Byzantine Nearness and Renaissance Distance: the Meaning of Byzantinizing Modes in 14th-Century Italian Art

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A well-known phenomenon to scholars of 14th-century Italian art is the growing attentiveness in painting of this period to the differences between modern, illusionistic modes of representation on the one hand, and more old-fashioned ones on the other. Because of the presence of stylistic features that are traditionally associated with Byzantine and/or Italo-Byzantine art of the preceding period, such as linearity, two-dimensionality and frontality, these old-fashioned modes are often referred to as Byzantinizing. The meaning of these Byzantinizing modes has been subject of an ongoing debate ever since the pioneering studies of György Gombosi and Millard Meiss in the first half of the 20th century. I engaged in this debate in my 2013 article “Byzantine Art and Early Italian Painting.” Following established views of scholars such as Keith Christiansen and Paul Krüger, I explained the use of retrospective modes

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of representation as a means to counterbalance the ever-increasing verisimilitude of Giottesque art. I argued that these modes allowed artists to evoke a realm that is human and approachable yet at the same time divine and transcendent; the old-fashioned, Byzantining elements in these paintings enabled the viewer to experience a higher, spiritual reality within a painting that presented itself as a vivid evocation of the visible world.

But how are we supposed to imagine the higher, spiritual reality that Byzantining modes evoke? Is it a reality far removed from the experience of the viewer, thus preserving the transcendental remoteness of the sacred? The implied contrast between the approachable illusionistic modes of Giottesque art and the more abstract modes of Byzantining art seems to suggest so. Whereas the illusion of inhabitable space and the suggestion of three dimensional form in Giottesque art give the impression of bringing the divine figures and stories nearer to the everyday experience of the viewer, the earlier, Byzantining modes of representation seem to prevent an undesired level of nearness, thus safeguarding the transcendental distance of the sacred. However, such a connection between stylistic abstraction and the evocation of a transcendental, timeless world has been questioned in recent years. Scholars have argued that assumptions about this connection are based on modern ideas about the relationship between abstraction and spirituality, which do not necessarily reflect the reality of people living in earlier periods. Thus, while in modern times the stylized modes of Byzantine and Italo-Byzantine art might have connotations of spirituality and remoteness, this might not have been the case in the later Middle Ages.

Taking this criticism as a starting point, I will re-examine the meaning of retrospective modes in 14th-century Italian painting. The contribution is divided into two parts. The first section will discuss the critique on the assumed relationship between abstraction and spirituality in more detail and will apply it to the specific context of the Trecento. In the second part, I will try to formulate an alternative interpretation based on this analysis, proposing a reversal of the use of the terms “nearness” and “distance” in relation to the different stylistic modes that characterize painting of this time-period. In formulating this interpretation, I will make use of insights from scholars of classical, Byzantine and Western medieval art. In most cases, their observations have not been applied to the Trecento; it is my aim to show the relevance of their remarks for the study of painting of this period. I will also point to a few instances where my observations concur with those of other scholars of 14th-century art, thus acknowledging the historiographical tradition in which my proposed reading needs to be positioned.