INTRODUCTION: THE METAPHOR OF THE "LIVING ICON"

The late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries saw the emergence of a strikingly novel pictorial format in parts of the Byzantine Empire. Displaying the portrait of a saint surrounded on all four or fewer sides by scenes from his or her life, the so-called *vita* icon depicted some of the most popular figures in the Orthodox calendar, including Nicholas, George, and John the Baptist. The clarity and efficacy of the format evidently enabled its popularity; by the thirteenth century, it was being deployed to depict various holy figures in the Latin West as well. Of these western examples, the most concentrated and imaginative use of the *vita* image occurred in the realm of the Franciscans in the first half of the duecento, to honor their flamboyantly charismatic founder, Francis of Assisi.

This book investigates the conditions that enabled the emergence of the *vita* image in Byzantium and among the Franciscans, and its varied functions. It argues that the image type was a powerfully pungent expression of the ontological complexities intrinsic to the identity of the medieval saint, in both the Byzantine East and the Latin West (particularly in the case of Francis of Assisi, who shattered normative conceptions of saintly behavior by conforming only too perfectly to its ideals). The juxtaposition of a magnified portrait at the center of a panel flanked by smaller episodes both presented a satisfyingly synoptic view of the saint in question and distilled a stunning critique of the prevailing structures of vision, representation, and sanctity. The format engaged with urgent theological and philosophical issues that had long vexed the

medieval East and West, such as the similarities and differences between words and images, between relics and icons, between a representation and its subject, and the very nature of holy presence.

That these issues were not (perhaps never) satisfactorily resolved but remained the subject of fierce debates is evident from the fact that the *vita* image first emerged in Byzantium well after the end of Iconoclasm in 843 CE. By then, one might presume that the "problem"of the *eikon* (image) and its relationship to holy presence had already been dealt with. But an examination of the lives of saints in texts and images after Iconoclasm proves otherwise. As we shall see, the icon was the subject of continuous reflection among the Byzantines, and it is in the realm of hagiography that we find some of the most creative and challenging propositions regarding its creation, description, and reception. The saint, in other words, was the crucible on which concepts and practices concerning visual representation were tested. For the Franciscans, on the other hand, the hagiographic project itself was fraught with problems. Writers and painters commissioned to describe the life of Francis faced inordinate – even, arguably unprecedented – challenges, in having to describe the phenomenon of the stigmatization and its effects on a mortal human body. As this book shows, the *vita* format furnished the most effective pictorial expression to those challenges. The image type, then, was not merely an agent of spiritual instruction, or a didactic tool propounding the life of the saint depicted, or a useful pictorial accompaniment to the liturgical celebration of the holy one, although it undoubtedly performed all these roles. Along with them – and more importantly – the format proffered a pithily complex commentary on the possibilities and limits of visual mediation in the very definition of a saint.

This, for all the ubiquity of sacred persons and their images in the medieval era, was no simple task. For one, the markers signifying sainthood were remarkably tenuous.As Aviad Kleinberg remarks, "The medieval perception of sainthood was fluid. ... Medieval communities venerated simultaneously very different individuals ... indifferent to the logical contradictions such behavior entailed."[1] Apart from the sheer variety of saintly types (e.g., martyrs, virgins, confessors, and children), the very substance of sanctity was perceived as precariously unstable and labile in the period. Even while retaining a completely human

form, the saint was also invested with divine grace. He or she was regarded as a conduit between the human and divine realms, thus partaking of both. Moreover, as an imitator of Christ (whether in literal or nonliteral terms), the saint was perceived to be constantly engaged in a process of the *representation* of holiness; a representation whose benchmark was the figure of Christ. When hagiographers undertook to honor, proclaim, and describe the lives of the saints, they had to grapple with the inevitable tensions that resulted from presenting, on the one hand, a seemingly unified, coherent saintly identity and, on the other, a unique charisma that could not be explained but by the contingency of divine favor, and the continuous ontological transformations sustained by the holy one over a lifetime. Representations in words and images conferred a retrospective semblance of unity and cohesion on what was, in fact, an enterprise of the utmost contingency and chance, and manifested itself as such.

