of Gold Based on Byzantine Ekphraseis of Works of Art

Gold is considered one of the most characteristic elements of Byzantine culture. This view applies especially to art. Undoubtedly, this statement is quite right: it is best confirmed by the preserved works of painting and artistic craftsmanship, especially those of jewellery. In sum, Byzantine artists used to use gold on a large scale, showing great technical skill. It is therefore surprising that this issue has not received a separate and comprehensive study yet. Although researchers recognise the presence of gold, unfortunately, they rarely go beyond the general observations. Despite this, in the literature devoted to Byzantine art,


2 The striking lack of more accurate references to gold is particularly evident in studies on Byzantine aesthetics, in which the focus of their authors is mainly the role of the Neoplatonic thought, e.g. V.Н. Лазарев, История византийской живописи, vol. I, Москва 1947, p. 23–33, 104; П.А. Михеев, Аиафетиκή θέωρησις της βυζαντινής τέχνης, Αθήνα 2006, p. 106–111, 131, 156–157 (1st ed. Αθήνα 1946); Р.А. Michælis, Neo-Platonic Philosophy and Byzantine Art, JAAC 11, 1952, p. 21–45; idem, L’esthétique d’Hagia-Sophia, Faenza 1963, p. 44–60 (1st ed. Αθήνα 1946); G. Матеев, Byzantine Aesthetics, London 1963, p. 13–22, 144; В.В. Бычков, Византийская эстетика. Теоретические проблемы, Москва 1977, passim; idem, Малая история византийской эстетики, Киев 1991, passim.
it is assumed that gold was used primarily because of its symbolic meanings. As a result, the issues pertaining to aesthetics and aesthetic experiences are ignored, although they are the main subject in Byzantine texts. In fact, reading these modern studies, we learn more about contemporary beliefs about Byzantine art than about it itself. The issue of the significance of gold in Byzantine art is unquestionably complex, and for this reason, this article may be only a preliminary outline of the most important questions related to the subject. Selected examples of Byzantine source texts in which their authors referred to gold in a strictly artistic context are the backbone for all considerations. The main thesis statement, which will be proved here, is as follows: gold, as a substantial medium of artistic expression, was used on a large scale primarily for aesthetic reasons. At the outset, it should also be highlighted that the primary sources testify that for over a thousand years of the existence of the Byzantine Empire views on gold did not undergo major shifts, hence these texts do not reflect the changes of Byzantine art. Therefore, it was decided to discuss the topic using the content criterion referring to the aesthetic values that were associated with gold in Byzantium. These values are above all: glow, colour, and splendour.

In the context of the issue of the significance of gold in Byzantine art, ekphrasesis (ἐκφράσεις) are the most useful type of texts. They are usually part of larger texts, both poetic and prose ones. Ekphrasesis, present in Greek literature from its

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3 It seems that Julius Lange was the first who directly indicated that gold backgrounds in medieval paintings can also be understood in symbolic categories. The research direction he outlined was developed and eventually became dominant – also in relation to Byzantine painting; J. Lange, *Et blad af koloritens historie* (1893), [in:] *Udvalgte Skrifter af Julius Lange*, ed. G. Brandes, P. Købke, København 1901, p. 136–156.

4 This is a general problem related to the study of mediaeval art, because – as Mary Carruthers points out – researchers are used to the question “what does it mean?”, and that is why they so easily overlook the problem of aesthetic pleasure of mediaeval people. Her observation can be equally well applied to the study of Byzantine art. However, as Carruthers reasonably indicates, to tackle this kind of topic, our understanding must be changed, because we should move away from nineteenth-century Romantic and twentieth-century Modern categories relevant to art and its perception; M. Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages*, Oxford 2013, passim.

very beginnings, became extremely popular in late antiquity because they allowed both the use of a variety of stylistic devices and the choice of attractive subjects. Byzantine authors carried on taste for them. Nicholas of Myra (also known as Nicholas Rhetor, ca. 410 – ca. 490) defined the ekphrasis in his *Progymnasmata* (Προγυμνάσματα) as follows:

> ἔκφρασίς ἐστι λόγος ἀφηγηματικός, ὑπ’ ὄψιν ἄγων ἐναργῶς τὸ δηλούμενον. πρόσκειται δὲ ἔναργῳ, ὥστε κατὰ τοῦτο μάλιστα τῆς διηγήσεως διαφέρει· ἢ μὲν γὰρ ψιλὴ ἔχει ἔκθεσιν πραγμάτων, ἢ δὲ πειράται θεατάς τοὺς ἀκούοντας ἐργάζεσθαι. ἔκφραζομεν δὲ τόπους, χρόνους, πρόσωπα, πανηγύρεις, πράγματα. [...] Δεῖ δὲ, ἢνικά ἄν ἔκφραζομεν καὶ μάλιστα ἀγάλματα τυχὸν ἢ εἰκόνας ἢ εἰ ἄλλο τοιοῦτον, πειράσθαι λογισμοὺς προστιθέναι τοῦ τοιοῦτος ἢ τοιοῦτον παρὰ τοῦ γραφέως ή πλάστου σχήματος, οἷον τυχὸν ἢ ὅτι ἐργιζόμενον ἔγραψε διὰ τήνδε τὴν αἰτίαν ἢ ἠδόμενον, ἢ ἄλλο πάθος ἐροῦμεν συμβαίνον τῇ περὶ τοῦ ἐκφραζομένου ἱστορίᾳ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἄγοις λογισταὶ. οἱ λογισμοὶ συντελοῦσι εἰς ἐνάργειαν

[...] *ecphrasis* (ekphrasis) is descriptive speech, bringing what is described clearly (enargós) before the eyes. “Clearly” is added because in this way it most differs from narration; the latter gives a plain exposition of actions, the former tries to make the hearers into spectators. We compose ecphrases of places, times, persons, festivals, things done [...] Whenever we compose ecphrases, and especially descriptions of statues or pictures or anything of that sort, we should try to add an account of this or that impression made by the painter or by the molded form; for example, that he painted the figure as angry for this reason, or as pleased; or we shall mention some other emotion as occurring because of the history of what is being described. Similarly in other cases also, explanations contribute to vividness.

Therefore, the key to a brilliant ekphrasis is to bring the described things – including works of art – or events clearly (ἐναργώς; so also φανερώς, i.e.: plainly, openly, manifestly, evidently) before the eyes of an audience (ὑπ’ ὄψιν ἄγων ἐναργῶς τὸ δηλούμενον), since this is the only way that listeners can become spectators (ἡ δὲ πειράται θεατάς τοὺς ἀκούοντας ἐργάζεσθαι). The way to achieve this desirable feature was, in particular, a thoroughgoing description which was supposed to evoke images (φαντασίαι) in minds of listeners. In Byzantium, the creation of ekphraseis – as in antiquity – was a part of the elementary stage of

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7 Nicolai *progymnasmata*, 68–69, ed. J. Felten, Leipzig 1913 [= RG, 11; BSGR].
the rhetorical education during which the late antique textbooks with the preliminary exercises (i.e. προγυμνάσματα, praeexercitamina) were employed. These works, as well as other texts on the theory of rhetoric, were commented and summarized by Byzantine authors. Some of them, e.g. John Geometres (ca. 935 – ca. 1000)\(^{10}\), Nikephoros Basilakes (ca. 1115 – after 1182)\(^{11}\), and George Pachymeres (1242 – ca. 1310)\(^{12}\), prepared their own ones as well\(^{13}\).

Ekphraseis are often very significant sources for Byzantine art studies. Byzantine authors of such descriptions used to write not so much about the details of the appearance of a given image or building, but mainly about the reactions of the audience. In fact, the most crucial task was not to refer to a real, specific work of art, but to evoke in a listener – by referring to the collective cultural memory – the sense that such piece of art might exist. Thus, ekphraseis were, above all, a kind of intellectual play of a given author with his listeners. Hence, they may say a lot about the culture in which they were created. These texts may be helpful in comprehending Byzantine notions on art as well, because they indicate to us what Byzantines found significant. On their basis, therefore, it is possible to draw conclusions regarding the perception of works of art, as well as prized aesthetic values. Although in ekphraseis there are many well-known topoi (τόποι), it should be emphasized that they were not only ornaments indicating the author’s erudition, but also elements carrying specific and legible content. The use of topoi that would no longer be understandable would interfere with communication, and as a result, an ekphrasis would not bring the subject described before the eyes with visual vividness\(^{14}\). The authors, however, had a wide range of rhetorical devices to


Some Remarks on the Significance of Gold

achieve this required effect in their texts. In the Description of the all-praiseworthy St. Euphemia (Ἔκφρασις εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν Εὐφημίαν τὴν πανεύφημον), Asterius the bishop of Amasea (ca. 350 – ca. 410) wrote about these media of expression, using a vivid metaphor: οὐδὲ γὰρ φαυλότερα πάντως τῶν ζωγράφων οἱ μουσῶν παίδες ἔχομεν φάρμακα (For we, men of letters, can use colors no worse than painters do) 

Thus, Henry Maguire pertinently points out that:

A closer reading of the Byzantine rhetorical writers reveals that they were extremely sensitive to artistic styles and to their meanings, whether those styles were, in present-day terms, classicizing and naturalistic on the one hand, or unclassical and schematic on the other. The difference between Byzantine and modern art criticism lies not in perception but in language. The Byzantines were not blind, but they were using a language completely different from those of twentieth-century critics, and for this reason their statements have been misunderstood.

Hence, despite some conventionality and a specific language, ekphraseis may be substantial primary sources, also when it comes to the issue of the significance of gold in Byzantine art.

