

Preface

This book's constituent essays were occasioned by *Byzantine Materiality*, a major international conference held 8–11 May 2019 at and under the auspices of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary and its Institute of Sacred Arts. Several features distinguish it from other conference volumes or the mere proceedings of a scholarly symposium.

For one, the essays here have had more than one airing. They first began to be honed at a workshop in September 2018 to elicit substantive comments and critiques that could then be incorporated into the presentations. In addition, Evan Freeman, together with Richard Schneider, took extraordinary care in identifying and cultivating the conference participants. Those selected represent two notable diversities, one being disciplinary. It is unusual in the art history world to gather specialists from various media and even more so to also include authorities on philosophy and neuroscience. The other diversity—scholars who bring their own faith and religious experience to bear on their work and those who do not—is even rarer. The commitment to bridge scholarship from diverse starting points is an intentional and ongoing feature of the work of the Institute of Sacred Arts.

The workshop, conference, and publication were sponsored by the first of two consecutive three-year grants from the Henry Luce Foundation. This initial stage was dedicated to the exploration of material spirituality through a number of activities and publications. Several underlying principles make such an exploration especially interesting, if not inevitable, on the part of an Orthodox Christian institution. Looking at the long history of Orthodox Christianity, one finds a faith that celebrates not only the Incarnation of the Son of God but the very principles of incarnation and material embodiment. This is evident in its robust artistic culture across Byzantine and Slavic contexts that unstintingly exults in the material expression of creativity in the service of divine worship. Orthodox liturgy is a nexus of artistic creativity spanning diverse media, giving them a coherence of purpose. Of course, all art is inevitably expressed in and through the material from which it is constructed or emanates, especially if one appreciates the materiality not only of the tactile and the visual but also of sound and word. Although the worlds of religion and philosophy sometimes seem to privilege spiritual reality over the material, it is only through an embodiment of it that humans can experience and engage with the spiritual.

The above principles, together with the vibrant discipline of materiality studies, led inexorably to the subject of the 2019 conference. That gathering's life, quality, and enduring effect through this volume are due to the thoughtfulness and skill of its organizers and especially to Evan Freeman. I am pleased beyond words to commend

this book to its readers and eagerly await the creative work that it will surely continue to engender.

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