These points are borne out by a remarkably suggestive and well-known but rarely analyzed passage, which highlights the difficulties of capturing not just the saint in words and images but also the complexities of reception that underpin reading or looking at a saint's life. With uncharacteristic ruefulness (and, one suspects, a certain disingenuousness), Basil of Caesarea wrote to Gregory of Nyssa, pondering over all that he should have done in order to be a worthy Christian. In the process, he made the following analogy:

> Καὶ πανταχοῦ ὥσπερ οἱ ζωγράφοι, ὅταν ἀπό εἰκόνων εἰκόνας γράφωσι, πυκνὰ πρὸς τὸ παράδειγμα ἀποβλέποντες, τὸν ἐκειθεπ χαρακτῆρα πρὸς τὸ ἑαυτῶν σπουδάζουσι μεταθεῖναι φιλοτέχνημα. οὕτω δεῖ καὶ τὸν ἐσπουδακότα ἑαυτὸν πᾶσι τοῖς μέρεσι τῆς ἀρετῆς ἀπεργάσασθαι, τέλειον, οἱονεὶ πρὸς ἄγαλματά τινα κινούμενα καὶ ἔμπρακτα, τοὺς βίους τῶν ἁγίων ἀποβλέπειν, καὶ τὸ ἐκείνων ἀγαθὸν οἰκεῖον ποιεῖσθαι διὰ μιμήσεως.
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> Thus, as painters, when they are painting from other pictures, look closely at the model, and do their best to transfer its characteristics to their own artfully wrought work, so too must he who is desirous of rendering himself perfect in all branches of excellence, keep his eyes turned to the lives of the saints as though to living and moving statues, and make their virtue his own by imitation.[2]

The metaphor of the "living statue" was important to the Byzantines.[3] Not only was Basil himself described as one;[4] we also find his exhortation

repeated in a ninth-century manuscript of the *Sacra Parallela*, a compilation of scriptural writings currently located in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.[5] The passage in the manuscript, on folio 328 verso, is accompanied by an image (Plate I). An artist sketches on a panel from an icon, which is presumably the image of a saint. The artist is engaged in copying the icon; the corner of the latter grazes the side of the panel in his hand, thus hinting at the genealogical link (here expressed as a tactile connection) between the model and its copy. Relic-like, the completed icon imparts its touch to the icon in progress and legitimizes it. The artist is carefully positioned outside the tactile chain. Even though he holds the panel and is cast in the role of the "artful" manufacturer, his activity is confined to transcribing the icon's "characteristics." This is emphasized by his staring eyes, trained in the direction of the completed image, even as his hand moves in the process of tracing its contours. This artist is a transmitter, not a creator. Although he is the largest figure in the ensemble, the importance that accrues to size is undermined by his position. Shown in a three-quarter view, he is subordinated to the frontal gaze of the icon, which confronts the viewer directly. This vignette with its encapsulation of some of the fundamental principles of Byzantine image theory – and its concomitant ambiguity about the relative importance of the artist – depicts a process analogous to the cultivation of Christian virtue and saintly emulation, as per Basil's injunction. Artistic manufacture is likened to the inculcation of ethics.

Yet, being a good Christian is a somewhat more complicated procedure than the image would suggest. For one, it involves a different set of maneuvers on the part of the person "desirous of rendering himself perfect" from those enacted by the artist. The zealous Christian must look at the lives of the saints (presumably in their written and oral versions) as if they are statues. Indeed, the image right above that of our artist depicts a bearded figure pointing at the adjoining column of text. The inclusion of the artist below, with his hand and gaze pointing toward the completed icon, underscores the literal transition from the written to the pictorial to which Basil prompts us.