According to Byzantine texts, beauty was the main idea with which gold was associated. Plotinus (ca. 204 – ca. 270) was the first who constituted the theoretical fundament for thinking about beauty (τὸ καλὸν) as the idea (τὸ εἶδος). This philosopher pointed out that beauty is the idea manifested in different ways. Then, the presence of the idea is vital. In this way, therefore, widespread observations...
– Plotinus, after all, did not have to order people to recognize light, gold, or stars as beautiful – gained a weighty philosophical foundation. As for the late antique and Byzantine plastic arts themselves, it is difficult to talk about the direct impact of the Plotinus’ thoughts on their shape. His aesthetic considerations, however, played an important role in Byzantine culture, because they were accepted by the Church Fathers thanks to whom the Plotinus’ understanding of the perceptible beauty was consolidated.

For Byzantine authors, the beauty of gold essentially meant its glow – so it was directly related to light – as well its colour. Both attributes were positively perceived in antiquity, but it seems that they were particularly appreciated in late antiquity, and on this account, it can be said that at that time there was formed an aesthetic thought in which variegation (ποικιλία) was the most important value.

\[\text{Εὐταίθα κάλλος ἓπακτὸν καὶ εἴδωλον τοῦ καλοῦ, ἤ δὲ ψυχὴ καλὴ μὲν τὴν φύσιν, καλλίως δὲ ὅταν ἔκει βλέπῃ. \text{εἰ γὰρ αὐτόθεν καλὴ, ἢν ἄν πάσα καλὴ, ὃ δὲ νοσὶ αὐτῷ τοῦτο κάλλος καὶ τὰ μετ᾽ ἐκείνῳ καλὰ ἢ εὐθὺς μὲτ᾽ ἐκείνων ἢ πολλοστά. τὰ μὲν οὖν μετ᾽ ἐκείνων πρῶτος ἀστράπτει, τὰ δὲ διὰ μέσων μεταλαμβάνονται τοῦ ἐκεί κάλλους, δὸς πορρώτερον, τοσούτω καὶ ἀμυδρότερον τὸ κάλλος ἴσχυσιν.} \]

Toῦ αὐτοῦ· περὶ νοητοῦ κάλλους,


\[\text{20 E.g.:} \]

\[\text{Εἰ δὲ τὸ ἐν σώματι καλὸν ἐκ τῆς πρὸς ἄλληλα τῶν μερῶν συμμετρίας, καὶ τῆς ἐπιφαινομένης εὐχροίας, τὸ εἶναι ἔχει, πῶς ἐπὶ τοῦ φωτός ἀπλοῦ τὴν φύσιν ὄντος καὶ ὁμοιομεροῦς, ὁ τοῦ καλοῦ διασώζεται λόγος; Ἦ ὅτι τῷ φωτὶ τὸ σύμμετρον οὐκ ἐν τοῖς ἰδίοις αὐτοῦ μέρεσιν, ἀλλ’ ἐν τῷ πρὸς τὴν διόν ἀλύσῃ καὶ προσηνεῖ μαρτυρεῖται; ὃς γὰρ καὶ χρυσός καλὸς, οὐκ ἐκ τῆς ἐπαγωγῆς μόνης, τὸ τερπνὸν κεκτημένος. Καὶ ἐπέστρεψεν ἀστέρων κάλλιστος, οὗ διὰ τὸ ἀναλογούντα ἔχειν τὰ μέρη ἐξ ἀνυπόκτητην, ἀλλὰ διὰ τὸ ἀλυπότα τινα καὶ ἢδεαν τὴν ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ ἁπάντω ἐμπίπτειν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς. Ἐπεί δὴ καθ’ ἑαυτὴν, καὶ ὀφθαλμὸς ἰδίᾳ, καὶ ἕκαστον τῶν τοῦ ἀνδριάντος μελῶν διῃρημένως κείμενα, οὐκ ἂν φανεῖν ἐπ’ ὅντα αὐτῷ· πρὸς δὲ τὴν οἰκείαν τάξιν ἀποτεθέντα, τὸ ἐκ τῆς ἀναλογίας, ἐμφανὲς μόλις ἐπειδὴ, ἐπεὶ καὶ χεῖρ καθ’ ἑαυτήν, καὶ ὀφθαλμὸς ἰδίᾳ, καὶ ἔκαστον τῶν τοῦ ἀνδριάντος μελῶν διηρημένως κείμενα, οὐκ ἂν φανεῖ διὰ τοῦ τυχόντος ἐπιτεθείναι, πρὸς τὸ τελοῦντα, τὸ ἐκ τῆς ἀναλογίας, ἐμφανές μόλις ἐπειδή, καὶ τῷ ἰδιώτῃ παρέχεται γνώριμον. Οὐ μέντοι ταύτη τῇ καθ’ ἑαυτῇ πρὸς τὴν οἰκείαν τάξιν ἀποτεθέντα, τὸ ἐκτὸς αὐτοῦ καθ’ ἑαυτῶν καθάρως πρὸς τὸ τέλος αὐτῶν ἀπανθάμονον τὴν ἐννοιάν. Τοιεῦτος οὖν δὴ ταύτη τὴν ἐννοιάν ἐπαινεῖται τῶν κατὰ μέρος ἐργῶν ὁ Θεὸς ἀναγέγραψε, μὲλλει δέ τὸν προσήκοντα ἐπαινεῖ καὶ παντὶ ὁμίῳ τῷ κόσμῳ ἀπαρτισθέντι πληροῦν.} \]

It was related to colours and visual effects on shimmering surfaces of various materials, such as gold, precious stones, marbles, and fabrics. This kind of aesthetic inclinations was then adopted in Byzantium where they did not lose its relevance until the end of the empire’s existence, as evidenced by numerous texts and works of art.

In the context of the late antique aesthetics, Michael Roberts coined the evocative term “jeweled style” to illustrate concisely a change in taste in the contemporary poetry, whereby he refers chiefly to the Latin literature. According to Roberts, the classical poetics was then rejected in favour of a new one, in which instead of the simplicity and unity of composition, the variety (varietas, variatio) was particularly delighted and due to it even a simple topic could become interesting and decorative (ornatus). Therefore, repetition was avoided, and authors used to use synonyms and circumlocutions to prevent monotony. The literature created in this way was supposed to be like a shimmering gem (gemma) that attracts attention with its glitter (lumen) and colour (color)\(^1\). Although it is difficult to agree with all the detailed considerations of the researcher, who sometimes compares literature with painting too easily, his term “jeweled style”, in the context of art understood simply as a predilection for sophisticated, multi-coloured and shiny materials, quite aptly describes the late-antique and Byzantine aesthetics\(^2\).

Referring directly to Byzantine primary sources, it should be stressed that gold in ekphraseis, full of admiration for visible beauty, appears as one of the quintessential precious materials, and this is the most characteristic feature: gold does not have a unique, special position among them, since marbles, precious stones, and expensive fabrics are not perceived as less valued. Let’s study some specific examples. Describing the church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople, Paulus Silentiarius (died ca. 575–580) wrote:


The roof is compacted of gilded tesserae from which a glittering stream of golden rays pours abundantly and strikes men’s eyes with irresistible force. It is as if one were gazing at the midday sun in spring, when he gilds each mountain top.

Here, the poet drew attention not only to the golden mosaic cubes covering the vaulted parts but also emphasized that the rays of light reflecting from their surface are so intense that it is even difficult to look at them. The brilliance of the tesserae hurts eyes like the spring sun illuminating the mountain peaks at noon. It should be noted that the colour of the sun’s rays, both in the church and outside, is described as golden.

It is worth adding that Silentarius in some very poetic lines contained quite specific content because authors frequently used to stop on more general statements. For example, Procopius of Caesarea (ca. 500 – ca. 565) wrote on the same church: “The whole ceiling is overlaid with pure gold, which adds glory to the beauty, yet the light reflected from the stones prevails, shining out in rivalry with the gold.” Thus he did not specify that the vaults were decorated with gold tesserae but he admitted that this part of the building is beautiful and resplendent. Notwithstanding this opinion, Procopius found that the glow of marbles is stronger than that of gold. His view may seem somewhat surprising, but a little further we read as well: “This brass, in its colour, is softer than pure gold, and its value is not much less than that of an equal weight of silver.”

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27 Procopius, I, 2, 4.
interesting that both Procopius and Silentarius noticed some weaknesses of gold, especially since their feelings are opposite – although they both described the same dome – because for the first author gold glitters less than marbles, and its colour is less delicate than that of copper, and for the second one, the glow of golden mosaic cubes is too dazzling.

Other writers also used to point to the special visual effects associated with golden surfaces, both earlier such as Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260 – ca. 339) and later ones. Of the latter, it is especially worth paying attention to the text from around the mid-twelfth century whose author is Michael protecdicus of the church of Thessalonica and later dean of the church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople. His composition is on folios 123r–124v of the Escorial codex Y–II–10 (Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial) and it is the ekphrasis of the Holy Wisdom church written for the annual celebration of the inauguration of the church. This text consists of 232 lines – unfortunately, it is incomplete now – and refers to the architectural form of the church and its symbolic interpretation as well. What is more, the author remarked on the building’s decoration, and, at the very beginning, he emphasized that the beauty of the church is related to gold (ὅς καὶ πυρράζει τὴν ὄψιν ώς ύγρότης πάντη χρυσόν)

Regarding the narthex, we read:

καὶ ἡ τοῦ χρυσοῦ στιλπνότης ἐγγὺς εἶναι τοῦ καταστάζειν ποεῖ νομίζεσθαι τὸν χρυσόν. τοῦς γὰρ ὑγροὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς τῇ ἀνταυγείᾳ ὡσπερ κυμαίνουσα, τὰς ἐκείνων νοτίδας εἰς τὸν χρυσὸν ἐφάντασε τὸν ὁρώμενον, καὶ δοκεῖ ῥευσεῖσθαι ύπὲρ τὸν μονόχρου χρυσόν.

