

Archeosophical Icon Painting and Iconognosis

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ABSTRACT: Tommaso Palamidessi, the founder of Archeosophy, regarded art, and specifically the icon, as a support for inner elevation and meditation, and the subject of a theurgic practice. His doctrinal corpus, together with its operative techniques, is presented in *L'ascesi artistica i colori e la pittura*, posthumously published in a reduced version in 1986 and in its complete form in 2012, through a private edition in four volumes. This text presents the geometrical figures to be used in the proportions, the action of colors on the psyche, the techniques of visualization and of “colored” respiration, the blessing formulas for the painting materials, and the theurgical consecration of the board. The text, which originated from a paranormal experience Palamidessi had in 1971, can be defined as a veritable manual of esoteric theory and artistic technique, aimed at initiating the novice into the preparation of the sacred icon, to its theurgic consecration, and to meditation on it. The icon painting practice of Palamidessi becomes thus “iconognosis:” a form of ascesis and an operative technique capable of producing a spiritual transmutation of the artist, and of transforming the icon into a “theophanic mirror” that manifests the divine presence.

KEYWORDS: Archeosophy, Tommaso Palamidessi, Esotericism and the Arts, Iconognosis, Icons and Meditation.

Introduction

The influences of Western esotericism in the world of art, especially in the first half of the 20th century, are well-known. They have been the subject of academic studies for more than fifty years, as demonstrated by important exhibitions such as the seminal *The Spiritual in Art* (1986: Tuchman 1986); *Traces du Sacré* (2008: Alizart, Loisy, and Lampe 2008), which was able to gather almost two hundred artists of international fame; and the Venice Guggenheim’s *Surrealism and Magic: Enchanted Modernity* (2022: Subelytè and Zamani 2022).

Particularly relevant and studied are the influences of Theosophy on abstract art (Bauduin 2013) through Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) and Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), without forgetting the amazing story of Hilma af Klint (1862–1944). While Terence Harold Robsjohn-Gibblings (1903–1976) insisted that abstract art really started with the ideas on “thought-forms” of Theosophists Annie Besant (1847–1933) and Charles Webster Leadbeater (1847–1934) (Robsjohn-Gibblings 1947), modernist art can hardly be understood without considering the important influences of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) and even of Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918).

In fact, the links between esoteric and artistic discourse are so deep and obvious that today they no longer need to be justified. They should only be explained. In searching for an explanation, Marco Pasi proposes four principal modes in which esotericism can find its expression in modern and contemporary art. The first mode is through the representation and use in the artistic process of metaphysical or esoteric symbols. The second derives from the fact that an artistic object, being the result of a manipulation of the material, can be interpreted as a talisman or an object of power. The third mode sees in the artistic work a means to induce extraordinary experiences. Finally, the fourth mode regards the artistic work as a result of a spiritual or mystical experience (Pasi 2015).

The four modes indicated by Pasi are all implicitly included in the “artistic ascesis” proposed by Tommaso Palamidessi (1915–1983). The founder of the Archeosofica School spent many years painting icons, and later synthesized his experience in a text which is now regarded as a classic in this field (Palamidessi 2015 [1971]). It also constitutes the base and a guide for the numerous Archeosophical icon painting courses offered in Italy, Germany, Austria, and Portugal.

In fact, the Archeosophical icon painting practice can be considered an “iconognosis.” Palamidessi believed that iconognosis rested on three principles. First, the icon is an artistic-scientific work that uses non-arbitrary colors and symbols of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Second, the Archeosophical icon is a theurgical work, prepared specifically for liturgical or hierurgical rites through a special process and a ritual of consecration. Third, the icon painting work corresponds to a specific “artistic ascesis,” whose purpose is the spiritual transmutation of the artist, who condenses in the icon the testimony of a mystical experience or of an initiatory self-realization.

An Experience as Monk-Icon Painter

The life of Tommaso Palamidessi is characterised by its eclecticism. His work focuses on the individuals in their psychic, spiritual, creative, religious, and artistic features. Therefore, it is not surprising that Palamidessi already exhibited an interest for the aesthetic dimension in the early 1960s, when he practised sculpture, under the master Guarino Roscioli (1895–1978), and painting (Baroni 2011, 90).