However, the church father adds a further layer of complexity to his analogy: the statues fashioned by the beholder (whether in his mind, in stone or metal, or in some other material) must be "living and moving." Where the artist is permitted the ease of operating within a single

medium (he "paints [pictures] from other pictures"), is endowed with the ability of artful manufacture, and is expressly posited as one who conveys a preexisting set of pictorial coordinates, the Christian must perform a more arduous set of tasks. He must switch between media and become, to a certain extent, a creator. He must transform a hagiographic text into an image, and the image into a mobile quantity invested with the full power of its moral significance. As if that were not complicated enough, the "image" referred to here could take on another, less literal dimension. As Stratis Papaioannou has shown, a "living statue" in Byzantium could allude not only to a beautifully carved and sculpted exterior, endowed with a similarly beauteous, or virtuous interior; it could also indicate a perfectly formed verbal discourse, in which style and content, beauty of expression and truthfulness of spirit, were harmoniously mingled.[6] In keeping with this formulation, then, our good Christian must be skilled at handling matter (be it words, paint, stones, or metals) *and* the nature, or spirit, of the saint in bringing about his "living statue." Only when exterior and interior, style and content, are in perfect concord, can such a being be said to have been wrought.

As if to hint at these (more difficult) transformations, one entire side of the icon in the Paris manuscript brushes against the text column, the image emanating from the letters, as it were – the pictorial taking shape from the verbal. But the transition of the image into a "living" entity is not pictured, or at least not directly. Broken down, Basil's instructions are not as straightforward, and his analogy is not as seamless, as they appear to be at first glance. Small wonder, then, that the manuscript illustrates only the first part of the passage and not the second.

This book suggests that the *vita* image best expresses the metaphor of the "living icon" in all its glorious nuance, with its array of questions (implicit and explicit) regarding the textual and visual depiction and reception of a saint. Scholarly consensus regards the *vita* images as instruments of instruction or propaganda, ideal for communicating those episodes that made the saint in question a holy figure. This argument, however, does not account for the reasons or the effects behind putting an enlarged portrait together with small-scale narrative scenes, nor does it explain the peculiar details animating those scenes, such as repetition, distortion, and sometimes, the outright defacement of the saint. This book examines the specific components of a handful of *vita*

images and offers an explanation as to why this format, over others, was deemed suitable to the various tasks at hand. And, as already suggested, the *vita* icon did indeed perform a set of highly important tasks. If the fifteenth century in Italy and Flanders is regarded as a period in which the pictorial possibilities of the frame, the icon, and narrative scenes were extended so as to combine the "vividness of the narrative . . . with the portrait character and direct appeal of the traditional icon," as Sixten Ringbom puts it,[7] then the *vita* image in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries might be considered a decisive step in that direction, in light of its diffusion over Europe within that time and beyond. As we shall see, in some *vita* images the concept of the "traditional icon" is put to the test, as the depiction of the saint in the center of the panel hovers between a seemingly static, atemporal iconic formula and a narrative mode in which the depiction appears to allude to a specific moment in a temporal sequence.

The subject of time serves to remind us that the period under consideration in this book – from the eleventh up till the thirteenth century – is not merely dictated by the fact that that is when this particular image type gradually emerged and then flourished in the Byzantine East and among the Franciscans; these centuries are also marked by decisive intellectual developments (anxieties, even), which, I argue, directly impinged upon the creation of the *vita* image. The rest of this introduction presents the general background of those developments as a prelude to the specific issues discussed in the chapters to follow.

The "Living Icon" and Its Problems

Byzantine thinkers in the eleventh century engaged in vigorous debates on the definition of the icon and modes of viewing it, as so persuasively shown by Charles Barber.[8] These debates found expression – indirectly but emphatically – in a range of textual and visual genres, among them the *vita* icon, until the ravaging of the empire in 1204 by the Fourth Crusade. The entire course of the thirteenth century, moreover, was significant for seeing some of the most innovative developments in saintly practice and imagery in Italy. In the first half of the duecento that peninsula witnessed an extraordinary (and, to some, even aberrant) phenomenon: the rise of St. Francis of Assisi, the *alter Christus*,[9] blessed