[...] and the brightness of the gold almost makes the gold appear to drip down; for by its refulgence making waves to arise, as it were, in eyes that are moist, it causes their moisture to appear in the gold which is seen, and it seems to be flowing in a molten stream. But what

29 E.g. his description of the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople:

αὐτὸς δὲ νεών ἀπαντα εἰς υψός ἄφατον ἐπάρας, λίθων ποικίλαις παντοίων ἐξαστράπτοντα ἐποίει, εἰς αὐτὸν ὄροφον ἐξ ἑδάφους πλακώσας, διαλαβὼν δὲ λεπτοῖς φατνώμασι τὴν στέγην χρυσῷ τὴν πᾶσαν ἐκάλυπτεν· ἄνω δὲ περιέλαμπε χρυσός, ὡς μαρμαρυγὰς τοῖς πόρρωθεν ἀφορῶσι ταῖς ἡλίου αὐγαῖς ἀντανακλωμένης ἐκπέμπειν. δικτυωτὰ δὲ πέριξ ἐκύκλου τὸ δωμάτιον ἀνάγλυφα χαλκῷ καὶ χρυσῷ κατειργασμένα.


32 This text was edited and translated by Cyril Mango and John Parker. They also provided it with an introduction and commentary; C. Mango, J. Parker, A Twelfth-Century…, 1.12–13, p. 235.
manner of stonework is this that fastened around the building, striving with its variegated coloring and smoothness against gold, shining because of its smoothness and, because of its diversified bloom having something that surpasses even the gold, which is of one color?  

To Michael, gold – because of its intense gloss – seems to be flowing down the walls (καὶ ἡ τοῦ χρυσοῦ στιλπνότης ἐγγὺς εἶναι τὸν καταστάζειν ποεῖ νομίζεσθαι τὸν χρυσὸν). The shimmer of gold is glaring and it results in watery eyes (τοὺς γὰρ ὑγροὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς τῇ ἀνταυγείᾳ ὥσπερ κυμαίνουσα, τὰς ἐκείνων νοτίδας εἰς τὸν χρυσὸν ἐφάντασε τὸν ὁρώμενον, καὶ δοκεῖ ῥευσεῖσθαι τηκόμενος), and the stones, due to their variegation of colours, resemble flowers in bloom (ἐκ δὲ τοῦ ἄνθους ὀντος ποικίλου). Interestingly, the author is inclined to consider the multi-coloured revetments as more beautiful than gold which is, after all, of one colour (μονόχροος). A monochromaticity seems to be less valued than colourfulness (πολύχροος), although there were exceptions to this rule, as evidenced by the description of the floor in one of the homilies of Leo VI the Wise (886–912).  

33 C. Mango, J. Parker, *A Twelfth-Century…*, 3.67–79, p. 237 (There are the Greek text and the English translation).  


35 Reading Byzantine primary sources, one could often find that the most wonderful visual effects are associated not with gold but with multi-coloured stones, both marbles, and gems, to which the former ones are regularly compared. In the context of stone revetments, the example of the poetic ekphrasis of the Constantinopolitan church of the Holy Wisdom of Silentiarius is significant. His description of the church’s marbles is extensive and very detailed, because it does not boil down to the general highlighting of their diverse colours and extraordinary gloss. Therefore, almost all the stones mentioned in the poem can be accurately recognized and assigned to individual places of the church; N. Schibille, *Hagia Sophia*…, p. 97–109, 241–243. It should be clearly emphasized that the Silentiarius’ ekphrasis is a unique combination of elaborate poetry with a large dose of specific information, which was quoted in a very erudite form; *Paulus Silentiarius*, 617–646, 664–667.  

36 Μαρμάρου γὰρ λευκῆς ἐκ πλακῶν ὑπέστρωται, τὸ συνεχὲς τῆς διαφανείας μηδενὸς διατείχιζόντος χρώματος, προτετιμηκότος τοῦ τεχνίτου τὸ ἀμιγὲς τῆς ἀγλαίας τοῦ ἐκ τῆς ποικίλης κατασκευῆς ἀνθίου, οία πολλὰ ἐν ταῖς τῶν ἐδαφῶν κατασκευαῖς ὀρᾶται. Πλὴν ὡσπέρ τινα ὄρια
Some Remarks on the Significance of Gold

The author underlined there that the pavement made of white slabs is beautiful because of its one colour, and it is a pure splendour for him. In general, the combination of materials of different colours providing stunning visual effects was valued more than simplicity praised by Leo.

In the context of extraordinary impressions, the X Homily of Photius I of Constantinople (858–867, 877–886) immediately comes to mind. The patriarch prepared it on the occasion of the inauguration of the church of the Virgin of the Pharos at the Great Palace of Constantinople. This event took place in 864 during the reign of Michael III (842–867):

Some Remarks on the Significance of Gold…

It is as if one had entered heaven itself with no one barring the way from any side, and was illuminated by the beauty in all forms shining all around like so many stars, so is one utterly amazed. Thenceforth it seems that everything is in ecstatic motion, and the church itself is circling around. For the spectator, through his whirling about in all directions and being constantly astir, which he is forced to experience by the variegated spectacle on all sides, imagines that his personal own is transferred to the object. Gold and silver cover the greater part of the church, the one smeared on tesserae, the other cut out and fashioned into plaques, or otherwise applied to other parts. Over here are capitals adorned with gold, over there are golden cornices. Elsewhere gold is twined into chains, but more wonderful than gold is the composition of the holy table. The little doors and columns of the sanctuary together with the peristyle are covered with silver; so also is the conical roof set over the holy table with the pavements made of white slabs is beautiful because of its one colour, and it is a pure splendour for him. In general, the combination of materials of different colours providing stunning visual effects was valued more than simplicity praised by Leo.

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93

Some Remarks on the Significance of Gold…

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Some Remarks on the Significance of Gold…

It is as if one had entered heaven itself with no one barring the way from any side, and was illuminated by the beauty in all forms shining all around like so many stars, so is one utterly amazed. Thenceforth it seems that everything is in ecstatic motion, and the church itself is circling around. For the spectator, through his whirling about in all directions and being constantly astir, which he is forced to experience by the variegated spectacle on all sides, imagines that his personal own is transferred to the object. Gold and silver cover the greater part of the church, the one smeared on tesserae, the other cut out and fashioned into plaques, or otherwise applied to other parts. Over here are capitals adorned with gold, over there are golden cornices. Elsewhere gold is twined into chains, but more wonderful than gold is the composition of the holy table. The little doors and columns of the sanctuary together with the peristyle are covered with silver; so also is the conical roof set over the holy table with the...
little pillars and canopy that support it. The rest of the church, as much of it as gold has not overspread or silver covered, is adorned with many-hued marble, a surpassingly fair work.

In his solemn speech, Photius used well-known and much earlier developed schemes for describing the church’s interior, and his ekphrasis is, in fact, rather general, thus it could be applied easily as a description of another church. As for gold, he mentioned that it is in the mosaic cubes (ὁ μὲν ψηφῖσιν ἐπαλειφόμενος) and that capitals, cornices, and chains are gilded (ἐνταῦθα δὲ διὰ χρυσοῦ περιζώματα· ἀλλαχόθι δὲ ταῖς ἀλύσεσιν ἐπιπλεκόμενος χρυσὸς). The author, however, emphasized that the altar with the silver ciborium is more beautiful than gold (ἢ χρυσοῦ τι θαυμασιώτερον, ἡ θεία τράπεζα, σύνθημα). It seems that in this way Photius rather indicates that the sanctuary is the most important part of the church than comments on aesthetics. The patriarch certainly succeeded in creating the vision of the splendour of the new foundation: completely covered with gold and silver (Ἀλλὰ γὰρ χρυσὸς τε καὶ ἄργυρος τὰ πλείστα τοῦ ναοῦ διειλήφασιν) and also with multi-coloured marbles (μαρμάρων δὲ πολυχρώμων). It is worth adding that the homily was given in situ, which also allowed for less scrupulous explanations. Anyway, the Photius himself justified his approach with rhetorical emphasis:

Yet, even if my speech has fallen below the mark, I am not any the less content than if it had risen to the level of an adequate description. For my purpose was not to make an exhibition of eloquence but to show that the church is most excellent and beautiful and that it defeats the canons of an ekphrasis.

40 Photius, 10, p. 103.23–27. In Homily XVII, Photius also emphasized the power of sight – a sense that surpasses hearing (Photius, 17, p. 170.28–33):

41 The Homilies of Photius..., 10.7, p. 189.
The X Homily of Photius, which passages were cited above, was formerly considered a speech for the inauguration of the so-called New Church (Νέα Ἑκκλησία) funded by Basil I the Macedonian (867–886). Cyril Mango proves, however, that the text refers to the church of the Virgin of the Pharos. The description of the New Church is found in the panegyrical Vita Basilii (Ἰστορικὴ διήγησις τοῦ βίου καὶ τῶν πράξεων Βασιλείου τοῦ ἀοιδίμου βασιλέως), which is the only extant secular biography in Byzantine literature. The emperor was presented there not only as a brave warrior, but also as a generous founder, who raised many churches from ruin and also built numerous new ones.

The emperor offered this church to Christ, the immortal Bridegroom, as a bride decked out and adorned with pearls and gold and gleaming silver and, moreover, with a variety of many-colored marbles, mosaic compositions and silken robes. The ceilings of that five-domed church glitter with gold and flash forth (their) beautiful representations like (as many) stars; on the outside, the roof is embellished with brass work resembling gold; the shrine’s interior walls on either side are varied with costly and many-colored marbles and its sanctuary is variously decked out with a wealth of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls. The chancel barrier that separates the outside area from the altar space; the colonnade set into this barrier and the (parts) above, functioning as lintels, as it were; the seats within (the sanctuary); the steps leading to them; and the altars themselves are all given massivity and substance by...
silver that is gilded all over and ⟨adorned⟩ with precious stones in settings made [?] from costly pearls. As for the pavement, it first will appear to be spread with ⟨rugs⟩ woven of silk or with Sidonian fabrics, so beautifully has all of it been inlaid and varied by marble panels of many hues set into the ground; by the variegated mosaic bands that enclose these panels; by the precision with which everything has been joined together; and by the superabundant elegance spreading throughout.