In this period, the interests of Palamidessi were already focused on the rediscovery of the early Church Fathers of Christianity, and the project of what would become the Archeosofica School (Corradetti 2022, 10). In these years, Palamidessi wrote for the magazine *La tribuna illustrata*, where his column included essays devoted to the divulgation of themes and symbols of the esoteric and spiritual traditions. It is in some of these articles that we find his first references to painting. In one of his periodic visits to the shrine at La Verna, where he was completing his preparation for joining the Franciscan Third Order (Lullo 2020), Palamidessi met the painter Antonio De Vivo (1915–1982), who had been knighted by the Italian Republic for his artistic achievements. Palamidessi called him an “ascetic painter,” and a lifelong friendship started (Palamidessi 1962).

In the *Tribuna illustrata* articles, the metaphysical dimension of painting is already outlined. Indeed, artistic creation is seen as a “revelation of a superior reality.” The artists’ “mediumistic nature, suspended between the world of demons and that of angels” makes them receptive to “influences both from below and from above” (Palamidessi 1963, 34). Artists are thus able to “immerse themselves in the Nature and re-enter into themselves, after having absorbed and captured the archetypal values, so as to express them through the filter of their personality” (Palamidessi 1962, 34).

However, as it often happens with Palamidessi, the turning point for the elaboration of an esoteric theme was born from a spiritual or a parapsychological experience he personally lived. In this case, the event occurred during a period of intense activity on the theme of icon painting, which had started at least in October 1970.

In his eighteenth Archeosophy booklet published in the same year 1970, *Esperienza Misterica del Santo Graal*, Palamidessi had already devoted numerous

pages to the artistic ascesis and the iconognosis (Palamidessi 1970, 27–32), a sign of his intense reflection on the subject. Probably between the end of 1970 and the end of 1971 Palamidessi painted his two icons we know of, one depicting “Saint Antipas” and the other “Saint Francis Instructing the Wolf.” Palamidessi himself referred to the first icon, which depicts the martyred bishop Antipas of Pergamon (?–92 CE), whom the Orthodox tradition identifies with the martyr Antipas mentioned in *Revelation 2:13* (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 32). The existence of the second one has been confirmed to me by the current leader of Archeosophy, Alessandro Benassai.

On September 8, 1971 Palamidessi started drafting his treatise *L’ascesi artistica i colori e la pittura* (Palamidessi 2015 [1971]). On the previous Sunday, he had lectured on the subject at the Pisa branch of the Associazione Archeosofica. The paranormal phenomenon happened on Thursday, November 11, 1971, at 1.30 p.m., in his villa of Morlupo, a village near Rome. Palamidessi experienced his life as a “novice” icon painter in a “large Christian Russian Orthodox monastery.”

The details of the geographical and temporal context are lacking. The reference to the episode as a memory of a “past life” is not explicit, even if in some way the story, reported in details in *Tecniche di risveglio iniziatico* (Palamidessi 1975, 34–8), can be understood as such.

The account is particularly important because it includes all the core features of Archeosophical icon painting. They include the hierurgical and ascetic use of the icon painting technique operated through “symbolic and consecrated colors, and thus charged with a mysterious force;” the epiclesis and the descent of the Divine Presence operated through a precise ritual made of consecrations, “fumigations,” and numerous invocations to the “Most Holy Virgin and the Celestial Son;” experimenting with colors as a metaphysical experience facilitated by specific respirations, visualizations, and ad hoc positions; the choice of precise geometrical proportions for the “sacred board of lime tree, planed and scraped in such a way as to render it convex;” and finally, the choice of auspicious times and of a special ascetic dietetics (Palamidessi 1975, 37).

The treatise L'ascesi artistica i colori e la pittura

The principal text of Palamidessi on icon painting is *L'ascesi artistica i colori e la pittura*, which can be defined as a veritable manual of “esoteric theory and artistic technique” (Baroni 2011, 174). It is aimed at initiating the novice to the preparation of the sacred icon, to its theurgical consecration, and to meditation on it. Palamidessi started the drafting of the text, which would eventually become his twenty-seventh booklet on Archeosophy, in 1971. However, it was only in 1986 that the book was posthumously edited and published by his daughter Silvestra Palamidessi (1948–1996) with the title *L'ìcòna, i colori e l'ascesi artistica* (Palamidessi 1986). Subsequently, after Alessandro Benassai acquired the original manuscript, the text was newly edited and published in four volumes, as the twenty-seventh booklet of Archeosophy, in a private edition and with the original title, i.e., *L'ascesi artistica i colori e la pittura* (Palamidessi 2015 [1971]).

