

**MYHAILO VRUBEL KYIV
CREATIVE PERIOD:
SACRED ART AND CANON PROBLEM**

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**КИЇВСЬКИЙ ПЕРІОД ТВОРЧОСТІ
МИХАЙЛА ВРУБЕЛЯ: САКРАЛЬНИЙ
ЖИВОПИС І ПРОБЛЕМА КАНОНУ**

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Abstract

The aim of the study is the analysis of sacral paintings of M. Vrubel during the «Kyiv period» (1884 – 1889) and understanding of the church canon by the artist. **Methodology of the research** includes general scientific methods – art study analysis and generalization of the problem under investigation. In order to study the subject the epistolary heritage of the artist was used. **The article reveals** the genesis of painting style of M. Vrubel as an integral part of the European version of the style Art Nouveau. The article also proves that this process took place during his «Kyiv period», and was closely connected with the impact of Western European religious art on M. Vrubel's creative work, in particular, when working on the sketches for St. Volodymyr's cathedral. **Conclusions.** Evaluating the millage covered by M.Vrubel as a muralist we can conclude that his creative work has developed on the basis of academic easel forms and naturally evolved to Art Nouveau. While working on monumental and easel paintings in St. Cyril Church, monumental paintings in St. Sophia Cathedral and sketches of painting for St.Volodymyr's Cathedral embodies the

Анотація

Мета статті – проаналізувати сакральний живопис Михайла Врубеля «київського періоду» (1884 – 1889); виявити особливості розуміння канону художником. **Методологія дослідження** включає загальнонаукові методи – мистецтвознавчий аналіз та узагальнення досліджуваної проблеми. Дослідження базується на вивченні епістолярної спадщини художника. **Новизна дослідження.** У статті розкрито генезу становлення живописної манери М. Врубеля як органічної частини європейського варіанту стилю модерн. Як доводиться у статті, таке становлення відбувається саме у «київський період» його творчості і пов'язане з впливом західноєвропейського релігійного живопису на творчість М. Врубеля, зокрема, під час роботи над ескізами для розпису Володимирського собору. **Висновки.** У результаті аналізу фрескового живопису Врубеля доходимо висновку, що його творчість, розвиваючись на основі академічних форм станкового мистецтва, поступово набула рис ар-нуво. Під час роботи над монументальними та станковими картинами у церкві св. Кирила,

highest level of artistic achievements of mature Art Nouveau.

монументальними картинами у Софійському соборі та ескізами для собору св. Володимира художник втілює найвищий рівень мистецьких досягнень зрілого модерну.

Keywords:

Mikhail Vrubel, "Kyiv period", sacral paintings, the problem of canon, Art Nouveau.

Ключові слова:

Михайло Врубель, «київський період», сакральний живопис, проблема канону, ар нуво.

Introduction 1

Sacral painting of M. Vrubel is studied in this article in the context of canon and typical features of church painting of the 2nd half of the XIX century. After careful study of two main directions that had been formed by the end of the XIX century in church painting in Russian Empire, i.e. neo-Russian style and Art Nouveau, the author notes a particular role of Vrubel in the formation of the above mentioned style. The article traces how through careful study of ancient Kievan Rus art samples (of the XI century), Byzantine monumental art (the VI-XII centuries), Italian Renaissance painting and due to a special personal worldview Vrubel, during his «Kyiv period», worked out the style of painting, which has become an integral part of the European version of Art Nouveau. Influence of Western European religious art on Vrubel's work was also under analysis, particularly, his work on sketches for St. Volodymyr's Cathedral.

The aim of the study is the analysis of sacral paintings of M. Vrubel during the «Kyiv period» (1884 – 1889) and understanding of the church canon by the artist.

The methodology and analysis of sources 2

Sacral art of this outstanding artist has long been successfully studied in Russian and Ukrainian art criticism. S. Yaremich (Iaremich, 1911), D. Kogan (1980), N. Dmitrieva (1984, 1990), A. Ivanov (1928), D. Sarabyanov (1989), as well as such Kyiv researches as K. Ladizhenska (Ladyzhenska, 2013), O. Drug (Druh, 2013), I. Margolina (2009, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c), N. Ageyeva (Ageeva, 2015, 2013), A. Iling (Illinh, 2013), V. Ulyanovsky (Ulianovskyi, 2005, 2016), N. Prakhov (1958), V. Zummerr (1927) and many other art critics studied his creative activity. In order to study the subject the epistolary heritage of the artist was used, specifically, the book «Vrubel. Correspondence. Memoirs about the artist», which is still one of the best collections of materials on the study of the creative heritage of M. A. Vrubel (1929). This article is based on their research in consultancy with N. Ageyeva, the leading researcher of the National Museum «Kyiv art gallery» (former Kyiv National Museum of Russian Art).

