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Byzantine Frescoes from Lusignan Cyprus in Houston*

*But their eyes were holden that they should
not know him.*

(Luke 24:16)

If the Byzantine frescoes were still in Lysi, a small village on Cyprus, they would not attract so much attention, as there is nothing special about them. The whole island is full of churches with interesting interiors¹. But when the frescoes from Lysi appeared in Houston, they became unique. They are said to be the only specimen of this kind in the Western hemisphere. Why are they here near the Mexican Gulf, which is known for the numerous oil rifts that are a source of wealth? There is a direct connection between the Byzantine paintings and the rifts. The art connoisseurs, Dominique and John de Menil, who owed their fortune to the oil business, saved the exquisite masterpieces from Cyprus. Paradoxically enough, these frescoes are not so well known

* This article was written when I was a Visiting Professor at Rice University as a Fellow of the Kościuszko Foundation. I am very grateful to Mrs. Susan de Menil for the exchange of views in a telephone conversation, and for the hospitality of the Menil Collection where I worked in the archives due to the kindness of Dr. Josef Hofestein, The Director of the Collection, and the two ladies: Ms. Geraldine Aramanda and Ms. Heather Kushnerick. I am particularly indebted to Heather, who was my discreet companion in January 2008, when I was bent over the boxes with the necessary materials. I am very grateful for the photographs of the frescoes and of the chapel as well as for the opportunity of receiving many important photocopies.

I also owe a great deal to Dr. Nora Laos, who shared with me the draft of her article on the frescoes, presented at the conference of American Byzantinists in Saint Louis in November 2006, in which I was happy to participate. As usual, I extend my warm thanks to my sister, Dr. Dorota Filipczak, who corrected my English. The archival research, however, was necessary for the last stage of my writing. I started with the literature of the subject which seemed to be abundant but it was only an illusion. There are many books on Cyprus, but not very original because of repetitions. I will therefore refer to the most recent publications, especially those which change the stereotypical interpretation of the Cypriote history.

¹ A. Stylianou and J. Stylianou, *The Painted Churches of Cyprus. Treasures of Byzantine Art*, London 1985; E. Hein, A. Jakovljevic, B. Kleidt, *Cyprus. Byzantine Churches and Monasteries: Mosaic and Frescoes*, trans. into English by J.M. Deasy, Ratingen 1998; *Medieval Cyprus. Studies in Art, Architecture, and History in Memory of Doula Mouriki*, eds. N. Patterson Sevčenko and Ch. Moss, Princeton University Press 1999.

even in Houston, not to mention the whole world. Let us make them famous. Here is their story.

Years will pass before anybody emulates the excellent description of the vicissitudes of medieval Cyprus provided by Peter W. Edbury², whose text definitely eclipsed a classic publication by Sir George Hill³. Edbury stresses the importance of the geographical position of Cyprus which was a privilege but also a trouble for the island. Attractive for many neighbours, Cyprus was an object of their political desire. An authority on the history of art, Annemarie Weyl Carr, dated the frescoes from Lysi to the 13th century⁴, though not without problems. Accordingly, it is necessary to recreate the political atmosphere of that time.

Byzantine art flourished on Cyprus especially in the Komnenian epoch, but Constantinople lost control over the island during the unfortunate reign of Andronikos I Komnenos (1183–1185), when his cousin, Isaac Komnenos, became the independent governor on the island in 1184, and remained powerful during the reign of Isaac Angelos, Emperor of Byzantium since 1185. The Angeloi were not strong enough to attach the rebellious Cyprus back to the capital⁵. The situation in the Middle East was additionally complicated by Saladin's victory over the Latin army at Hattin in 1187. Guy de Lusignan, King of Jerusalem, was defeated. Another crusade, the third one, was organized to help the Holy Land. Its main leader, Richard the Lionhearted, King of England, played the crucial role in changing the political course of Cyprus. He defeated Isaac in May 1191, and a month later he moved on to Acre. While fighting against Saladin, he managed to sell the island to the Templars who kept it until April 1192, and then made their deal with Guy de Lusignan, selling Cyprus to him⁶. From that moment onwards the island found itself under the rule of a petty noble family