The quoted ekphrasis although quite extensive, does not contain many details – like that of Photius. This is another evocation of a dazzling imperial foundation which is composed primarily by the discussing of wonderful and expensive materials exploited in the church embellishment, namely: gold, silver, tesserae, fabrics, and various many-hued stones. In this instance, like in previous ones, the beauty is grounded on variegation (οὕτω ποικῖλαι ταύτας τοῦ τεχνίτου θελήσαντος, ὡς ἐκ τοῦ πολυμόρφου θηρῶντος τὸ εὐπρεπὲς καὶ ἐράσμιον)\(^{45}\). Besides, the lavish decoration of the shrine is compared to the fine attire of a bride (ὅν ὡς νύμφην ὡραῖσμένην καὶ περικεκοσμημένην). This comparison also indicates that the Church is married to Christ, the immortal Bridegroom (τῷ ἀθανάτῳ προσήγαγεν νυμφίῳ Χριστῷ). Thereupon each church building also in terms of external appearance must be appropriate for such a great Groom. On this account, the adorned “garment” of the New Church consists of marble cladding, mosaics, silk fabrics, pearls, gold, and silver. All these elements are costly and shiny, and they differ in colours as well.

Gold, probably in the form of tesserae, also covered the interiors of the five domes (πέντε συμπληρούμενοι ἡμισφαιρίων στίλβει χρυσῷ καὶ εἰκόνων ὡς ἀστέρων ἐξαστράπτει κάλλεσθαι), shimmering like stars. Moreover, all parts of the templon and the altars were made of silver and thereafter gilded (ἐξ ἀργυροῦ πάντα περικεχυμένον ἔχοντος τὸν χρυσὸν). Very similar elements of a description are also found in the somewhat earlier poetic ekphrasis of the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. It was written by Constantine of Rhodes (ca. 870 – after 931) who dedicated his work to Constantine VII

\(^{44}\) Vita Basilii, 83.15–19, 84.1–18 (There are the Greek text and the English translation). Liutprand of Cremona (ca. 920 – ca. 972) mentioned this church in the Retributio (Ἀνταπόδοσις), where he described his first diplomatic mission at the court of Constantinople, during the reign of Constantine VII Porphyrogentius (913–959):

Fabricavit autem precioso et mirabili opere iuxta palatium orientem versus ecclesiam in honorem summi et caelestis militiae principis, archangeli Michahelis, qui Grece archistrátigos, hoc est miliciae princeps, appellatur. Ecclesiam autem ipsam Nean, hoc est novam, alii vocant, alii vero Ennean, quod nostra lingua novennalem sonat, appellant, eo quod ibidem ecclesiasticarum horarum machina novem pulsata ictibus sonet,


\(^{45}\) Vita Basilii, 89.15–17.
Porphyrogenitus (913–959). The poet mentioned there the names of the architects Anthemius of Tralles and Isidore of Miletus, known most of all from the design of the church of the Holy Wisdom, and stressed that due to their theoretical knowledge it was possible to erect such a magnificent building. The church of the Holy Apostles, however, was ravishing not only because of the engineering concepts but also because of the stunning decoration. The latter is compared to a bride with golden ornaments (ὅποια νύμφην κροσσωτοῖσι χρυσέοις) – this motive was used, as we have seen, also in reference to the New Church – and to a wedding chamber glistening with gold (παστάδα χρύσαυγον ὑραίσμενην). The extraordinary glow of the church interior is associated with gold, as well as with multi-coloured marbles (μαρμάρων πολυχρόων), precious stones, and pearls giving fiery reflections (ταῖς ἐκ λίθων τε μαργάρων φρυκτωρίαις) and coming from different parts of the whole world (τῶν ἐξ ὅλης σχεδόν γε τῆς οἰκουμένης / καὶ μέχρις Ἰνδῶν Λιβύης τε κ’ Εὐρώπης / τῆς Ἀσίας τε πανταχοῦ θρυλλουμένων). A little further, Constantine of Rhodes also pointed to golden tesserae, against which – as can be

46 Τοίας μὲν ὥστε καὶ τόσαις τεχνουργίαις καὶ σχηματισμοῖς γραμμικῆς θεωρίας ὀλὸν διαμιᾷσες συγκατάρτισες<ν> δόμοιν τὸν ἀστρολαμπῆ τῶν σοφῶν Ἀποστόλων, εἰτ’ Ἀνθέμιος, εἰτ’ Ἰσίδωρος νέος, ὑλαις ἀπείροις μαρμάρων πολυχρόων καὶ λαμπρότητι τῶν μετάλλων τῶν ἐξένων ἐπενδύσας τε καὶ καλῶς συναρμόσας, ὥσπερ νύμφην κροσσωτοῖσι χρυσέοις ἡ παστάδα χρύσαυγον ὑραίσμενην ταῖς ἐκ λίθων τε μαργάρων φρυκτωρίαις τῶν ἐξ ὅλης σχεδόν γε τῆς οἰκουμένης καὶ μέχρις Ἰνδῶν Λιβύης τε κ’ Εὐρώπης τῆς Ἀσίας τε πανταχοῦ θρυλλουμένων.

Constantine of Rhodes, On Constantinople and the Church of the Holy Apostles, 636–649, ed. L. James, I. Vassis, trans. V. Dimitropoulou, L. James, R. Jordan, Farnham 2012 (cetera: Constantine of Rhodes). Then follows the description of the used marbles. They, as we read, cover the building like a chiton (ἂς ὡς χιτῶνας ἐνδύσας τοὺς ὀρθίους τοίχους) and create in the interior the impression of a meadow full of blooming flowers with colours reminiscent of precious stones (Constantine of Rhodes, 650–674; 686–695). It is worth comparing this part of the ekphrasis to the some passages from the Silentiary’s poem on the church of the Holy Wisdom, vide Paulus Silentiarius, 617–646.

47 Χρυσῷ δὲ μίγδῃν ύέλῳ πεφυκότι ἀπαν κατεχύρωσε τούνδοθεν μέρος, ὅσον τ’ ἐν ύψει σφαιροσυνθέτου στέγης χ’ ὅσον λαγόσιν ἁψίδων ὑπερφέρει, καὶ μέχρις αὐτῶν μαρμάρων πολυχρόων καὶ μέχρις αὐτῶν κοσμητῶν τῶν δευτέρων
concluded from the description – scenes from the life of Christ were depicted. It is noteworthy that the author had regard to technical detail, namely, that the golden mosaic cubes were made of glass and gold (Χρυσῷ δὲ μίγδην ὑέλῳ πεφυκότι).

The golden glow was also associated with shiny fabrics, as evidenced, for example, by Silentiarius’s ekphrasis of one of the silk purple fabrics prepared for the church of the Holy Wisdom:

tοῦτο δὲ καλλιπόνοιο φυτεύσατο χείρες τά βάρβαρος ἡμεῖς μύρης.

τούτου δὲ καλλιπόνοιο φυτεύσατο χείρες τά βάρβαρος ἡμεῖς μύρης.


toûto de kallipónoi φυτεύσατο χείρες τά βάρβαρος ἡμεῖς μύρης.  

Constantine of Rhodes, 742–750.

48 This is a quite long description, Constantine of Rhodes, 751–980. The church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople was demolished in 1453, therefore a form of this church is reconstructed primarily on the basis of written sources, which include, first of all, the ekphraseis created by Procopius of Caesarea, Constantine of Rhodes, and Nicholas Mesarites. The earliest of them discussed only the architectural form, and the other two also depicted scenes. Perhaps these mosaic pictures were made during the reign of Basil I; L. James, Constantine of Rhodes’ Poem and Art History, [in:] Constantine of Rhodes, On Constantinople…, p. 181–217. On the place where the church was built: Constantinople. Archaeology of a Byzantine Megapolis. Final Report on the Istanbul Rescue Archaeology Project 1998–2004, ed. K. Dark, F. Özgümüş, Oxford–Oakville 2013, p. 83–96. It is worth noting that there was a “Dumbarton Oaks Symposium” dedicated to this church (24–26 April 2015); M. Mullett, R. Ousterhout, The Holy Apostles. Dumbarton Oaks Symposium, 24–26 April 2015, DSP 70, 2016, p. 325–326; a collection of essays related to this conference has been recently published: The Holy Apostles – A Lost Monument, a Forgotten Project, and the Presentness of the Past, ed. M. Mullett, R.G. Ousterhout, Washington D.C. 2020 [= DOBC].

Some Remarks on the Significance of Gold

This has been fashioned not by artists’ skilful hands plying the knife, nor by the needle driven through cloth, but by the web, the produce of the foreign worm, changing its colored threads of many shades. Upon the divine legs is a garment reflecting a golden glow under the rays of rosy-fingered Dawn, and a chiton, dyed purple by the Tyrian seashell, covers the right shoulder beneath its well-woven fabric; for at that point the upper garment has slipped down while, pulled up across the side, it envelops the left shoulder. The forearm and hand are thus laid bare. He seems to be stretching out the fingers of the right hand, as if preaching His immortal words, while in His left He holds the book of divine message – the book that tells what He, the Lord, accomplished with provident mind when His foot trod the earth. The whole robe shines with gold: for on it gold leaf has been wrapped round thread after thread after thread, firmly bound with silken thread by sharp needles.