**Results
of the
research** **3**

Mikhail Vrubel (1856 – 1910) is justly called the founder of Art Nouveau and Symbolism in Russian art. The ancestors of the artist on the father's side, the male line, came from Prussian Poland, as to his female line, they were Varsovians (The Milkovskys), but his grandmother belonged to the Polish Confederation. Decembrist Bassargin was among his ancestors on his mother's side by the male line, and a member of the Finland Seim, Mr. Krabbe, was an ancestor by the female line.

Vrubel left an imprint on Russian and Ukrainian religious painting in the late XIX – early XX centuries. He had a great gift as a muralist but unfortunately he could not unveil his potential in full force in this field, it was not destined. The experience of church painting began and ended for the artist in the so-called «Kyiv period» which lasted five years (1884–1889).

Church painting by M. Vrubel is studied by scholars mainly in several aspects. In the first aspect, it is studied in the context of the characteristic features of religious painting of the 2nd half of the XIX century, and especially the end of the XIX century when the church painting of the Russian Empire had two main trends-Neo Russian Style (religious and national style) and Art Nouveau (New Style). And the creative activity of M. Vrubel played an important role in the formation of these styles. The second aspect is the emergence of the artist's creative method. Through careful study and further development of ancient samples (XII century), Byzantine art (VI – XII centuries), monumental art and Italian Renaissance painting and due to personal worldview Vrubel developed his style of painting during the «Kyiv period» which has become an integral part of European version of Art Nouveau. But the theme of canon in sacral artist's painting has been poorly studied. However, taking into consideration the length of this article and its popular scientific character, the author only made a try at touching the problem.

«Kyiv period» did not only determine the main themes, it was also the period when a number of outstanding sacral monumental works were created. Vrubel made nine wall oil paintings in St. Cyril's Church in Kyiv: «The Archangel Gabriel», «Entry into Jerusalem», «Cloud Assumption», «Descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles», «Head of Moses», «Head of the Prophet Solomon», «the bust of Christ», «Angels with Labars», «Lamentation» / «Pieta» / and four images for the iconostasis of the church – Christ, the Virgin with Child, saint Cyril and saint Athanasius (1884 – 1885). Moreover, the artist recreated the lost images of angels in the dome of St. Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv (1884 – 1885) and created picturesque composition «The Agony in the Garden» (1887) for the church in the estate of Y. Tarnowski in Motovilovka village near Kyiv. The work on the sketches for the painting of St. Vladimir's Cathedral in Kyiv was of great importance for the formation of the artist's unique style for which he made four versions of the composition «Lamentation»

and two versions of «Resurrection» (1887), both were executed in watercolor.

We would like to remind that iconography is, in the most general terms, the system of rigid canons (templates, standards and techniques) of depicting images of individual characters and story scenes. In the middle of the XIX century the Orthodox Church designated the basic requirements for church painting: «in compliance with «historical fidelity», idealization of images and ban on such willfulness as “nude human body without obvious needs, exquisite situation of persons, passionate glances, athletic forms...”» (Gusakova, 2011) and expressed the need to distinguish the concepts of an icon and a painting on a religious theme but the Church did not specify dogmatic and aesthetic differences between them. The government in the name of great princes and princesses who held the position of president of the Academy of Arts also cared about the fate of Russian sacral art. With their support, vice president of the Academy of Arts, Prince G. Gagarin organized the class of Orthodox iconography at the Academy. The basis of the class curriculum which was supervised by Professor T. Neff was strict adherence to patterns of «Byzantine art» that were taken in the ancient shrines of Kyiv, Novgorod, Suzdal, Vladimir, Georgia and the Caucasus and in the territories where Orthodox culture was spread, in Greece Italy and on Mount Athos.

But professors of the Academy opposed the idea of creating a class of Orthodox iconography. They believed that «imitation of Byzantine painting will lead to the decline of painting in Russia and that the requirement for conventional types of icons will never develop a talent» (Gusakova, 2011). The class of Orthodox iconography was short-lived, from 1856 to 1859. In addition to his duties as vice-President, Prince Gagarin was personally involved in the church painting project. The painting created by him in the church of the Mariinsky Palace in St. Petersburg (1856) became the intermediate link between classicism of the early XIX century and religious national style in art that was fully developed only at the end of the century.