- 2 P.W. Edbury, *The Kingdom of Cyprus and the Crusades, 1191–1374*, Cambridge 1991. Cf: Idem, *Franks in Cyprus, Society and Culture 1191–1374*, eds. A. Nicolaou-Konnari and Ch. Schabel, Leiden-Boston 2005, pp. 63–101. In the Preface to the first book Edbury reminds us of the merits of J. Richard and Count W.H. Rudt de Collenberg, which are, obviously, unquestionable (Edbury, *The Kingdom...*, XI). It is enough to mention two basic titles out of so many others: J. Richard, *Le peuplement latin et syrien en Chypre au XIII^e siècle*, *Byzantinische Forschungen* 6 (1979), pp. 157–173; W.H. Rudt de Collenberg, *Les Lusignans de Chypre*, *Epeteris tou Kentrou Epistemonikon Ereunon*, X (1980), pp. 85–119.
- 3 G. Hill, *A History of Cyprus*, vol. I–IV, Cambridge 1940–1952. The second volume is devoted to the Lusignan rule. I am not very original in mentioning all these names. Carolyn L. Connor does the same in the note 4 to her article: *Female Saints in Church Decoration in: Medieval Cyprus...*, p. 212. It means that we reached the limit to our knowledge, which I mentioned in my review of the volume: *Byzantium and Italians in the 13th–15th centuries = Dumbarton Oaks Papers XLIX* (1995) published in *Byzantinoslavica LVIII* (1997), fasc. 1, p. 196.
- 4 A. Weyl Carr and L.J. Morrocco, *A Byzantine Masterpiece Recovered, the Thirteenth-Century Murals of Lysi, Cyprus*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1991, p. 71. Cf other publications, in which A.Weyl Carr analyzes the art of Cyprus and refers to Lysi: Eadem, *Cyprus and the Devotional Arts of Byzantium in the Era of the Crusades*, Aldershot 2005; Eadem, Art, in: *Cyprus. Society and Culture 1191–1374*, ed by A.Nicolaou-Konnari and Ch. Schabel, Leiden-Boston 2005, pp. 285–328.
- 5 Ch. Brand is still unquestionable authority on the description of the Byzantine state under the Angeloi. Cf: Idem, *Byzantium Confronts the West 1180–1204*, Cambridge Mass. 1968.
- 6 P. Edbury, *The Kingdom*, pp. 5–12.

from Poitou, who due to Guy's connections with the Kingdom of Jerusalem, became powerful enough to establish their dynasty there. This dynasty survived till 1474. Such data confuse the art historians, who call the Latin rule "occupation" but at the same time admit that "the Cypriote monumental decoration was independent of unusually broad scope"⁷. This myth of Latin domination was finally challenged by Chris Schabel, who stated that the "Greek Orthodoxy survived the Frankish period not so much of a successful national struggle against complete absorption as the Greeks always remained the majority and neither the Franks nor the Latin Church ever attempted any Latinization"⁸. He named "the Christianity the Unifier of the People"⁹ which I am pleased to quote as this is my point of view which I expressed in the book on mixed, Byzantine-Latin marriages¹⁰. This is the context we need in order to grasp the significance of the frescoes from a modest church of a mysterious St. Themanianos in a small village Lysi, located in the central part of the island, to the south-east of Nicosia, on the way to Famagusta¹¹. The territory was already under the Frankish control, yet nobody objected to people worshipping in a Byzantine way. However in 1196 the Latin archbishop was designated in Nicosia, with suffragans at Paphos, Limassol and Famagusta. Guy's brother, Aimery, became the king of Cyprus (1196–1205) and then his son, Hugh I, succeeded him (1205–1218). The status of the kingdom was granted by the German-Roman Emperor, Henry VI of Hohenstaufen, which boosted the position of the house of Lusignan for centuries¹². The Byzantines did not manage to react to these events, as the Fourth Crusade which was meant to strengthen the Frankish Syria against the Muslims, put an end to the Byzantine rule in Constantinople for almost sixty years.

The frescoes at Lysi were therefore created in the period of transition, but as the time of Aimery's and Hugh's respective rules is remembered as peaceful for Cyprus, the frescoes continued the great Byzantine tradition. Looking at them one can think that nothing happened, nothing had changed. Moreover, one can admire them breathless if they are the only representation of Cypriote art to be seen. In comparison with other paintings, however, they lose their value, as the viewer is spoiled by the beauty of frescoes in such places as the churches of Panagia tis Asinou at Nikitari

7 C.L. Connor, *Female saints*.

8 Ch. Schabel, *Religion in: Cyprus. Society and Culture...*, p. 210. He adds that the Greek clergy was obliged to swear an oath of allegiance to the Latin Church, but its religious rites remained the same.

9 *Ibidem*, p. 212.

10 M. Dąbrowska, *Łacinniczki nad Bosforem. Matżeństwa bizantyjsko-łacinijskie w cesarskiej rodzinie Paleologów (XIII–XV w.)* (Latin Ladies on the Bosphoros. Byzantine-Latin Marriages in the Imperial Family of the Palaiologoi, 13th–15th centuries), Łódź 1996, p. 158. The general idea of the book is summed up for the sake of the foreign reader in my article: "Is there any room on Bosphoros for a Latin Lady?", due to appear in *Byzantinoslavica* (2008) fasc. 2.