The poet described the liturgical fabric that was laid on the altar. It was made of silk dyed with the Tyrian purple, and the figure of Christ Pantocrator was embroidered with gold thread. According to Silentiarius, this cloth glistened wonderfully in the morning sun, spreading the golden glare all-round. In the following lines, the author also referred to other scenes and persons, including Peter and Paul who are next to Christ. They are standing under golden arcades (νηὸς ἐκολπώθη χρύσεος; τέτρασι χρυσείοις ἐπὶ κίοσι). The both saints, having a rank lower than Christ, were embroidered with silver threads (ἀμφω δὲ στολίδεσσιν ὑπ’ ἀργυφέῃσι πυκάζει πήνη ποικιλόεργος· ἐπ’ ἀμβροσίων δὲ καρήνων νηὸς ἐκολπώθη χρύσεος, τριέλικτον ἐγείρων ἀγλαϊνὴν ἀψίδος· ἐφεδρήσει δὲ βεβηκός τέτρασι χρυσείοις ἐπὶ κίσιο. χείλεσι δ’ άκροις χρυσοδέτου πέπλοιο κατέγραψεν ἄσπετα τέχνη ἐν δ’ ἑτέροις πέπλοισι συναπτομένου βασιλῆα μὲν παλάμαις Μαρίης θεοκύμονος εὑροίς, ἄλλοθι δὲ Χριστοῦ θεοῦ χερί· πάντα δὲ πήνης νήμασι χρυσοπόρων τε μίτων ποικιλλεῖται αἴγλῃ.

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50 Paulus Silentiarius, 765–785.
51 C. Mango, The Art of the Byzantine…, p. 88–89.
52 ἀμφω δὲ στολίδεσσιν ὑπ’ ἀργυφέῃσι πυκάζει πήνη ποικιλόεργος· ἐπ’ ἀμβροσίων δὲ καρήνων νηὸς ἐκολπώθη χρύσεος, τριέλικτον ἐγείρων ἀγλαϊνὴν ἀψίδος· ἐφεδρήσει δὲ βεβηκός τέτρασι χρυσείοις ἐπὶ κίσιο. χείλεσι δ’ άκροις χρυσοδέτου πέπλοιο κατέγραψεν ἄσπετα τέχνη ἐν δ’ ἑτέροις πέπλοισι συναπτομένου βασιλῆα μὲν παλάμαις Μαρίης θεοκύμονος εὑροίς, ἄλλοθι δὲ Χριστοῦ θεοῦ χερί· πάντα δὲ πήνης νήμασι χρυσοπόρων τε μίτων ποικιλλεῖται αἴγλῃ.

Paulus Silentiarius, 792–805.

Retrieved from https://czasopisma.uni.lodz.pl/sceranea [29.08.2021]
This kind of composition and its major colours can bring to mind the fantastic architecture, which is depicted in the mosaics in the dome of the Rotunda in Thessalonica. This architecture was depicted primarily of gold mosaic cubes, and it also frames the figures of standing saints or courtiers. In the case of the described fabric, buildings funded by emperors as well as the scenes of Christ’s miracles were embroidered with gold thread. As a result, the cloth is beautiful because of the content shown and the craftsmanship, and it is lighted by the golden glow of the threads.

It should be noted that examples of this kind of fabric’s ekphraseis are quite numerous, especially in the late antique Latin literature. At that time, imperial and consular robes were widely described. This theme was popular because it gave the opportunity – as in the case of architecture – to present splendid objects made of expensive, multi-coloured, and shiny materials. In the context of this so-called “jeweled aesthetics”, it is worth citing some passages from the semi-legendary *Narration on the Hagia Sophia* (Διήγησις περὶ τῆς Ἁγίας Σοφίας). Its chapters

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Some Remarks on the Significance of Gold…

15–19, 21–24, and 26 relate mainly to costly materials used in the church. In most cases, there are not many detailed descriptive parts among them: only two of them are quite extensive ekphraseis. The first one refers to the altar commissioned by Justinian I (527–565):

Ἐποίησε δὲ μηχανὴν τοιαύτην· βουλόμενος γὰρ κρείττονα τὴν ἁγίαν τράπεζαν καὶ πολυτελεστέραν ποιῆσαι ὑπὲρ χρυσίου προσεκαλέσατο ἐπιστήμονας πολλοὺς εἰρήκως αὐτοῖς τοῦτο. Οἱ δὲ ἔφησαν αὐτῷ· ἐκ εἰς χωνευτήριον χρυσὸν, ἄργυρον, λίθους τιμίους καὶ παντοίους καὶ μαργαρίτας καὶ ζάμβυκας, χαλκόν, ἥλεκτρον, μολύβδον, σιδηρόν, κασσίτερον, ἔλεγον καὶ λοιπῆν πάσαν μεταλλικὴν ὤλην· καὶ τρίψαντες ἄμφωτερα αὐτῶν εἰς ὀλυμπους καὶ δήσαντες, ἐπὶ τὸ χωνευτήριον ἔχυσαν. Καὶ ἀναμαξάμενον τὸ πῦρ, ἀνέλαβον ταῦτα οἱ τεχνῖται ἐκ τοῦ πυρὸς καὶ ἔχυσαν εἰς τύπον· καὶ ἐγένετο χυτὴ πάμμιγος ἡ ἁγία τράπεζα ἁτίμητος· καὶ εἶθ οὕτως ἔστησεν αὐτήν· ὑποκάτω δὲ αὐτῆς ἔστησε κίονας καὶ αὐτοὺς ἅλεκτρον καὶ σίδηρον, κασσίτερον, μολύβδον καὶ λοιπὴν πᾶσαν μεταλλικὴν ὤλην. Τίς γὰρ θεάσηται τὸ εἶδος τῆς ἁγίας τραπέζης καὶ ο网首页είη; ή τίς δυνήσηται κατανοῆσαι ταύτην διὰ τὸ πολλὰς χροιὰς καὶ στιλπνότητας ἐναλλάσσειν, ὡς ὁρᾶσθαι τὸ ταύτης εἶδός ποτὲ μὲν χρυσίον, ἐν ἄλλῳ δὲ τόπῳ ἀργυρίζον, εἰς ἄλλο σαμφειρίζον, ἐξαστράπτον καὶ ἁπλῶς εἰπεῖν ἀποστέλλον οἱ χροιαὶ κατὰ τὰς φύσεις τῶν λίθων καὶ μαργαρίτων καὶ πάντων τῶν μετάλλων?

He also make the following contrivance. Wishing to make the holy altar table better and more precious than gold, he consulted many wise men and told them so. They said to him. “Let us throw gold, silver, various precious stones, pearls and mother of pearl, bronze, electrum, lead, iron, tin, glass and every other metallic material into melting furnace.” Having crushed and bound all of these in mortars, they poured them into the melting furnace. And when the fire had kneaded all these together, the craftsman took them out of the fire and poured them into a casting mold. And so the altar table was cast, made up of all materials and priceless. And then he set it up in this manner, and placed columns of pure gold under it with precious stones and enamels; and he made the surrounding stairs, on which the priests stand when they kiss the holy altar table, also of pure silver. He made the liturgical basin (thalassa) of the altar table of priceless stones and gilded it. So who can behold the beauty of the holy altar table and not be amazed? Or who can comprehend it as its many colors and brilliances change, so that it appears sometimes as gold, in other places as silver, elsewhere gleaming with sapphire – radiating and, in a word, sending out seventy-two colors according to the nature of the stones, pearls and all the metals?

In this description, where gold is a synonym of the most valuable substance, Justinian, however, managed to find a way to obtain a material even more wonderful and expensive (κρείττονα τὴν ἁγίαν τράπεζαν καὶ πολυτελεστέραν ποιῆσαι ὑπὲρ χρυσίου), since he ordered to melt all possible precious materials – apart


from gold also silver, electrum, bronze, pearls, and precious stones – along with more common metals – i.e. lead, iron, tin, and with glass – in one crucible. Consequently, a priceless mixture (πάμμιγος ἀτίμητος) was created. As we read, it was characterized by a multitude of colours and it shimmered in different ways, like the materials of which it was made. It can be assumed that the author, explaining how the altar was built, above all tried to emphasize the emperor’s involvement and generosity, as he cumulated the most expensive materials for the most vital part of the church’s furnishings. Therefore, this description should not be taken literally. In turn, the seventy-two colours probably allude to the number of disciples sent by Christ to preach the Gospel. Importantly, an anonymous author of the Narration clearly stressed a brilliance and colourfulness of the costly materials. In the second ekphrasis – regarding the floor and symbolic interpretation of the four stripes on it – he directly stated that: “Θαῦμα δὲ ἦν ἰδέσθαι ἐν τῷ κάλλει καὶ τῇ ποικιλίᾳ τοῦ ναοῦ· ὅτι πάντοθεν ἐκ τῆς χρυσοῦ καὶ ἀργύρου ἐξήστραπτεν” (It was wonderful to see the beauty and variety of the church, for it shone all around with gold and silver). Thus, the most prized aesthetic value is still the variegation (ποικιλία, πολυποικιλία). Evidences of this preference can be found throughout the text, since it glitters with precious and shiny materials such as, among others: golden mosaic cubes (ὑέλινος χρυσός), niello (ἀργυροέγκαυστος), sardonyx (σαρδόνυξ), crystal (κρύος), jasper (ιάσπιον), sapphire (σάπφειρος), ruby (λυχνιτάριον) and emerald (σμάραγδος). They are all so wonderful and dazzling that the author rhetorically asks: “Τὴν δὲ ὡραιότητα καὶ τὴν ὑπερβολὴν τοῦ κάλλους τοῦ κεχρυσωμένου καὶ διηργυρωμένου ναοῦ ἀπὸ ὀρόφους ἕως ἐδάφους τίς διηγήσεται;” (Who can relate the loveliness and the excessive beauty of this church, gilded and sheathed with silver from ceiling to floor?)