In ancient Russ picturesque location of scenes in the church was determined by cosmic and topographic features, architectural forms and dogmatic purposes. At the end of the XIX century canonical triad of subordinated elements «God-likeness – ethics – aesthetics» was changed and started to move in the opposite direction. The first place was occupied by aesthetics with ethics following it, and only after them there was a place for God-likeness. The expression «to paint over the shrine/temple» was understood as «to decorate or arrange» and church painting instead of «visual theology» was limited to illustrations of the Holy Bible that satisfied aesthetic needs of Russian society at that period (Gusakova, 2011).

Much credit for the formation of religious and national style must be given to a well-known scholar and art historian N. Pokrovski

(1848–1917) who together with other scholars developed the program of painting for Orthodox churches that were under construction. His pictorial art projects included picturesque images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints and scenes from the Holy Bible according to the canon of scene location in churches and numerous characters from the early Christian, Byzantine and Kievan Rus church history. Such decoration of churches contributed to the strengthening of religious feeling and promoted respect for national roots. The interior of an Orthodox church was to emphasize «the importance of the monument of Russian art» and implement «the ideal that would spiritualize the generation» (Gusakova, 2011). Such concept allowed the artists to develop the church canons and at the same time preserved the spiritual content of icons, changed the shape and pictorial language and created new iconography. This creative process was seen as a natural development of art. Thus, a new religious and national direction appeared.

Many artists of the second half of the XIX century (V. Vasnetsov, N. Bodarevsky, M. Nesterov, N. Bruni etc.) developed their painting techniques and artistic language due to which the religious images – symbols appeared. Such a system of rules and painting techniques can be called special, individual artist's canon. Such individual religious canon reflecting the artist's representation of the ideal of otherworldly, unearthly spiritual beauty can be found in the works by M. Vrubel.

In the analysis of sacral compositions by M. Vrubel it is becoming clear how a talented and creative artist interprets traditional church painting subjects. So his paintings in the church of St. Cyril and St. Sophia Cathedral reflect an organic and in-depth understanding of Byzantine art and Kievan Rus art of the XII century reconceived by a man and an artist of the end of the XIX century.

One of the researchers of Nouveau D. Sarabyanov noted that the new direction was formed in Russia together with national concepts. Such a bias towards national issues, he noted, «was a characteristic of Art Nouveau in several European countries in general» (Sarabianov, 1989, p. 79). However, academic features are noticeable in Mikhail Vrubel's works. It is reflected in the tendency toward strict rules of art, focus on beauty which is selected as an object of creation. But Vrubel consistently overcame academism, he reinterpreted nature, «rejected an alliance with naturalism which was typical for the late European academicism» (Sarabianov, 1989, p. 81). Let us briefly consider sacral works of Vrubel executed during «Kyiv period». The artist executed the most significant monumental works in St. Cyril's Church which can boast the world's largest ensemble of ancient frescos of the XII century that survived to the present day. The vicinity of Vrubel's paintings to these monuments of religious art shows us that the level of his talent is equal to that of ancient masters and we can see the versatility of his talent. In 1884 while still a student of the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts Vrubel

accepted the offer of a professor, philanthropist and art historian Adrian Prahov to participate in the restoration of St. Cyril's Church and execution of new compositions in situ of lost frescos of the XII century that would organically fit into the interior of the ancient shrine. The new concept of A. Prahov's plan was obvious, that was «co-authorship» with the masters of the XII century which was new to big artists of the XIX century. In 1880-es the interest in national antiquity among experts and educated people increased but not from the point of view of artistic value but from the historical point of view. It was in St. Cyril's Church and St. Sophia Cathedral where for the first time Vrubel, and A. Prahov helped him at that, managed to transfer from archaeological research and restorations to the live modern creativity and perceive the great painting tradition of ancient Kievan Russ and Byzantine art and art of the Renaissance era.

Monumental works in the St. Cyril's Church by M. Vrubel such as «The Archangel Gabriel», «Entry into Jerusalem», «Cloud Assumption», «Head of Moses», «Head of the Prophet Solomon», «Bust of Christ», «Angels with Labars» show, as it was mentioned above, the artist's deep understanding of Byzantine art and Old Rus art, ancient iconography and feel in color. Most of the compositions are performed in accordance with the canon but still there are exceptions. In the story «Cloud Assumption» there is a retreat from the conventional iconographic canon which was due to objective reasons; the composition is executed above the northern portal of the cathedral which was rebuilt at the time, it was expanded and increased in height. Due to this it was not possible to replicate the composition in accordance with the picture of the XII century. In the «Bust of Christ» the Messiah surprises with both inconsistency as to the accordance with the Christian canon and figurative description inherent to Vrubel which was the evidence of the creative search of the artist, gradual development of his system of painting techniques and rules, search of the individual canon. One of the main aspects of Vrubel's creative search was to understand, unravel and reveal the human soul.