11 Cf. the map in: A. Weyl Carr, L.J. Morrocco, *A Byzantine Masterpiece*, p. 34.

12 P. Edbury, *The Kingdom*, p. 31.

or Panagia Araka at Lagoudera, both to the south-west of Nicosia, on the way to the Troodos mountains¹³.

I am not speaking about the other masterpieces disseminated all over Cyprus. These two should be mentioned as they are the main reference point for A. Weyl Carr in her dating of the paintings at Lysi¹⁴. It is clear that it was not an easy task for this experienced art historian. Her hesitation is visible, and finally, she decides to attribute the frescoes at Lysi “not so much to the final chapter of Cyprus’s twelfth-century art, but as the evidence of a renewed vitality in the thirteenth”¹⁵. The author states that “the precise decade of Lysi mural’s paintings remains ambiguous, but, in the end, it is not fundamental”¹⁶. If so, a historian can still wonder whether they were a product of nostalgia for the fallen Empire, or an expression of satisfaction with the Byzantine revival under Michael VIII Palaiologos in 1261. It is impossible to know whether the actual artist had any emotional connections with Constantinople.

Anyway, A. Weyl Carr maintains that the frescoes are “purely Byzantine”¹⁷ even if they were created in the time when the Lusignan power in Cyprus was established for good. It would cover the rule of Hugh I’s only son, Henry I (1218–1253), and that of his grandson, Hugh II (1253–1267). The latter had no male offspring, which provoked a political dispute between the claimants. Finally, the Cypriote legacy was taken over by the son of Hugh I’s daughter, Isabella, who became Hugh III (1267–1284)¹⁸. He was from Antioch which connected the Syrian and Cypriot lines of the family.

In the 13th century the history of Cyprus was not so serene as at the beginning of the Lusignan rule. The Byzantine Empire revived, and at the same time the Latin states in the Middle East, la France d’Outremer, were approaching their bitter end. However, the troubles of Michael VIII Palaiologos who strove to remain in power and avoid the repetition of the Fourth Crusade did not allow him even to dream about winning Cyprus back for his state. On the other side, the Frankish remnants in the Middle East were desperately defending themselves against the Muslims, and after their fall, many inhabitants found shelter on Cyprus. Those events had no impact on the Cypriote art, of which Lysi is a good example. Latin art flourished under the Lusignans but they did not block the development of Byzantine i.e. Orthodox art. It illustrates the cohabitation of the two cultures and rather than the conflict, even if A. Weyl Carr uses the expression of the “Lusignan regime”¹⁹.

13 A. Stylianou and J. Stylianou, *The Painted Churches*, pp. 114–140, 157–185; E. Hein, A. Jakovljevic, B. Kleidt, *Cyprus*, pp. 55–60, pp. 71–76 – respectively.

14 A. Weyl Carr, L.J. Morrocco, *A Byzantine Masterpiece*, pp. 70–79.

15 *Ibidem*, p. 110.

16 *L.cit.*

17 A. Weyl Carr, *Art in the Court of the Lusignan Kings* (in *E Kypros kai oi Stauroforias. Cyprus and the Crusades* ed. N. Cureas and J. R. Smith, Nicosia: Cyprus Research Center 1995 =chapter VII (in: *Cyprus and the Devotional Era...*, p. 252, note 2.

18 P. Edbury, *The Kingdom*, pp. 35–36. One of his famous successors was Peter I who visited Cracow in order to persuade the Polish King to participate in the crusade against the Muslim. Cf.: M. Dąbrowska, *Peter of Cyprus and Casimir the Great in Cracow, “Byzantiaka”* (Thessaloniki), 14 (1994), pp. 257–267.