From the texts discussed so far, it follows that gold was valued primarily for its extraordinary glow – sometimes even too blinding – with which light was...
inevitably related. The authors, as could be seen, regularly point out that rays falling on golden surfaces are reflected from them, scattering golden reflections all-round. Thus, the aforementioned “jeweled aesthetics” do not exist without light, because it “triggers” these, described with pleasure and highly praised, characteristic visual effects. Hence, gold needs a light source to fully show its beauty. In turn, the light can take dazzling colour of gold. It is not surprising, then, that Sergey Averintsev termed gold the “absolute metaphor of light”

In the accounts of Byzantine writers, gold is also a colour, although this issue was considered less often because in terms of colours marbles and precious stones were much more praised. They were, as already mentioned, compared to meadows in full bloom. All the more, it is worth quoting a passage from the already cited homily of Leo VI, where he explains the reason for using golden mosaic cubes in the church:

Ἐφεξῆς δὲ τοῦ ὅλου τοῦ ναοῦ κύτους καὶ τῶν αἷς ἁψίδων ὁ ὅροφος, τῶν άλλων οἰκείων ἀνεστήλωται θεραπόντων εἰκόνες, πάσαι ψηφίδος χρυσῷ ἀλειφομένης πεποιημέναι, ἐνταῦθα τὸ χρήσιμον τοῦ χρυσοῦ κατειλέουσαν τοῦ τεχνίτου καὶ ἀφθόνως χρησαμένοι. Ἐβουλήθη γὰρ ταῖς εἰκόσι τῇ τοῦ χρυσοῦ μίξει τοιοῦτον ἐνθεῖναι κάλλος, οἷον εἰκὸς ἀμφιέννυσθαι τούς βασιλέας πλησίον, ἄλλως τε δὲ καὶ πρὸς τὸ γράψαι τοῖς μέλεσιν ἀρετῆς χρῶμα τῆν ἐκ τοῦ χρυσοῦ κατενόησεν χρησιμεύουσαν ὠχρότητα

The rest of the church's hollow and the arches on which the roof is supported have images of [God's] own servants, all of them made of mosaic smeared with gold. The craftsman has made abundant use of gold whose utility he perceived: for, by its admixture, he intended to endow the pictures with such beauty as appears in the apparel of the emperor's entourage. Furthermore, he realized that the pallor of gold was an appropriate color to express the virtue of [Christ's] member.

The emperor points out there that the pale hue of gold (ὠχρότητα) reminds the costumes of the imperial court (εἰκὸς ἀμφιέννυσθαι τούς βασιλέας πλησίον), and that it is suitable for the images of saints because it emphasises their saintship (πρὸς τὸ γράψαι τοῖς μέλεσιν ἀρετῆς χρῶμα τῆν ἐκ τοῦ χρυσοῦ κατενόησεν χρησιμεύουσαν ὠχρότητα). In this context, it is also worth paying attention to the short poem of Eugenius of Palermo (ca. 1130–1202) dedicated to the image of Saint John Chrysostom:

Καὶ χρῶμα χρυσοῦν, πάμμακαρ, σοὶ καὶ στόμα·
τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἡμῖν ἐκχέον χρυσοῦς λόγους
τὴν κλῆσιν ἀπήνεγκεν ἐκ τῶν πραγμάτων,

67 Leo VI, 31.70–78.
All blessed one, both your color and your voice are golden. For the one [your voice], pouring out to us golden words, took its name from your deeds, while pallor delineates the holiness of your color. For consuming your flesh by the fire of fasting, you have tinged it with the pallor of gold

In this case, the poet specified that the golden colour – due to its pallor (ὠχρότης, χλωρότης) – was very suitable for the representation of the ascetic saint whose body, experienced by fasting, lost its more vivid colours.

The beauty of gold was also associated with splendour. This question was also raised, e.g., by Choricius of Gaza (491–518) in the ekphrasis of the church of St. Stephen at Gaza:

The curious observer may look high and low in search of a spot bare of either marble or gold: he will not find one here. Those who are embarrassed by [so much] gold and marble, and seek relief in stones and masonry, will be able to study the latter on the outside.

The effulgent embellishment of the church consists of gold and marble revetment. They contrast with the outside stone walls which can provide a respite from the richness of the interior. Recognizing that this type of decoration could be too overwhelming to spectators, the author also hurried to explain that the building has a very good style that would only be appreciated by true art experts. Of course, there is a trap here: those who perceive a building negatively have no knowledge of art. Choricius, though sure of the incomparable beauty of the church, made

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69 Eugenius Panormitanus, In imaginem Chrysostomi, 11, [in:] Versus Iambici, ed. M. Gigante, Palermo 1964 [= TMon, 10].
70 H. Maguire, Nectar…, p. 130.
71 Choricius, 2.2.49.
73 […] συνελθέτωσαν ἀνδρεῖς πολλῶν ἱστορήσαντες πόλεων ἱερά, ἄλλος ἄλλο τι δοκιμάζειν έργον εἴδος, καὶ πρὸς τοὺς πανταχοῦ βεβοηγούσις νεώς κρινέσθω καθάπερ ἐν δικαστηρίῳ τὸ τέμενος ἐκ τοιούτων συνεστηκότι κριτῶν. οἷον ὁ μὲν γραφῆς ἔστω φιλοθεάμων, οὐ τῆς ἐν χρώμασι μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῆς ἐν ψηφίδι μιμουμένης ἐκείνη· ὁ δὲ μαρμάρων δοκιμαστής, ὅν τὰ μὲν ἔξω οὐ μεταλλεύεται προσαγωρεύουσα τόπων, τοῖς δὲ τὰ χρώματα δίδωσιν ὀνόματα. ἄλλω κιόνων μελέτω τὰς κεφαλίδας
Some Remarks on the Significance of Gold…

it clear that the right proportions must be respected in the use of gold, because both an excess and a shortness is wrong. Just from this one example, it can be seen that the attitude to gold was to some extent marked by suspiciousness. The authors often felt obliged to clarify that the decorations of gold did not exceed the appropriate measure (ἀμετρία): gold is beautiful, but it is necessary to use it purposefully and decorously.

Against a backdrop of the moderation in a use of gold, the description of the church of Saint George in the Mangana quarter written by Michael Psellos (ca. 1017–1078?) is an interesting example. He characterised the church rebuilt by Constantine IX Monomachos (1042–1055) as a combination of beauty and luxury:

καὶ τεχνικῶτερα πάντα· καὶ χρυσός ὑπαλείφων τὸν ὄροφον. τῶν δὲ λίθων ὁπόσαι χλοάζουσιν, αἱ μὲν κατεστρόφυννοντο· αἱ δὲ τοίχοι ἢμιοῶντο· καὶ ἄλλῃ τις ἐφ’ ἐτέρα ἐπήγει, ἢ ἐφ’ ὄμοιῳ τῷ χρώματι· ἐναλλαξ παραλλάττουσαι. ο δὲ χρυσός, ἀπὸ τῶν δημοσίων ταιμιείων ὑπέρ ἄφθονον πηγῶν καχλάζοντι ἐπέρρεε τῷ ῥεύματι. […] Ο μὲν γὰρ ναὸς, ὡσπέρ τις οὐρανός χρυσοῖς ἀστράσι πάντοθεν ἐπεποκιλτο. μᾶλλον δὲ τὸ μὲν αἰθέριον σῶμα ἐναλλάξ παραλλάττουσαι. ὁ δὲ χρυσός, ἀπὸ τῶν δημοσίων ταμείων ὥσπερ ἐξ ἀφθόνων πηγῶν καχλάζοντι ἐπερρεῖ τῷ ῥεύματι. […] Ὁ μὲν γὰρ ναὸς, ὥσπερ οὐρανὸς χρυσοῖς ἀστράσι πάντοθεν ἐπεποκιλτο. μᾶλλον δὲ τὸ μὲν αἰθέριον σῶμα ἐναλλάξ παραλλάττουσαι. ὁ δὲ χρυσός, ἀπὸ τῶν δημοσίων ταμείων ὥσπερ ἐξ ἀφθόνων πηγῶν καχλάζοντι ἐπερρεῖ τῷ ῥεύματι. […] Ἐπισκευάσαι δὲ βουληθεὶς καὶ τὸν ἐν τῷ ἀνάπλῳ ναὸ ἀκριβῶς, ἂν ἄρα μὴ πρὸς τὸ ὕψος ἀπείπῃ· ξύλα γὰρ ἐνταῦθα πολυτελῆ καλαθίσκοις κεκαλυμμένα τοῦ τε πρὸς ἰσχύν ἅμα καὶ πρὸς κάλλος εὖ ἔχειν. συνιόντων οὖν τῶν δικαστῶν καὶ τοῦτο κρίνειν ἑκάστου λαχόντος ὅπερ ἂν ἄμεινον τῶν ἄλλων τύχων γινώσκων, πάσαις ἡμῖν ὁ νεὼς νικήσει ταῖς ψήφοις, Choricius, 2.252–54.

74 In the History of Niketas Choniates, we read that Isaac II Angelos (1185–1195) destroyed this church with the adjacent palace, and the building materials obtained during this demolition were then used for other edifices:

<σκοπεῖν>. χρυσῶν ἔτερος μέτρα πολυπραγμονείτω σαφῶς, εἰ ποῦ τι γέγονεν ἐνδεές ἢ περιττόν· ἐκεῖ οὐκ ἂν ἔσχειν, καὶ συνιόντων οὖν τῶν δικαστῶν καὶ τοῦτο κρίνειν ἑκάστου λαχόντος ὅπερ ἂν ἄμεινον τῶν ἄλλων τύχων γινώσκων, πάσαις ἡμῖν ὁ νεὼς νικήσει ταῖς ψήφοις, Nicetae Choniatae historia, pars prior, Isaac2, pt3, ed. J. van Dieten, Berlin 1975 [= CFHB. SBe, 11.1], p. 442.18–27.

like the sky adorned on all sides with golden stars; to be more exact, the heavens are gilded only at intervals, while here the gold, flowing as it were, from the center in a copious stream, has covered the entire surface without interruption.  

Although Psellos admired this church, he also recognized it as a crowning example of the exaggeration of the emperor who wanted to surpass all other churches:


My indictment of his [Constantine IX’s] excesses now comes to its principal point, namely the church he founded in honor of the martyr George, which he then entirely destroyed and wiped out, and [after rebuilding it] reduced it once again to ruin. [...] Later on, however, he became consumed by the passion of rivalling all the buildings of the past and even surpassing them by far.

