

Predella journal of visual arts, n°37, 2015 - Miscellanea / *Miscellany* ■

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Direzione scientifica e proprietà / *Scholarly Editors-in-Chief and owners:*
Gerardo de Simone, Emanuele Pellegrini - predella@predella.it

Predella pubblica ogni anno due numeri online e due numeri monografici a stampa /
Predella publishes two online issues and two monographic print issues each year

Tutti gli articoli sono sottoposti alla peer-review anonima / All articles are subject to anonymous peer-review

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Predella journal of visual arts - ISSN 1827-8655

Hagia Sophia and the Byzantine Aesthetic Experience

Review of Nadine Schibille,
Hagia Sophia and the Byzantine Aesthetic Experience,
Ashgate, 2014, 320 pp., £ 70, ISBN 978-1-4724-3758-7

This book takes an inside look at the sense of wonder and otherworldliness that has overwhelmed visitors to the church of Hagia Sophia since early Byzantine times, and examines the sixth-century building from the perspective of aesthetics, and in relation to early Byzantine theories of color, luminosity and divine enlightenment.

Based on literary and philosophical sources as well as visual and archaeological evidence, light is identified in this volume as a key aesthetic and epistemological category in early Byzantium – and as the principle that dictated the architectural structure and artistic programme of Hagia Sophia in its sixth-century incarnation.

Chapter One draws on the vast scholarship on Byzantine rhetorical conventions and visibility, investigating aesthetic responses to Hagia Sophia in the sixth century through coeval descriptions of the church. Early writers focused their attention on the mesmerizing effects of light and color in Hagia Sophia, identifying light as a central component of their sensory experience in the church. However, Schibille argues that these texts also conceptualized light as the material manifestation of divine presence in the building, suggesting a close association between aesthetic experience and apprehension of the divine in Hagia Sophia.

Chapters 2 and 3 turn to the practical aspects of illumination, examining the architecture, decorative programme and lighting systems of Hagia Sophia in the sixth century. Some of the hypotheses advanced in these sections rely on controversial archaeological and literary evidence, and would require separate discussion. However, the overarching argument is convincing: light played a key role in the architectural and decorative design of Hagia Sophia. The careful orchestration of natural and artificial lighting and the interplay between atmospheric light and the color of mosaics in the church created a resplendent, luminous space, which elicited amazement and spiritual reverence.

Having compared Hagia Sophia with other early Byzantine buildings in Chapter 4, and after a brief (and perhaps dispensable) detour into neurobiology, Schi-

bille devotes the two final chapters to the theological underpinnings of the use of light in Hagia Sophia. This is an accomplished section, at once poetic and rigorous. Early Christian theologians widely employed the language of light and darkness to express notions of divine presence, spiritual illumination and human access to God. Such associations between physical luminosity and divine revelation, in turn, provide a conceptual framework to interpret the significance of light and color in Hagia Sophia. For sixth-century viewers – Schibille argues – seeing the material splendor of Hagia Sophia implied seeing divine light in accessible form. This enlightenment, at once bodily and spiritual, overcame the inability of the human intellect to grasp the idea of God, also confirming the value of aesthetic experience as a conduit to knowledge of the world.

This volume brings together literary, visual and philosophical evidence to sustain its argument about the interconnections between aesthetic theories, social and cultural perceptual habits, and artistic production. In this context, it is regrettable that the book, which rightly advocates the significance of luminosity and color for a fuller understanding of Byzantine art, should be illustrated with photographs that are insufficient in number, too small and of uneven quality.