The version edited by Benassai, although less homogeneous and editorially honed than the previous one, includes numerous previously unpublished parts, some of which had been left by the author only as notes in an incomplete form, and original designs by Palamidessi. It is now considered the most complete text, and is the one used by practitioners of Archeosophical icon painting. The text is divided in four volumes on the basis of a thematic division. The first deals with the sacred and spiritual dimension of art, and with the theological and scientific foundations of icon painting. The second is devoted to color, which in addition to its symbolic aspect is also analysed in its practical realization, starting from the raw materials. The third volume is the most technical, as it presents the entire realization of the icon, from the preparation of its board to the design with its proportions, up to the technical details of the icon painting process. The fourth is entirely devoted to the artistic ascesis as a whole, and offers meditative and ritual suggestions for the preparation and consecration of the icon.

Painting as a Way to Ascesis

For Palamidessi, any activity offers the opportunity for ascesis and self-overcoming. The artistic activity is no exception. Artistic ascesis, as the subtitle of

L'ìcòna, i colori e l'ascesi artistica indicated, is “a Way towards self-overcoming and a divine consciousness in Art” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971]).

More specifically, Palamidessi believed that art is a powerful transformative instrument. It can lead to either elevation or degradation, depending on the sensibility of the artist. Art is, on the one hand, a “representation of the outer reality of the things belonging to the mineral, vegetable, animal, and human world, transfigured into Beauty by the genius of the artist.” On the other hand, it is the “representation of the inner reality that is found in the outer reality” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 2). This inner representation depends on the subjectivity of the artist, who can be receptive “prevalently to the good, or to the bad.” If the work of art does not correspond to the “revelation of a superior reality,” if artists do not seek to “penetrate the inner reality of the things so as to ascend to the attributes of God,” then for Palamidessi they are “artists of the bad and the ugly” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 3).

The artistic ascesis is a way of living an art “not left adrift but steered by the Cosmic Subjectivity of the Christ” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 4). The artistic ascesis is therefore regarded by Palamidessi as a ladder that allows the artists, initiated into sanctity, to resonate and vibrate in harmony with “the divine uncreated energies, with the spirits of light, with the Communion of the Saints, with the Most Holy Virgin,” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 11) and to fulfil their priesthood by realizing in the works of art a theophanic sacrament.

Theological Framework: The Veneration of the Holy Images

A special role in the artistic work is played by the icon, which for Palamidessi is “a precious instrument of the special sacred art that helps the ascesis.” Its symbolic colors and pictorial canons constitute an “aesthetic science for the self-overcoming of oneself and the perfect imitation of the Christ” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 3). However, before moving on to the operative practice, Palamidessi consecrates almost an entire volume to clarify the doctrinal and theological context in which to set one’s own artistic ascesis. The evident reason for this doctrinal caution lies in the numerous controversies that had plagued icon painting movements of the past.

Artistic work, as noted by Pasi, is the result of a manipulation of the material, which as such can be interpreted by the esoterically inclined artists as a talisman or an object of power (Pasi 2015, 102). This is even more true in the case of the icon. In this case the painting, first purified and exorcised, then blessed and sanctified according to appropriate rituals, becomes a ritual instrument, and is considered to be a vehicle of the Divine Presence. The boundary between magic and theurgy, between idolatry and iconoduly, between Eucharistic transubstantiation and consecration through the icons, may appear to be subtle. Doctrinal errors and ambiguous interpretations led to the well-known iconoclastic movements, whose principal impulse came with the emperor Leo III the Isaurian (675–741), to whom Palamidessi devotes several pages (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 9–12).