19 A. Weyl Carr, L.J. Morrocco, *A Byzantine Masterpiece*, p. 86 – for example.

The Lysi murals would not have attracted attention but for the Turkish invasion. I am not referring to the one from the 16th century, but that of 1974. Let us remind the reader that Lusignans kept the island till 1489, when the widow of James II Lusignan, Catherine Cornaro abdicated and transferred the rights to Cyprus on to Venice. The Ottoman Turks conquered it in 1571. In 1878 the Turks gave up the administrative rights to Cyprus, and England took over the island. After so many centuries of different reigns, the island, being then a British colony, preserved its Orthodox identity. In January 1950 the Cypriot Church organized a referendum concerning the union with Greece. This was boycotted by the Greek Cypriot Left and by the Turkish Cypriots. The results however were favorable for the union. The British offered the local autonomy, but the majority of Greek Cypriots turned against them in 1955. The independent Republic of Cyprus was finally proclaimed in 1960. The troubles lasted, as the Greeks constituted the majority but the Turkish minority was strong. Cohabitation was tense and in 1974 it ended with the Turkish occupation of the north-eastern part of the island and the division of Cyprus into two zones. The situation was complicated by the fights between Greeks themselves – some of them supported the Archbishop Makarios, President of the Republic, some, connected with Athenian Junta, acted against him²⁰. Everything was warmed up by the rumors about vast oil deposits under the Aegean Sea. Every side involved showed its interest in them. Superpowers, who from the very beginning were discreetly involved in the conflict, were also shaken by this revelation. Who wouldn't be? It is enough to quote Dimitrios Ioannides, the Greek prime minister, in the taped phone conversation with "his man" in Nicosia in March 1974, just before the coup: "Tell Makarios, we'll buy him a gold throne like the Queen of Sheba's... (...) Up to now we were a Cinderella state, now we'll be Americans"²¹. In this climate of euphoria, disappointment and permanent tension, one day the frescoes from the church in Lysi, which found itself in the Turkish zone, were stolen, chopped into pieces and offered to the art dealers on the black market.

- 20 There is a rich literature on this complicated subject, when one should take into consideration the points of view of all the sides involved. It also means that it was a risky business to enter the Cypriot market of art, which Dominique de Menil and her advisers realized quickly. Leaving this question for later let me quote only some important titles: J. Koumoulides, *Cyprus in transition, 1960–1985*, London 1986; Ch. Ioannides, *In Turkey's Image: the Transformation of Occupied Cyprus into a Turkish Province*, New Rochelle, N.Y. 1991; N. Uslu, *The Cyprus question as an issue of Turkish foreign policy and Turkish-American relations, 1959–2003*, New York 2003; C. Yennaris, *From the East: conflict and partition of Cyprus*, London 2003.
- 21 M. Drousiotis, *Cyprus 1974. Greek Coup and Turkish Invasion*, Mannheim 2006, p. 160. The end of Greek-Turkish conflict is far from being resolved. The last sentences of this book are striking: "The first Clerides–Denktash (Greek and Turkish Cypriot authorities, respectively – M.D.) talks began in Vienna, in January 1975. Up the present day (2002), they are still talking..." (p. 267). The history of contemporary Cypriot events is very interesting *per se*, but Drousiotis relation is extraordinary due to his personal archives and documents taken from various collections. It is a perfect background for the vicissitudes of Lysi frescoes. New generation of writers and artists try to change the division on the island from "a Wall into a Bridge". Cf. Y. Papadakis, *Memories of walls, Walls of memories*, in: *Chypre et la Méditerranée Orientale*, ed. Y. Ioannou, F. Metral, M. Yon, Lyon 2000, pp. 231–239.

Andreas and Judith Stylianou wrote about Lysi on the basis of notes and photographs taken before the Turkish invasion. The small church of St. Euphemitia (the historians of art attributed it to St. Theomianos) is overshadowed by high eucalyptus trees. "This idyllic chapel is single-aisled vaulted building with a dome over the centre and arched recesses in side walls. Vaults and arches are slightly pointed. It is built of local white limestone"²². They dated the remnants of wall-paintings for the 14th century. Leaving this aside, let me concentrate on the fragments which were stolen. The first one is the painting of the Mother of God of Blachernitissa type, attended by Archangels Michael and Gabriel, which they described as fine²³. The second best surviving fresco was that of Christ Pantocrator in the dome, surrounded by angels. The authors were not delighted by this picture. "The eyes of Christ are not very successful; they look at the beholder without focusing"²⁴, they stated delicately, which by no means disqualified the painter. According to the Orthodox canons of presenting the holy images, he failed. The Stylianou described purple and blue clothes of Jesus Christ and paid attention to "the Preparation of the Throne inside the oval aureola, guarded by angels and attended by the Mother of God and St. John the Baptist, on either side of intercessors, alluding to the Last Judgement"²⁵. This description became the basis for the restorers when the decision of saving Lysi frescoes cut into 38 pieces was made.