One of the most significant works of Vrubel in St. Cyril's Church is "Descent of the Holy Spirit" at the choir. The artist conveyed the complexity of human emotions with extraordinary force in the images of the apostles; he created a gallery of portraits with deep psychological characteristic. He painted them from Kyiv intellectual class and clergy of that time, the priest of the church, Peter Orlovsky, archaeologist Goshkevich and Professor Prahov. It is remarkable that all of them were the brightest representatives of the intellectual elite of that time, well-known researchers and connoisseurs of Kyiv Christian antiquities and people of high spiritual culture. Young Apostle shown the third from the left side of Mary has undeniable resemblance to Vrubel himself. According to iconographic canons the Apostle Luke is always portrayed the third from the left side of the Virgin Mary. It is known that Luke was not only an apostle and

evangelist but also a painter who made the first pictorial image of Holy Mother; in the Christian tradition he is regarded as the author of the famous icon of «Holy Mother of Vladimir». It is remarkable that Vrubel deliberately portrayed himself in the place of Luke, in the place of an icon painter. Vrubel uses a large range of colors that is why the garments of the saints seem to be of different colors in daylight, in the evening and with night light. Artistic synthesis of Christian, historical and symbolic perspective composition is manifested in changes in figurative space and the plastics of figures. In this integral in its composition work Vrubel's individual manner is already vivid; features of Art Nouveau become heavily noticeable, they were manifested in laconic picturesque decision and especially in the heightened emotional images.

The composition ends with the image of King of the Universe. The Elder with a beautiful white beard, wearing a crown, adorned with precious stones, with uplifted hands to heaven as if he supports this great monumental composition. The symbolic image of the King of the Universe personifies dark, unenlightened part of mankind in Byzantine iconography to which apostles will bring bright Christian faith in different languages. And it is not accidentally that the open palms of King the Universe face the top of the composition. From God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, through the enlightened apostles King of the Universe perceives divine grace converging in the form of flames of Pentecost by his palms open to the sky. Architectural details, contours of Gothic and Oriental houses resembling a minaret serve as background for the Elder. Characteristic buildings and structures from different geographical regions in different styles symbolize cardinal directions of the north, south, east and west. Apostles will go in these directions to carry Faith of Jesus Christ to the peoples. Vrubel created the icons of the iconostasis of St. Cyril's Church, Savior, the Virgin, Saints Cyril and Athanasius in 1884 – 1885 in Venice where he also studied mosaics and frescoes of old masters. The image of Holy Mother is executed especially gently and tenderly with eyes full of tears and expression of suffering for mankind on her face. One can feel here not only virtuosity but the depth of genuine religious experience. Without departing from the church canon the artist brings personal experiences and individual perception of Italian Renaissance painting to the image he created.

Vrubel's works in St. Sophia became an interesting experience in monumental sacral painting. A. Prahov revealed several mosaics in the dome drum, the images of Pantocrator, an archangel, the upper part of the figure of the Apostle Paul and ornaments. According to the tradition of Byzantine church four angels with Labaras were supposed to be in this place and they were to be directed to the four cardinal points and personifying the four seasons. Only one in the blue and dark blue robes representing «Winter» was preserved. A. Prahov offered M. Vrubel to add the missing three angels. In line

with the figure of the archangel preserved the artist performed the other three angels with slight modifications; firstly he painted the robes in dense tones and after the paint dried, it seemed as if he laid out the robes in mosaic square stones of different hues. The artist made the imitated smalt a little bit bigger in size than the original smalt stones on purpose, he knew that stones painted on the surface with oil paint would not reflect light as well as the real mosaic stones that reflect light at different angles if the brush strokes were of the same size as the size of real smalt stones. And in these works Vrubel felt himself a participant of devoted work of old masters and tried to be worthy of them, he managed to find the really big tradition in painting and the laws of its expression.