Thus, the aim of the first volume of *L'ascesi artistica i colori e la pittura* is that of making the theological and scientific bases of the theurgy of the icon as clear as possible. Practical and operational directives will follow in the fourth volume. The approach of Palamidessi is inspired by that of Paul (Pavel) Evdokimov (1901–1970), whose text, quoted by Palamidessi, had just been published in a French edition (Evdokimov 1970). In the case of the icons, the divine action, which “enhypostatizes,” i.e., “absorbs and integrates them in its spiritual body,” does not concern the material species of the board and tempera colors but the “likeness” of the icon itself (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 15).

Whilst in the Catholic and Orthodox theology of the Eucharist, the transubstantiation operates a transformation of the substance of the species, the icon does not contain any nature, does not attract nor imprison anything, but everything that is fixed on the board irradiates there the Name-Hypostasis (Evdokimov 1970). For both Palamidessi and Evdokimov, the Divine Presence does not use the icon as a “place of incarnation” but rather finds there “the centre of an energetic irradiation” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 15). Palamidessi had already clarified this position in 1970, that is, before his specific reflections on icon painting, when dealing with the study of the Grail:

Keep well in mind, the icon is not consubstantial with what it wishes to represent, but is immersed in a suprasensible light, and for this quality the icon of the Grail leads to the Grail (Palamidessi 1970, 31, underlined in original).

The insistence of Palamidessi on this point is justified by the fact that the distinction between a Divine Presence through “substance” and a Divine Presence through

“irradiation” emphasizes the theological difference between the two concepts. It answers possible accusations of pantheism and idolatry, and establishes the conditions justifying the veneration of the holy images, and therefore the doctrinal foundations for the icon painting work.

The Scientific Theory of the Icon

In the 2015 edition of *L'ascesi artistica i colori e la pittura*, next to the theological foundation of icon painting there is an interesting chapter with the title “La teoria scientifica dell’Icona” (The Scientific Theory of the Icon: Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 21). This chapter supplements the theological foundation of the icons and their process of painting them with a scientific one. This fully fits in Palamidessi’s program of Archeosophy as an “experimental metaphysics” (see Corradetti and Lullo 2020), given that “faith, science, ascetics, and theology make the individual holy and cosmic” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 26). In this case, Palamidessi wants to evidence a “psycho-ionic” link between photographed, painted, and original images. In this sense, he quotes the parapsychological experiments and studies of Albert Leprince (1840–1914: Leprince 1941) and his friend Giuseppe Calligaris (1876–1944), and the case of Ted Serios (1918–2006: Eisenbud 1967).

In Palamidessi’s scientific theory, the study of the icon as a “sacral mirror,” whose analogy was not coincidental, re-emerges. Whereas an ordinary mirror shows our own image, the “mirror-icon” is a symbol of the Divine Spirit. The soul that looks at the mirror-icon “sees the shames it brings with it,” and by rejecting them “takes as a model the Holy Spirit and imitates it—unifies with the Spirit” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 23).

The concave and convex curvatures of the icon also have a precise hierurgical and liturgical value. In fact, the icon receives “the cardio-encephalic telepathic wave, not only of an electromagnetic nature, but of a spiritual one, and reflects it in an intense way to the focus of the mirror-icon, inundating the devotees with blessing and love” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], I, 23). Thus, a concave curvature is more adapt for the personal and hierurgical practice of the single devotee, whilst a convex icon will be more adapt for the liturgical or public rites. For Palamidessi, the analogy between icon and mirror is not merely symbolic. The “optical-psycho-spiritual” phenomenon of the mirror is so much real and relevant for icon painting that Palamidessi provides in the third volume a formula for the calculation of the focal distance of the icon, starting from the curvature radius of the board.