Dominique de Menil, already widowed by her husband, received the information on this discovery and without much hesitation decided to act. However, her preferences were much more connected with contemporary art. Max Ernst was her and her husband's friend, paintings by Ferdinand Leger and Andy Warhol decorated their residence in the prominent district of River Oaks at Houston²⁶. This couple of art patrons is very interesting. Dominique, née Schlumberger, born in 1908, inherited her family oil-equipment fortune. In 1931 she married Jean Menu de Menil four years her senior. They lived their life in Paris, then in New York, running their family business but also collecting objects of art. Their scope of interest was vast: from African art through Surrealist paintings from Europe and works of American abstract expressionists²⁷. These details give an impression that they were not particularly interested in religious art. On the contrary, Dominique de Menil was Catholic. She sponsored Mark Rothko Chapel in Houston which was meant to be Roman Catholic, now it is

22 A. Stylianou and J. Stylianou, *The Painted Churches*, p. 492.

23 Blachernitissa – a special canon of the portrayal of Our Lady, called after a picture in the church devoted to the Virgin Mary, founded in 450 in Blachernai, in north-western part of Constantinople. "The Mother of God faces the observer frontally, before her breast is suspended a medallion (like a shield) with the Christ child". Cf. E. Hein, A. Jakovljevic, B. Kleidt, *Cyprus*, p. 188.

24 Ibidem, p. 493.

25 Ibidem.

26 I was delighted to visit it on 19 March 2008, upon the invitation of the Menil Foundation.

27 Cf. *The Menil Collection*; a selection from the paleolithic to the modern era, New York 1987. De Menils were interested in Russian post-Byzantine icons, but pure Byzantium was rather distant to them. The Menil Collection Museum was opened to the public on 7 June 1987. See also: M. Brennan, *A Modern Patronage: de Menil gifts to American and European Museums*, New Haven 2007.

non-denominational. Rothko worked on the project in 1964–1967. It was open to the public in 1971 after Rothko's suicide a year earlier²⁸. The artist's personal drama probably switched him from the Roman Catholic and Byzantine inspiration to the darkness so visible in this piece of art, gloomy, and without windows. It is a sign of the times that this monument of self destruction became the great attraction of Houston, eclipsing The Byzantine Frescoes Chapel, the last achievement of Dominique de Menil, to which she paid so much attention not only as a connoisseur of art but as a person of spiritual sensitivity²⁹. She did not hesitate to get involved in this professional business which occurred to be an adventure with a criminal plot.

It is interesting for me, as a historian, to compare the documents from de Menil archives with the official information published in the press, looking both for facts and sensation³⁰. It is even more interesting to see the evolution of the family's point of view on the matter after Dominique de Menil's death in 1998. We know for sure that the frescoes from Lysi were stolen after the Turkish invasion in 1974, but we do not know exactly when. From their miserable state we can guess that they were stored in terrible conditions. During her stay in Paris in June 1983 Dominique de Menil got the photographs of wall paintings from Yani Petsopoulos, the art dealer in London, known to her. At that time their provenance was unknown, therefore the confidential investigation began, directed by Professor Bertrand Davezac, curator in the Menil Foundation, and the attorney from New York City, Herbert Brownell, was engaged to represent the Foundation. Petsopoulos, Davezac and Walter Hoops, Menil Collection director, went to see the originals, which happened to be in Munich stored by Aydin Dikmen an antique dealer from Konya who occurred to be a smuggler of stolen icons out of churches in Turkey³¹. The way in which he stored the frescoes is, therefore, not surprising. The angels surrounding Christ Pantocrator from the dome had been cut as separate fragments. The heads of Christ, of Mother of God, of Christ on her breast were also in pieces.

38 objects – good as items for separate sales. There was no doubt of their authenticity. However abused, they were still attractive as the dome was restored by Cypriotes in the 1960, as was known later. Petsopoulos undertook the investigation to find out where the frescoes were stolen from. In September 1983 the Embassy of Cyprus

28 Marcus Rothkowitz, aka Mark Rothko (1903-1970) was a Latvian-born American painter of Jewish origin. In 1913 his family emigrated from Russia to the US, avoiding pogroms which became cyclical after the Revolution of 1905. On his art: A. Chave, *Mark Rothko, 1903–1970: A Retrospective*, New Haven, 1989; J.E.B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko – A Biography*, Chicago, London 1993. There is a great literature about the Rothko Chapel and Dr. Nora Laos is making her contribution to it right now.

29 Cf. K. Shkapich, *Sanctuary; the Spirit in/of Architecture*, Houston, TX 2003; B. Davezac, *Four Icons in the Menil Collection*, Houston, TX 1992.

30 Cf. for example Patricia C. Johnson who in her article: The Menil pays “ransom” to restore frescoes, *Houston Chronicle*, Sunday Jan. 8 1989, p. 14, claims that frescoes came from the St. Themonianos chapel but in... Famagusta. Sounds better. Lysi is so difficult to find on the map...