Therefore, Psellos heavily criticised exaggerated aspirations of the emperor, and the ruler’s intention was decisive for considering the church too luxurious. However the funding of various edifices was a quite significant task of emperors, sometimes they were reprehended for the activity of this sort. It could also be a way of showing general disapproval of the policy pursued by a given emperor, just to mention the particularly symptomatic case of Procopius of Caesarea.

In the case of art, splendour of gold could be very desirable, as evidenced by epigrams devoted to icons made of precious materials or, at least, clad with them. And to give an example, Nicholas Kallikles (ca. 1080 – ca. 1150) prepared a poem for an icon of Christ, which John II Komnenos (1118–1143) commissioned for the Pantokrator Monastery in Constantinople:

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77 Psellos, 6.185.1–5; 6.185.8–11.
When I beautify your icon with gold,
I, the king, pay tribute to the king of all.
When I [make it] glitter with precious stones,
I do not want you [to be] an "obstructing stone",
for I honour you as [the] cornerstone that unites all extremities.
And thus, like a merchant I attain you and adorn you with pearls,
you, the worthy and beautiful pearl,
from whom I have won all my good fortune:
an anointed throne, and sceptre, and glorious crown.
Should some Persian dog,
Scythian leopard, or Hungarian wolf howl,
should Panonians clamour and Dacians mount [their chargers],
strike them, O powerful one, smash their jaws.
Protect my offspring, the vine's fruit,
the flowers of the meadow, the white "lilies of the valley" –
give [them] long life. And in that future judgement
let me be united with my consort in a single soul
that death divided in twain,
leaving me half and already dead.
Unite that man immediately, as you know how,

81 Cf. Rom 9, 33.
82 Cf. Ct 2, 1.
83 Nicola Callicle, Carmi, 2.12–34, ed. R. Romano, Napoli 1980 [= BNN, 8].
bestowing the garden of Eden as [his] lot.

So these things I, John Komnenos, [address] to you, O Word, I, the king of the Ausonites, sprung from the purple[^84].

This emperor also funded another icon of Christ, which is associated with an epigram (Εἰς εἰκόνα τοῦ ύπεραγάθου σωτῆρος Χριστοῦ, ὡς ἀπὸ βασιλέως κυροῦ Ἰωάννου) written by Theodore Prodromos (ca. 1100 – ca. 1165):

Σὺ μὲν καθιστάς γῆς με πάσης δεσπότης,
ο παμβασιλεὺς ύπεραγάθος Λόγος,
καὶ μοι πρὸς ταρσῶν πάν τὸ βάρβαρον κλίνεις,
ὡς καὶ φόρους μοι δουλικῶς συνεισφέρειν,
καὶ προσκύνησιν οὐκ ἔμοι μόνον νέμει,
ἀλλ’ εἰ τις ἡμῶν εἰκονισθῇ καὶ τύπος:
ἐγὼ δὲ τῷ πλάσαντι καὶ στέψαντί με
καὶ ταῦτα πάντα δόντι ἥκαι στέψαντι
πάλιν στέψαντι μετ’
τὴν δουλικὴν εὐνοιαν εἰσφέρω πάλιν
καὶ ζωγραφίσω σε
ὅτι χρυσοῦ χάριν
καὶ ἀλλ’ ὧν Ἑλίους καὶ ἄλλους εἰσκομίζω σοι φόρους,
έμοι γὰρ ἐκ σοῦ καὶ βίου πρώτη πλάσις
καὶ σκηνῶν παμβασιλεῖαν
καὶ πάντων τῶν σιωπημένων
καὶ μυρίων πέλαγος ἀριστεύματων,
ὅς Λόγος ἔχει μένειν ἀμύνειν ἄνω
καὶ σπάνειν τῆς γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης
καὶ λιθούς μὲν μάρτυς ἀψευδὴς ἄνω,
κάτω δὲ τῆς γῆς καὶ τῆς γερανίας
ἀλλ’ οἴοι πανσθενὲς παντοκράτορ,
καὶ τοὺς προλοίπους δαμάσων μοι βαρβάρους
καὶ τοὺς τοῖς ἑπειδής φύλαττε τὴν πόλιν πόνος
καὶ [σε]νεφιστίνῃς ἔν τέλει σωτηρίαν.
Ἰωάννης σοι ταῦτα πιστὸς οἰκέτης
πορφυρόβλαστος Κομνηνὸς αὐτοκράτωρ
τῷ βασιλεί μου καὶ θεῷ καὶ δεσπότῃ[^85].

You who made me lord of all the world,
You the King of All and abundantly good Logos
who makes all barbarians bow at my feet,
and pay servile tribute to me.

It is not to my person alone that they bow down
but wherever else the image of our features is depicted.

I, to Him that made and crowned me,
once again pay the homage of a slave,
and painting you I venerate your form;
adorning you with gold and silver
is my way of paying you tribute.

To you I owe both life’s existence

Some Remarks on the Significance of Gold…

and my royal sceptre,
and the throne inherited from my father,
and a sea of myriad trophies
of which above the sun is unimpeachable witness
and below, the breadth of sea and earth.
But, O sovereign and all-powerful Pantokrator,
rein in for me the remaining barbarians,
and preserve my city through my own pains,
and at the end give my soul salvation.
The emperor Komnenos sprung from the purple,
to my king and God and Lord86.

In the both poems, the emperor decided to commission an icon decorated with expensive materials – in the first case they are gold, pearls, and precious stones, in the second one – silver and gold. The descriptions are quite general, but it can be assumed that these materials formed revetments: it is especially likely in the last epigram, where both the painting layer and adornment are distinguished (καὶ ζωγραφῶν σε προσκυνώ σου τὸν τύπον / καὶ τὴν ἀπ’ ἀργύρου τε καὶ χρυσοῦ χάριν / καθώσπερ ἄλλους εἰσκομίζω σοι φόρους). John II Komnenos chooses these gifts to thank for all the favours he has received so far and to ask God for further support in both state and personal matters. The emperor presents himself as the greatest earthly ruler who addresses the supreme king, therefore the gift must be worthy of both of them. In the context of material goods, precious metals and stones are the most valuable. Hence, Komnenos intended them to deck the images of Christ. There are more Byzantine poems composed around the problem of icons with precious-metal revetments, which proves the popularity of the motif and this type of votive gifts as well87.

Costly and shiny materials creating a dazzling decoration were suitable not only for churches but also for the imperial court. In ekphraseis of imperial residences, the richness of the materials used – as well as the way they are characterised – virtually does not differ from that employed for descriptions of religious architecture. In this context, it is worth quoting the ekphrasis of the palace of Digenis Akritis. His residence is an example of unreal architecture, created for the purpose of the poem, therefore it is more magnificent than any real palace:

Μέσον αὐτοῦ τοῦ θαυμαστοῦ καὶ τερπνοῦ παραδείσου
οἶκον τερτόναν ἀνήγειρεν ὁ γενναῖος Ἀκρίτης
εὐμεγέθη, τετράγωνον ἐκ λίθων πεπρισμένων,
ἀνωθεν δὲ μετὰ σεμνῶν κιόνων καὶ θυρίδων.
Τὸς ὀρόφους έκόσιμησε πάντας μετὰ μουσείου
ἐκ μαρμάρων πολυτελῶν τῇ αἴγλῃ ἀστραπτόντων:
τὸ ἔδαφος ἐφαίδρυνε, ἐψήφωσεν ἐν λίθοις,

86 T. Papamastorakis, The Display…, p. 38.
87 Ibidem, p. 39–47.

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In the midst of this wonderfully pleasant garden the noble Akrites erected a big square house of cut stone having stately columns and windows up above. He adorned all the ceilings with mosaic, he decorated the pavement with precious gleaming marbles and tesserae of stone. Inside he made upper chambers on three floors having sufficient height and decorated ceilings; [he also made] cruciform halls, strange pentacubicula, containing shining marbles reflecting shafts of light. So beautiful was the artist's work that the gay, many-faced aspect of the stones made one think of woven tapestry. He paved the floor with onyx so smoothly polished that those who saw it mistook it for water congealed to ice. On either side he set up long, wondrous reclining-rooms having golden ceilings upon which he represented in mosaic the victories of all those men of yore who shone in valor.

In the description of the residence of Akritis, sparkling marbles (ἐκ μαρμάρων τῇ αἴγλῃ ἀστραπτόντων; μετὰ μαρμάρων φαεινῶν λίαν ἀστραπηβόλων), mosaics (ἐφαίδρυνεν, ἐψήφωσεν ἐν λίθοις, χρυσόμουσα), and gilded ceilings (χρυσορόφους) are specified: their glow is clearly emphasized. As for colours, they are actually not particularised. This imagined palace is described in accordance with the established convention, and – due to the epic character of the poem – all the features are exaggerated and idealised. As the Akritis’ residence is an example of fantastic architecture, so its opposite is the palace Muchrutas, which brief ekphrasis was composed by Nicholas Mesarites (ca. 1163 – after 1216). It is a very interesting text because in this case, the author had to face the necessity of crossing the formulaic patterns since the building was erected in a style referring to Muslim architecture:

The Mouchroutas is an enormous building adjacent to the Chrysotriklinos, lying as it does on the west side of the latter. [...] This building is the work not of a Roman, nor a Sicilian, nor a Celt-Iberian, nor a Sybaritic, nor a Cypriot, nor a Cilician hand, but of a Persian hand, by virtue of which it contains images of Persians in their different costumes. The canopy of the roof, consisting of hemispheres joined to the heaven-like ceiling, offers a variegated spectacle; closely packed angles project inward and outward; the beauty of the carving is extraordinary, and wonderful is the appearance of the cavities which, overlaid with gold, produce the effect of rainbow more colourful than the one in the clouds. There is insatiable enjoyment here – not hidden, but on the surface. Not only those who direct their gaze to these things for the first time, but those who have often done so are struck with wonder and astonishment. Indeed, this Persian building is more delightful than the Laconian ones of Menelaus.