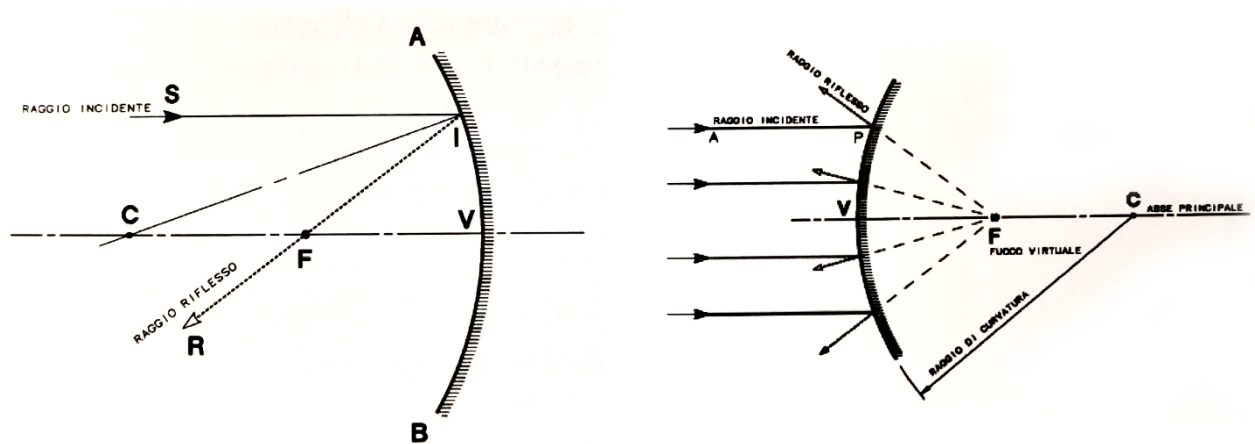


Figure 1. Focal distance in relation to the concavity or convexity of the icon. Point C indicates the circumference center, while F indicates the effective or virtual focus of the icon (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], III, 3-4).

Technical Aspects of the Archeosophical Icon Painting

When Palamidessi refers to icon painting as an “aesthetic science,” he clearly means that the pictorial canons, the use of colors, the path to the icon’s completion, and the theurgical process of consecration are not arbitrary. Instructions should be followed in each detail in order to obtain the desired ascetic results. Thus, in the third volume of *L’ascesi artistica i colori e la pittura*, he describes in great detail how to put the Archeosophists in the best technical conditions for the making of their icons. He explains how to make a paintbrush, and a palette for the colors, and adds practical suggestions for the egg, glue, and gum tempera.

From a purely technical point of view, the Archeosophical icon painting does not deviate from the traditional model codified by Dionysius of Fournia (ca. 1670–1745), a Mount Athos monk of the 18th century and the author of *Ερμηνεία της ζωγραφικής* (The Painter’s Manual). This text, translated into French in 1845 by Paul Durand (1806–1882) with the title *Manuel d’iconographie chrétienne grecque et latine* ([Dyonisius of Fournia] 1845), is mentioned by Palamidessi (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], III, 12), together with the classic *Trattato della pittura* or *Libro dell’Arte* by Cennino Cennini (1370–1440: Cennini 1821), a pupil of Giotto di Bondone (1267–1337). However, Palamidessi was mostly focused on the study of the numerical and geometrical canons that preside over the icon, a field he contributed to by introducing some new and noteworthy elements.

The dimensions of the icon and the anatomical proportions of the characters represented are not arbitrary. They should be selected according to a sacred symbolism of numbers and geometrical forms. For example, they should correspond to the 3:4:5 sacred triangle in the case of the half-bust, or 1:3 when a whole figure is represented. In each case, Palamidessi supplies symbolic geometrical schemes, which should be “internalized and meditated on for a long time in their dual meaning” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], III, 21).

The proportions of the busts and the faces follow the classical canons of Dionysius of Fourna and Cennino Cennini popularized by Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968: Panofsky 1955). Indeed, Palamidessi quotes an Italian translation of Panofsky’s book on the meaning of visual arts (Panofsky 1962). Even more important for Palamidessi is the use of the golden number through the construction of the five-pointed star or pentagram, known as “the dynamic sign of Nature and of Humans” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 35). He recommends the use of such a geometrical form to give “a cosmic dimension” to the faces of the saints (see Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Proportions of the icon of “James, the Brother of Christ.” Autograph design of Tommaso Palamidessi (in Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 35).

The Importance of Colors in the Archeosophical Icons

Chromatic symbolism and geometrical canons are the two principal vectors of the “aesthetic science” that presides over the realization of the sacred icon. For Palamidessi, the effectiveness of an icon at an ascetic and liturgical level depends on these two fundamental factors. In particular, color is distinguished by him in an “outer color,” that is, a color intended externally for the eye, and an “inner color,” which refers to “clairvoyant colors” coming “from the subjectivity” of the person. The work on the icon through the outer colors is a means to internalize and change the inner colors, or the colors “of a psychic nature,” which have a precise function “for creating a contact with the Grail as an experience of Light” (Palamidessi 1970, 29).