31 Fax of 31 May 1989 from William Constantine Crassas from Consulate of the Republic of Cyprus in Houston to Mrs. Susan Davidson, from the Menil Collection, 2. Menil Archives, Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum (MA 2007-001, BFCM) Box 4.

in Washington D.C. stated that the frescoes were Cypriot. Brownell acting on behalf of his veiled client and Petsopoulos himself arranged a visit of Dominique de Menil on Cyprus in November. She appeared in Nicosia accompanied by Hopps, Petsopoulos and Brownell to talk to the officials of the Republic of Cyprus. Then the Cyprus Counsel of Ministers received an offer that the Menil Foundation will restore the frescoes on its behalf and it was proposed that Cyprus should allow their loan to the Menil Foundation in Houston for a display for a public. The Menil funds in a Swiss bank were earmarked for this purpose. As the frescoes were the church monuments, the Archbishop of Cyprus approved the project. In July 1984 the restoration was devoted to the laboratory of Laurence Morocco in London in consultation with engineer Peter Rice from Ove Arup, London and Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, a restorer from the Menil Foundation. The restoration lasted till Spring 1988. In April that year the frescoes reached Houston safely³². In the meantime the agreement between the Holy Archbishopric of Cyprus and the Menil Collection was signed according to which the frescoes were to remain with the Menil family for fifteen years starting from 1986³³. The meticulous reconstruction of the frescoes was described by Morrocco in the book on Lysi frescoes written together with Weyl Carr. To reconstruct the monument the styrofoam dome was built. "In order to reshape the fragments as they were originally, we needed to remove the unstable animal-glue/canvas backing which was supporting them, and apply a facing support on the front", wrote Morrocco³⁴. Then a wooden frame structure was built to protect the work. Peter Rice suggested adding glass fiber skin as a final support³⁵. All fragments matched so perfectly that there were only small empty spaces between them. Morrocco and his team made a masterpiece. Then the question arose how to present the frescoes to the public. The project offered by Chris Wilkinson, the architect from London, followed the shapes of Byzantine constructions. However, modernized to suit the contemporary standards, it did not suit the imagination of Dominique de Menil³⁶. Considering this one and others, she decided to turn to her son, Francois, a filmmaker, and a graduate in architecture. It is worth quoting in extenso:

"Dear Francois: I need you. I need your help to design a building for the Cypriot frescoes. We have to be ready to build 'a chapel' if the Archbishop of Cyprus reminds us of our contract. The plans we have developed have been justly criticized: without being a replica of the Lysi chapel they are reminiscent of it, and it has been argued

32 Chronology of events concerning 13th century Byzantine Frescoes involving Cyprus and the Menil Foundation, July 1988, p. 6. Photocopy of the typewritten document from the Menil Archives..., Box 5.

33 Agreement between the Holy Archbishopric of Cyprus and the Menil Foundation, p. 7, signed by Dominique de Menil on 3 March 1987 and His Beatitude the Archbishop of Cyprus, Chrysostomos, on 24 March 1987. Menil Archives..., Box 2.

34 A. Weyl Carr and L.J. Morrocco, *A Byzantine Masterpiece*, p. 132.

35 Ibidem, p. 145.

36 Letter of 18 March 1987 from Chris Wilkinson to Paul Winkler from the Menil Foundation with sketches enclosed. Menil Archives..., Box 2.

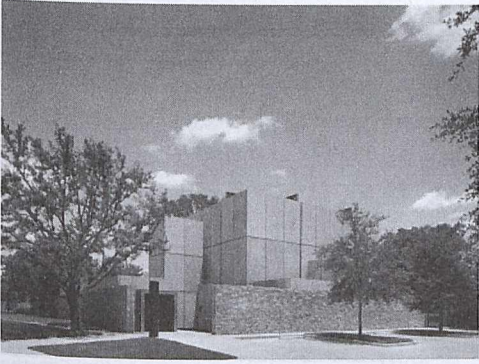


Fig. 1. Houston, Texas. The Byzantine Chapel Fresco Museum. General view (exterior)