with the stigmata or the wounds of Christ. Several features of the emerging Franciscan literary and visual discourse intersect with the preoccupations of the Byzantines. In observing that "the servant of God is a kind of painting," [10] Francis performed a self-referential gesture and implicitly designated his own body as a representation, adorned by the then tremendously controversial fact of the stigmata. Hagiographers consistently referred to Francis in terms of a picture painted over with Christ's wounds, or a sculpture into whose surface God had carved out the stigmata with heavenly instruments. Deemed a "living icon" in his own right, Francis was the most audaciously literal example of that metaphor; one whose very person was conceived of as an image signed, sealed, and drawn upon by the finger of God.[11] The "living icon," thus, was elaborated upon in texts and images in Byzantium (and somewhat in the medieval West), but attained its most spectacular expression in the person of a cloth merchant's son hailing from Umbria. But how exactly was the concept of the "living icon" understood in Byzantium? And why did the Franciscans so insistently adopt its informing principles to describe their founder?

Modern scholarship furnishes some answers to these questions. Hans Belting, in his magisterial study *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, suggests that the "living icon" refers to the narrative and emotionally charged images of Christ's Passion that arose in eleventh-century Byzantium. Demonstrating the seeds of the naturalistic style, which was supposedly refined by the Italian Renaissance, these icons were regarded as sufficiently lifelike to engender fine-tuned emotional responses.[12] As Anne Derbes and others have shown, the Franciscans, in particular, responded to these images and incorporated them into their repertoire.[13] Bissera V. Pentcheva, however, has nuanced Belting's definition of the "living icon," pointing out that the images in question are not, in fact, very naturalistic.[14] Pentcheva directs us instead to the interest in Neoplatonism in eleventh-century Byzantium, and accounts of public and private miracles that manifest a decided interest in the element of change in an image. The "living icon," according to Pentcheva, is better defined as one that was perceived to evince a concrete transformation in its form, hue, or medium. This transformation was ostensibly triggered by the action of the Holy Spirit; a literal "in-spiriting" of the icon, causing it to be *empsychos*, or imbued with breath and life.

Both Belting and Pentcheva locate the conceptual core of the "living icon" in terms of its visual consequences in the Byzantine sphere. Stratis Papaioannou, on the other hand, has traced the metaphorical resonance of the expression in Byzantine literary genres.[15] His reading suggests that the phrase referred to an image, or a text, whose aesthetic or exterior qualities, apprehended by the senses, encompassed ineffable virtues that were less easily perceived, but which were nonetheless made manifest. A "living statue" was regarded as an object, the material appearance of which gradually enabled an apprehension of divine presence. The final product was one whose exterior and interior coexisted in perfect accord, and which had the power to move its viewers to cultivate similarly harmonious physical and spiritual selves.

Compelling as these interpretations are, I would suggest that there is yet another aspect to this rich metaphor, also rooted in Byzantium, that has not been explored. This aspect draws directly on the concept of the "living statue" as a potential site for the continuous generation of images and metaphors, and of the gradual manifestation of holy presence. My interpretation reverses the notion of the icon as a living or animated entity, designating instead a category of human beings endowed with the capacity *to become* an icon with all its powers and deficiencies. While this designation was sometimes applied to the Byzantine emperor, it is, I argue, particularly pertinent to our understanding of the Byzantine saint.

Gilbert Dagron has commented on the seemingly circular logic (the "vicious circle") that linked icons and saints in Byzantine culture.[16] More often than not the saint appeared to a venerator resembling precisely his or her depiction in an image of which the venerator had had prior experience. As Dagron points out, the icon authenticated the identity of the saint, rather than the saint authenticating his or her pictorial depiction. This trope is so widespread in Byzantium that it is regarded as amounting to a "recipe . . . in handbooks on how to paint."[17] I contend, however, that the trope functioned in an immeasurably wider capacity, one in which it was transformed into a rigorous hermeneutic that went beyond the question of identity. Rather than merely authenticating the saint as Cosmas, or Damian, or whomever, the very likeness between the icon and the saint prompted the viewer to distinguish between image and person. In other words, it is *because* the saint had the potential not

only to resemble his or her icon but also to become a living version of it, investing its matter with his or her presence, that the differences between the two entities – person and icon – had to be carefully gauged by venerators and viewers.