The heritage of Vrubel's religious painting is divided into two parts: monumental and easel works of the artist that were made or executed i.e. put into life and the second part of his works are the works that remained only in sketches. Images for the iconostasis of the church in Motovilovka village near Kyiv ordered to Vrubel by Y. Tarnovski remained unfinished. The painting from the collection of the Kyiv National Museum of Russian Art «Agony in the Garden» (1887) gives an idea about unfulfilled intentions. The developing of the story is typical for the second half for the XIX century. And according to contemporaries influence of the famous artist N.Ge is quite noticeable. At the same time there are features of the late academism which are manifested in idealization, even mild sweetness in appearance of the main evangelical character. Christ is depicted in profile with folded hands. The objective world in the picture is dematerialized. Nature, losing its texture and weightiness under cover of night begins transformation into its opposite – the world of shadows. Crown of Thorns, a harbinger of near death on the cross depicted on the canvas is not clear, it is ghostly, its contour is blurred. Artistic, pictorial language in the painting is translated into the language of symbols that emphasize the illusory nature of all earthly things.

Watercolor sketches for painting of St.Vladimir's cathedral performed in 1887 in the estate of Y. Tarnowski near Kyiv became a further step towards the artist's gaining of his own brushwork which is certainly variant of Art Nouveau. The sketches that remained in watercolor sheets (now they are preserved in the collection of the National Museum «Kyiv art gallery», former Kyiv National Museum of Russian Art) are focused on two subjects – «Lamentation» and «Resurrection».

Vrubel creates a sketch on «Resurrection» for the lateral northern chapel. In addition to the figure of Christ and the angels the artist includes in the composition the figures of sleeping warriors and flowers that filled the middle of the bottom, the flowers then turn into an ornament. Ornamentality is a characteristic feature of Vrubel's creative work and one of the hallmarks of Art Nouveau. The sketch was rejected by the construction committee which did

not like the shape of the Roman guards that were placed by the artist directly on the ground. Despite this Vrubel continued to work on the sketches and created another version of the «Resurrection» and four variants for the composition «Lamentation». Variant of sketches on the theme of «Lamentation» allows to follow the search of the composition solution that could express the tragedy of the Gospel event most accurately. In one of the variants made in the technique of black watercolor real space is transformed by the artist into the imaginary space. The figure of the Virgin and horizontally elongated lifeless body of the Savior make a tranquil cross shaped form slightly enriched by halos circles. The silhouette execution of the flattened volumes on the neutral background is also a characteristic of Art Nouveau. Stretched, slow passage of time is another important component of style in this sketch. By choosing the most tragic moment the artist halts time. A feeling of intense, lasting forever intermission is being created. Great aesthetic value of watercolors is not only in harmony and absolute unity of color, silhouettes and forms of the image but in the spiritual depth of each separate element of the form.

The sketches for the painting of the cathedral were not accepted for execution. At the same time they were highly appreciated by A. Prahov who opined that another church should be built for Vrubel's sketches. Indeed, Vrubel's sketches differed greatly from the religious and national style supported by the official Church and the style which is artistically implemented in St. Vladimir's Cathedral in Kyiv; the sketches differed especially from the compositions by Vasnetsov. It was impossible to believe that Vrubel who perfectly handled the task of revival of ancient style in St. Cyril's Church would not have created the sketches for the church of St. Vladimir's Cathedral in the style ordered by the customers. Most likely that it was high time for the individual painting style of the artist that had been formed by that period to go on the air. The artist treated watercolor sketches rather as an independent works. «Do not think that these are templates only and not pure creativity», wrote M. Vrubel to his sister (Vrubel, 1929, c. 26). Biblical and evangelical images accompanied the artist throughout all his creative life reflecting the beauty of the universe. Art Nouveau as a style of religious painting in Kyiv did not receive further development. Religious and national style continued to dominate in there.

**Scientific
novelty and
practical
significance
of the
research**

4 The article reveals the genesis of painting style of M. Vrubel as an integral part of the European version of the style Art Nouveau. The article also proves that this process took place during his «Kyiv period», and was closely connected with the impact of Western European religious art on M. Vrubel's creative work, in particular, when working on the sketches for St. Volodymyr's cathedral.

Conclusions **5**

Evaluating the millage covered by M.Vrubel as a muralist we can conclude that his creative work has developed on the basis of academic easel forms and naturally evolved to Art Nouveau. And by his creative activity and even by his appearance he embodies the highest level of artistic achievements of mature Art Nouveau and at the same time he preserves national character and peculiarities of the Russian perspective of the XIX century.

In the history of Ukrainian artistic culture of the late XIX and early XX centuries, Mikhail Vrubel and his «Kyiv period» in particular occupy a special place. It is impossible to imagine the history of the national art history without his monumental and easel paintings in St. Cyril Church, monumental paintings in St. Sophia Cathedral and sketches of the painting for St.Volodymyr's Cathedral.

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