Palamidessi explores in depth the sacred, religious, and esoteric symbolism of colors (Godwin 2017), inspired by *Des couleurs symboliques*, a text written in 1837 by Baron Frédéric de Portal (1804–1876: de Portal 1837). Meditations on colors and their internalization are indispensable tools for the icon painter. Palamidessi supplies examples of meditations on colors through rhythmic respiration according to the times 6:3:6:3, and visualization of the colors associated with the repetition of some sentences—specific short prayers for each color:

Gold and Yellow: Sun of Glory, Divine Life, illuminate my heart.

Red: Red fire of the Divine Love, blaze inside me.

White: Whiteness of the Eternal Light, clothe my soul.

Azure: Azure Sapience, Wisdom of God, cover me with your mantle.

Green: Green of Resurrection and Hope, regenerate my spirit (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 18).

Palamidessi specifies that through such meditations the results of the “resonance” with the subject of the icon will become even more powerful.

To breathe the vital energy and to rhythm the breathing according to the glowing gold signifies to experiment the Divinity and its superabundance. To rhythm the breathing and to visualize the intense azure is the same as breathing the celestial truth, whereas the pale azure leads to the unity and to the celestial character of the one nature (Palamidessi 1970, 30).

The Theurgy of the Icon

The Archeosophical icon is more than a work of art of a religious character. It is a real theurgical work, for which Palamidessi supplies a detailed operative and ritual practice. It

involves a preliminary preparation period including a retreat and several days of ascetic exercises. He supplies meticulous indications and formulae of consecration and prayer for each phase of the day and for the realization of the icon. He begins with the purification and incensing of the still white board, so that with the help of the Divine Grace it becomes a “support worthy to receive the sacred images.” Follows the consecration of water mixed with salt, ashes coming from a blessed olive tree, and some drops of wine. The water, blessed through the use of a formula that “calls for great purity of heart and mind” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 19), should then be used for the preparation of the colors.

The meditative and ascetic operations follow one another during the whole process of making the icon. The ascetic painter will not consecrate the icons until they are completed. This is the very center of the icon-painting theurgical operations, the “culminating and decisive” moment in which the icon becomes a “temporal mirror of the eternity” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 36). For at this moment the Archeosophists, in the instant of the invocation, should be at the zenith of their ascetic preparation and inner purity, so that “their words are not useless or, worse, blasphemous” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 36). The benediction of the icon is performed at dawn after a whole night of vigil and prayer. At the culmination of an intense prayer, with the hands stretched on the icon, the painter proceeds with the formula of consecration addressed directly to the Divine Uni-Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Archeosophical Icon Painting and Iconognosis

The Archeosophical icon painting process is the starting point of meditation and concentration that will lead to the “iconognosis,” i.e., to the discovery of what lies behind the image. For Palamidessi, this is “the most advanced form of ascesis through the symbol,” “part of the theosis by means of the symbol,” and the perfection of the ascetic way of the “integral or esoteric Christianity” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 6).

The icon is considered by Palamidessi to be on a par with a mandala, that is, a “castle of meditation,” a “magic circle,” a powerful means on which to fix the physical look and “the eye of the mind so as to isolate oneself from the profane world and to enter into the sacred world.” The meditation on the sacred image, from the beginning of its preparation to its completion, directs the will of salvation of the devotee because “this image animates, dynamizes, becomes charged with fluid, and works deep and healthy transformations in our consciousness” (Palamidessi 2015 [1971], IV, 10).

The meditation on the icon leads to the contemplation of the archetypal reality and of the mystery which is found behind it. That is why the “Divine Trinity” of Andrei Rublev (1360?–1427?) expresses the “trisolar splendor of what Saint Gregory Palamas [ca. 1296–1359] indicated as the Light of Tabor, the Light contemplated by the Saints, and the Light of the second future: three Lights that are always the same Light” (Palamidessi 1970, 30). In the end, “The icon of the Grail leads to the Grail” (Palamidessi 1970, 39).

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