It is assumed that this palace was built around the mid-twelfth century. Its most characteristic element was – as can be deduced from the text – a muqarnas vault. The author, using a heavily rhetorical style, describes its complex form. He employs the common comparison of the vault with the heaven (τῷ οὐρανοειδεῖ ὀρόφῳ) and highlights the delightful – surpassing the rainbow – glow of gold reflections (τῶν κοιλωμάτων θέαμα πάντερπνον, ἰρῖν φαντάζον πολυχρωμοτέραν τῆς ἐν τοῖς νέφεσι, χρυσοῦ τούτῳ ὑπεστρωμένου). He concludes the whole with a statement of the extraordinary beauty of the building, even more magnificent than the Menelaus' palace. In this way, Mesarites pointed to the Poet and his scheme of ekphrasis of dazzling residence of the mighty ruler.

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93 [...] οἱ δὲ ιδόντες θαύμαζον κατὰ δῶμα διοτρεφέος βασιλῆος· ὃς τε γάρ ἥλιοι ἀγίλη πέλεν ἡ σελήνης δῶμα καθ’ υψερεφές Μενελάου κυδαλίμοιο. [...] δὴ τότε Τηλέμαχος προσεφώνεε Νέστορος υἱόν, ἅγχι σχοῖν κεφαλῆς ἡν μὴ πευθοίαθ' οἱ ἄλλοι· "φράζεο, Νέστορίδη, τῷ ἐμῷ κεχαρισμένε θυμῷ, χαλκοῦ τε στεροπὴν κατὰ δώματα ἡχήντα..."
To summarize the remarks on the significance of gold in Byzantine ekphraseis, and at the same time indicate how long-lasting – reaching even beyond the fall of Constantinople – the inclination for gleaming and costly materials, including gold, was, it is proper to cite the passage on the Pammakaristos Church from the History of the Patriarchate of Constantinople from 1454 to 1578 (Πατριαρχική Κωνσταντινουπόλεως ἱστορία ἀπὸ τοῦ ,αυνδ' ἐως τοῦ ,αφοη' ἐτους Χριστοῦ) which was written by Manuel Malaxos (died ca. 1580):

ἐχει γάρ ὁ οὐρανός, καθὼς τὸν ἐβλέπομεν, ἥλιον φεγγάρη ἀστρη καὶ τὰ ἄλλα. ἐχει δὲ αὐτός ὁ ναὸς τῆς παμμακαρίστου ἀντὶ τοῦ φωτὸς τοῦ ήλίου τὸ ώραιότατον καὶ λαμπρότατον χρυσόν τέμπλου, ἀπάνω μετά τοῦ ζωσποιοῦ χρυσοῦ σταυροῦ, ὅπως ἕνα εἰς αὐτόν ἐσταυρωμένος ὁ κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός καὶ σωτὴρ παντὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου γένους, καὶ αἱ εἰκόνες τῶν διάδεκα δεσποτικών ἑορτῶν, καὶ κάτωθεν τοῦ τέμπλου ἡ εἰκόνα τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, μεγάλη καὶ λαμπρότατη, καὶ ζωοποιοῦσαν χρυσόν. ἐν δὲ τῶν θείων εἰκόνων καὶ τῶν σκέπων ἦσαν κορώνας κυανοί ἐκέλευσαν καὶ τὴν λαμπρότητα τῶν θείων εἰκόνων.

χρυσαί τ’ ἠλέκτρου τε καὶ ἀργυρίου ἑδ’ ἐλέφαντος.

Zηνός που τοιδε γ’ Οὐλιππίου ἐδόθεν αὐλῆ, ὅσα τάδ’ ἀσπετα πολλά· σέβας μ’ ἐχει εἰσορόωντα, ὡς τε γάρ ηλίου αὐλῆ πέλεν ἴη σελήνης δώμα καθ’ ὑπερφέρεσι μεγαλήτορος. Πόλεμοι μεν γάρ τοιχοι ἐηληλέδατ’ ἐνθι καὶ ἐνθι, ἐς μυχὸν εἰς ὑπερφέρεσι, πρὶν χάλκεον οὐδὸν ἔκθεσε. ἄργυρεοι δὲ σταθμοὶ ἐν χαλκέῳ ἔστασαν οὐδό, ἀργύρεον δ’ ἐπ’ ὑπερθύριον, χρυσέη δὲ κορώνη. ἀργύρεοι δὲ κοῦροι ἐπὶ χερσὶν ἔχοντες, φαίνοντες νύκτας κατὰ δώματα δαιτυμόνεσσι, Ημέρ ας ἔτευξεν ἰδυίῃσι πραπίδεσσι δώμα φυλασσέμεναι μεγαλήτορος ἰδυίῃσι, ἀθανάτους ὄντας καὶ ἀγήρως ἠματα πάντα. ἐν δὲ θρόνοι περί τοιχῶν ἔρρηθεν ἔνθα καὶ ἐνθα, ἐνδον δὲ καὶ ἐνθα, ἐκ μυχῶν εἰς ὑπερθύριον, ἔστασαν αἰθομένας δαίδας μετὰ χερσὶν ἔχοντες, φαίνοντες νύκτας κατὰ δώματα δαιτυμόνεσσι.
Some Remarks on the Significance of Gold

καὶ ὅλην τὴν εὐπρέπειαν τοῦ ναοῦ [...] ἔναι δὲ καὶ λέγεται αὐτὸς ὁ ναὸς τῆς μεγάλης ἐκκλη-
σίας τῆς παμμακαριστοῦ ἐπίγειος οὐρανός, νέα Σιών.94

The sky – when we look at it – has the sun, moon, stars and other [celestial bodies]. In turn,
this church of the All-Blessed instead of the light of the sun has the most beautiful and
brightest golden templon with a life-giving and golden cross on the top, where the cruci-
fied Jesus Christ, Lord and Saviour of all mankind, is set, as well as the representation of the
Twelve Great Feasts, and below the image of Our Lord Jesus Christ, great and brightest,
and on the right, the image of the All-Blessed Virgin Mary, the most beautiful and bright:
both have extremely valuable golden podeai. [There are] also gates to the sanctuary, really
excellent and of great value; the door wings of the holy sanctuary [are] all gold and with the
evangelical salutation of the Holy Mother of God. Instead of moonlight and stars, it has silver
candlesticks and the splendour of sacred images, and all the glory of the shrine. [...] And this
church is called the great church of the All-Blessed and is the heaven on earth, the new Zion.

Gold in Byzantine texts appears primarily as one of the most beautiful materi-
als available to artists. Its beauty lies in its glow and colour, although despite the
dazzling appearance, some authors stated that multi-coloured marbles are more
wonderful. Above all, the variegation (ποικιλία, πολυποικιλία) was valued the
most. It was the main feature of the “jeweled aesthetics” developed in late antiq-
uity and carried on by Byzantines. Byzantine writers relatively rarely referred to
symbolic issues. For instance, in an ekphrasis of an icon of Virgin and Christ writ-
ten by John Eugenikos (ca. 1400 – ca. 1453), we read that a gold colour of Christ’s
cloak indicates his divine nature.95 A similar interpretation of the significance
of gold we find in an epigram associated with Manuel Philes (ca. 1275–1345).
He explains there that a silver gilded revetment of an icon designates spiritual
features of the depicted Virgin.96 The same motive is in an epigram on a bronze
gilded statue of the charioteer Porphyrios: gold is referred to the merits of the
famous athlete.97 What is more important, for Byzantine authors, wonderful aes-
thetic properties of gold could also have a symbolic meaning. Nonetheless, they
more frequently used to discuss aesthetic questions. Then, it seems that these
matters need more attention of researchers because now they are rather neglected.
In closing, it should also be added that highly appreciated visual effects created

94 Manuel Malaxus, Historia politica Constantinopoleos (a 1454 usque ad 1578 annum Christi),
7–22, 7–9, [in:] Historia Politica et Patriarchica Constantinopoleos, ed. I. Bekker, Bonn 1849
 [= CSHB, 32], p. 203–204.
95 See Anecdota nova, ed. J.F. Boissonade, Paris 1844, p. 335–340. See as well G. Galavaris, The
Stars of the Virgin. An Ekphrasis of an Ikon of the Mother of God, ECR 1, 1966, p. 364–369 (reprinted
96 See Manuelis Philae carmina inedita, 35, ed. A. Martini, Napoli 1900. See as well H. Maguire,
Originality…, p. 110.
on gold surfaces are not only associated with diverse conceptual meanings but also with technical aspects which pertain to, among others, various methods of gilding and polishing. It is very important problem due to its direct impact on a final shape of works of art. This issue, however, is the subject for a different paper.

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Some Remarks on the Significance of Gold...


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Abstract. The abundance of gilding is considered to be a particularly characteristic feature of Byzantine art. This attribute can be confirmed by even a cursory analysis of works of art. In short, Byzantine artists used gold on a large scale, showing great technical skill. It is therefore quite surprising that this issue has not yet received a separate, comprehensive study. Admittedly, researchers recognize the presence of gold but unfortunately, they almost do not go beyond general observations. On the one hand, they emphasize the primary role of the symbolic meanings of gold, and, on the other, they indicate the high material value of this precious metal. These comments are usually very general and their authors rarely refer to specific primary sources. Their observations, however, speak more about present-day ideas about Byzantine culture than about it itself. The indicated problem is an important and extensive task to be done, hence this paper is only an outline of the most important questions, each of which requires a separate and in-depth study. Therefore, this synthetic article introduces the most basic points associated with the understanding of gold in Byzantium. For this purpose, selected examples of Byzantine texts in which their authors referred to gold in a strictly artistic context are analysed. Thus, the main thesis is as follows: in Byzantine painting, gold, one of the most important devices of artistic expression, was used on a large scale primarily for aesthetic reasons.

Keywords: Byzantine aesthetics, ekphrasis, gilding, mosaic, marble

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