that it would smack of 'Disneyland'³⁷. She admitted that her intention was to reconstruct in Houston a chapel similar to the one from which the frescoes had been ripped off. Bertrand Davezac suggested a museum presentation with frescoes at the eye level. "It leaves out their spiritual importance, and betrays their original significance. Only a *consecrated chapel* (my italics), used for liturgical functions, would do spiritual justice to the frescoes", she continued. "For the first time important fragments of a religious building are not considered only as antiquities. They are approached also as relics and consideration is given to their religious nature"³⁸. Then in the next paragraph, Dominique de Menil switches from the idea of the consecrated building to the Rothko Chapel and shows it as a model to imitate "We touch here a subtle domain involving psychology and spirituality" she writes, paradoxically, without thinking, that these domains are incompatible. "You know that Rothko created a truly sacred space. Restored to a living situation the frescoes would correspond to the Rothko panels. Seven centuries apart, Rothko and the painter of the frescoes expressed the same human aspiration to reach the ineffable"³⁹. It looks like Dominique de Menil was thinking about Rothko in the context of the first stage of his project in 1964 when he really knew what the sacred space meant. But then, in his madness, he created something completely opposite. He did not like himself, he did not like the world, he showed it in his Chapel. I am not the only person who does not like Rothko's aesthetics. Simon Schauma, a famous and very tolerant art historian, presenting his program on Mark Rothko in Houston PBS, said about this chapel: "Do we feel bright and beautiful? I am not sure".

But the question was solved, and Francois de Menil began to think about a shelter for the chapel, creating A Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum (fig. 1, 2, I, II). Before her final decision, Dominique de Menil already started the fundraising and she addressed the Levantis Foundation for support. She stated that the Menil Foundation had spent already almost one million dollars to recover the frescoes. "The estimated cost to build a well air-conditioned and technically adequate chapel is es-

37 Letter of 25 April 1989 from Dominique de Menil to Francois de Menil. Menil Archives..., Box 2.

38 L.cit.

39 L.cit.

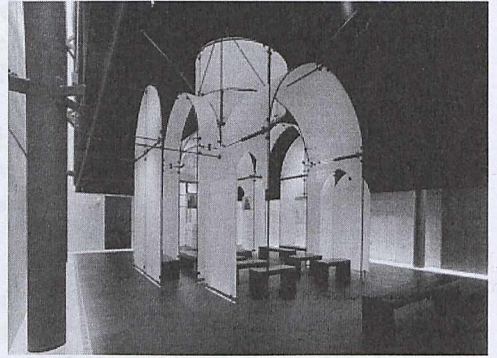


Fig. 2. Houston, Texas. The Byzantine Chapel Fresco Museum. General view (interior)

timated at \$ 900,000.00. The Menil Foundation cannot carry this new load”⁴⁰. She needed money for the Collection, opened a year before. She offered a deal to split the sum into three shares: \$ 300,000.00 each among Cypriotes, Greeks or Americans of Greek origin. “The extraordinary beauty of the frescoes, saved from destruction, on loan in the United States, could offer an occasion to remind the world of the plight of Cyprus”, she ended⁴¹. The City of Houston offered a space for the building⁴². On 19 November 1990 Dominique de Menil invited the Council, the friends and special guests of The Menil Collection to a viewing of frescoes⁴³. They were presented in the “Davezac” way, as the building was still to be erected. The costs occurred to be much higher – \$ 2,442,000 with possible small deductions⁴⁴.

The construction of the Fresco Chapel occurred to be a challenge. The lawyers started to discuss the question of prolonging the loan agreement, maybe to 50 years. What is more – they wrote: “We need to look at certain other legal issues such as, who is the Archbishopric and he or it a ‘church’? We need to further scrutinize the meaning of ‘consecration’ of the Chapel as an Orthodox church and its effect, if any, on the alternative choices discussed herein”⁴⁵. These pragmatic words put an end to the great idea that Dominique de Menil had in mind. “The Byzantine Fresco Foundation was established as a non-profit organization dedicated to the creation of the Byzantine Fresco Chapel in Houston. The Chapel will be the repository for the only examples outside the Orthodox world of frescoes from the Byzantine Period. Together the Chapel and the frescoes from Cyprus will serve as symbols in the United

40 Letter of 9 May 1988 from Dominique de Menil to C. Levantis in London. Menil Archives..., Box 4.

41 L.cit.

42 Letter of 8 December 1993 from Donna Kristaponis from Planning and Development department of City of Houston to Paul Winkler, Director of Menil Foundation. Menil Archives..., Box 2.