But the distinction between image and holy subject was both infinitely important and tantalizingly difficult to grasp. It hinged upon the definition of "presence" or *parousia* (*ousia* meaning "substance" or "essence"), and the definition of "image" or *eikon*. In marking the difference between presence and representation in the ninth century, Patriarch Nikephoros observed, "Making the absent present by showing forth the similarity and memory of its shape, [the icon] maintains [with its archetype] a relation stretching over time"[18] (Ὡς παρόντα γὰρ κὰι τὸν ἀποιχόμενον διά τε τῆς ἐμφερείας καὶ μνήμης ἢ μορφῆς ἐμφανίζουσα, συμπαρεκτεινομένην τῷ χρόνῳ διασώζει τὴν σχέσιν). The word *paronta*, here meaning "presence,"[19] is contrasted with *apoichomenon*, which refers to that which is gone, departed, or perished.[20] *Parousia* literally brings that which is distant, or dead, to presence, and the present. The representation (*eikon*) and its subject, however, are clearly separate in Nikephoros's formulation; they are brought into proximity by means of memory and likeness, but they are never identical. This demarcation led to a degree of confusion among clergy and laypeople alike. To give one example, Leo, a bishop of Chalcedon in the eleventh century, believed that the matter in which holy subjects were depicted was itself imbued with holiness, in stark contradiction of Nikephoros's pronouncement, which emphasized a *relation* between the two emphatically not based on identity.[21] Leo, however, perceived divine presence in the icon and its materials, as well as in the subject it depicted. Such distinctions reveal the contested nature of the definition of presence and representation, despite attempts at formulating (and regulating?) them.

The issue of presence, in particular, was further muddied by the fact that a saint was regarded as a representation of Christ and, therefore, as a sign. In an important article, Cynthia Hahn points out that "signs are marked by absence, a sign represents something absent, just as specifically, saints renew the meaning of the absent Christ. Nevertheless, because of the mystery of grace, an absence can be present."[22] She goes on to argue that "it is the genius of the hagiographic pictorial narrative

of the later Middle Ages that it was in some sense able to supercede the alienation of the sign and recover this power of the presence of Christ while at the same time giving the sign a 'face.'"[23]

This book complicates the notion that the saint and his or her hagiography in text and image were always able to supersede their status as signs, and to capture presence (in all the contradictions evident in the understanding of that term). As we shall see, the saint often assumed a range of ontological identities during his or her lifetime and beyond, such as relics, visions, dreams, and shadows. Each of these states held a distinct valence – and a distinct measure of presence – for the Byzantines, as is evident from their commentaries on the status of dreams, the nature of apparitions, and the means of distinguishing between their "good" and "evil" manifestations (a point discussed in Chapter 1). The expression "living icon," then, quite apart from its contextual meaning in various Byzantine texts, can be taken to encompass and reflect two essential facets of the scintillating ontology of the saint: first, his or her capacity to generate an array of diverse – sometimes overlapping and contiguous – states, such as dreams, visions, and relics, each of which was related mimetically to its holy subject, or prototype (*prototypos* in Greek); and, second, the differing degrees of presence that each of those states was perceived to embrace. The "living icon" was framed by the church fathers as a process occurring over such time as it took to cultivate virtue, and to match a handsome exterior to a correspondingly attractive interior. Similarly, I suggest that the different expressions of the saint (dreams, visions, etc.) were believed to manifest themselves over a period of time. The "living icon" thus came about as a consequence of this chain of states of being, of which it was one important element among several.

The awareness that holy presence was by no means an unvarying constant, and that it differed, both in its existence and in degrees in icons, relics, dreams, and visions, was sufficiently widespread. Accounts abound of venerators who recorded seeing the saint, or an icon of him or her, yield apparitions or the relics of the holy one, sometimes in rapid succession. The *Life of St. Nikon*, for instance, mentions an episode when a man praying in front of Nikon's portrait was transported to the saint's shrine where he experienced a healing miracle.[24] Interestingly, the episode distinguishes between Nikon's portrait and Nikon's shrine; it is the