43 Invitation. Menil Archives..., Box 5.

44 Letter of 14 April 1992 from Barbara Coats on behalf of Paul Winkler to Francois de Menil. Menil Archives... Box 5.

45 Memorandum of 21 January 1992 from Singleton & Cooksey to Menil Foundation Inc. Menil Archives... Box 5.

States of the magnificent cultural and spiritual legacy of the Byzantine period”⁴⁶. It was seductive for the Orthodox officials from Galveston, not to mention His Grace, Bishop Isaiah of the Diocese of Denver...⁴⁷. In this document, of 1994, Francois de Menil presented his project “showing how the glass panels enclosing the frescoes will appear from within the containing building of steel. The panels will be held together and stabilized by a system of metal clips and tension rods, the latter replacing – and suggesting – the vaulting pendentives typical for Byzantine architecture”⁴⁸. It meant that the fundraising was quite efficient. The Foundation campaign was looking for \$3.4 million – of this 2.4 million for construction costs and a \$ 1 million to provide funds for annual maintenance. Completion of the project of the chapel was expected by June 30 1994⁴⁹. The works delayed but finally the Byzantine Chapel Fresco Museum was opened on 8 February 1997. Special brochures were published. Weyl Carr was quoted: “The Byzantine icon does not stare at its viewer, this figure of Christ does not glare at or threaten the viewer. Before the viewer, he simply is”⁵⁰. Yes, he simply is and he attracts our sight, however, as Stylianou stated, Christ’s eyes weren’t expressed correctly.

Whatever our impression is, Dominique de Menil managed to see her dream. Fortunately, the explication of A. Weyl Carr did not connect this great idea with Rothko Chapel, which was completely different in its message. The journalists expressed their enthusiasm: “De Menil has created a spiritual space that brings the visitor’s attention to the reinstalled frescoes, the only Byzantine wall paintings in the Western hemisphere. Magnificent relics of an age of faith, they are larger in spirit than their relatively small size should suggest” wrote David Boetti in his article “Resurrecting Byzantium”⁵¹. “De Menil described this experience as “a place and time where the painter and observer meet”⁵². “Such painting are not just for decoration, Mrs. De Menil said for “The Dallas Morning News”. “Their function is in glory and the praise of God” In the chapel “they have recovered their function” she said⁵³.

Dr. Nora Laos, from the very beginning questioned the choice of locking the chapel into the museum built by Francois de Menil. “The frescoes are represented in Houston as an isolated object of art”. She called his explanation of this way of presenting the frescoes “Hegelianque”, quoting the architect. “The immaterial materiality of the infill glass panels intensifies the absence/presence of the original site and transforms the glass structure into an apparition constantly fluxing as one moves

46 The Byzantine Fresco Chapel Campaign, Progress report, fall 1994, p. 8, Menil Archives... Box 5.

47 Ibidem, p. 1.

48 Ibidem, p. 2

49 Project to create the Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum. Draft Proposal without date. Menil Archives... Box 5.

50 The Byzantine Frescoes Chapel, Houston 1997, p. 4. Menil Archives... Box 5.

51 D. Boetti, Resurrecting Byzantium, *San Francisco Examiner* Sunday, August 30, 1998, C-5. Menil Archives... Box 4.

52 J. Makichuk, Byzantine frescoes, *Texas Journey* May/June 1998, 25. Menil Archives..., Box 4.

53 B. Nichols, Fresco Museum Opens in Houston, *The Dallas Morning News* March 31, 1997. Menil Archives... Box 4.

through it”⁵⁴. “The frescoes themselves are not visible from the entrance, she wrote. (...) As relics, literally, ‘those that remain’, the frescoes are now safely protected in their Texan refuge. However their meaning has irrevocably changed” she stated⁵⁵. At the end Nora Laos worries about the fate of frescoes if one day they will be taken to Cyprus. I would not worry so much about it, as on the UNESCO list from 1985 there are 176 monuments from Cyprus of first quality and 184 of the second. Lysi belongs to the second category⁵⁶. It is in the interest of Cyprus to keep the paintings in Houston.

If they were taken, however, what would happen to the building which resembles Rothko’s architecture? Well, it will suit the postmodern landscape which was more important for de Menils than even a modest imitation of a Byzantine construction. Many churches on today Cyprus are small, flat, covered by pitched roofs. But this model did not suit here. I cannot forget the first idea of Dominique de Menil, who wanted to build a home for God represented in the frescoes. Then she changed her mind, and her successors have a completely different point of view. As I am writing this paper in the time of Easter, when in the Roman Catholic Church the description of the road to Emmaus is read, I can’t stop thinking about the quotation I used as an epigraph to this fascinating story. I will also add: “Did not our hearts burn within us, while he talked with us?” (Luke 24:32). Dominique de Menil’s heart probably was burning when she saw the paintings. During my stay in Houston, I visited the chapel several times and I observed the reaction of the guests, but “their eyes were holden” like in Luke’s Gospel.

Houston, 10 April 2008

54 N. Laos, *Byzantium in Texas: The Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum in Houston*. The paper delivered at Byzantine Studies conference. Annual meeting, St Louis, MO, November 11, 2006, p. 6 (draft).

55 L.cit.

56 UNESCO Protection of Cultural Property, 1985, pp. 18-38. Menil Archives... Box 5.