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## BYZANTINE ART AND CONTEMPORARY FASHION

Two famous contemporary fashion designers—Domenico Dolce, born in Polizzi Generosa, in the commune of Palermo in Sicily, and Stefano Gabbana, born in Milan—are very proud of their cultural heritage.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it was not a surprise when in 2013 they found inspiration in what are commonly described as the “Byzantine style mosaics” of the 12<sup>th</sup> century cathedral in the city of Monreale, Sicily. Like many others, they were captivated by the meticulousness and craftsmanship of the mosaics, and they devised personal versions of the same technique in media of their choice. The designers have a reputation for extravagance, expeditious execution, and the use of non traditional fabrics, so it was rather surprising that one of reasons for their inspiration by the mosaic technique was that “the art of mosaic-making is a slow and precise one.”<sup>2</sup> Their Byzantine collection was presented during the popular *Milan Fashion Week* in September 2013 (fig. 1).

A number of reviews have been published in prestigious fashion magazines—to name the most popular, *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie Claire*, and *Elle*. Most critics associated the following key words/themes/titles with this collection: “Byzantine Majesty,” “Catholic Drama,” “Beautiful Sin,” “Sophisticated Opulence,” “Extravagance of Byzantine Art,” “Religious Sternness Juxtaposed by Fashion’s Frivolity,” and “Emballishment.”<sup>3</sup> Personally, I do not follow fashion, especially high fashion and designers such as Dolce and Gabbana for a simple reason: their designs are not affordable for the budgets of professional academics. However, I was intrigued by this collection, so I decided to become a fashionista, at least on this occasion.

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<sup>1</sup> For their biography, please see <http://fashion-forum.org/fashion-designers/dolce-gabbana.html> (accessed November 1, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> “Mosaic as Fashion’s Muse: Dolce and Gabbana Winter 2014 ‘Tailored Mosaic,’” *Mosaic Art Now*, February 25, 2013, <http://www.mosaicartnow.com/2013/02/mosaic-as-fashions-muse-dolce-gabbana-winter-2014-tailored-mosaic/> (accessed November 1, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> These are titles of selected online reviews and opinions about the collection.



Fig. 1 One of the Official Posters for Dolce and Gabbana's Byzantine Collection, 2013

Сл. 1 Сл. 1. Једна од званичних постера за Долче и Габана византијску колекцију 2013.

In 1174, the Norman King William II ordered the construction of a new church in Monreale, dedicated to the Virgin Mary. On its completion in 1182, Pope Lucius III elevated the splendid church to the status of metropolitan cathedral (fig. 2).<sup>4</sup>

Sophisticated and cultured, King William II employed the very best Arabic, Byzantine, and local Norman craftsmen to work on it. The result is an eclectic combination of architectural ideas, artistic styles, and above all, a very flexible

iconography. It is a monumental basilica, 82 m long and 14.5 m wide, with an arcade of an eight-bay wooden-roofed nave supported on massive reused granite columns, certainly appropriated from some classical site. The mosaic decoration covers an area of 7,600–8,000 sq. m or about 1.5 acres of mosaic tesserae.<sup>5</sup> Traditional biblical themes and depictions of saints, Old Testament kings and angels abound, all visually enhanced with gilded motifs and opulent decorative patterns. Carpet-like mosaic layers culminate at the semidome of the apse, where there is a representation of Christ *Pantocrator* (fig. 3).

Dolce and Gabbana's collection in Milan was best described as a glittering mix of the divine and the profane elements executed in precious, golden, sparkling garments decorated with expensive Swarovski crystals and double-printed images, creating an illusion of a 3D mosaic. "The shabby fashion is so over; now it's time to go back to the real tailoring," explained Dolce and Gabbana before the show, and they really demonstrated their thesis on the runway with opulent, striking, embroidered dresses that are a pure visual joy.<sup>6</sup> The overall impression was that this collection in an unexpected way pays a strong tribute to the glory of Byzantine art in general, with exceptionally beautifully executed dresses, gold accessories with the typical palate of the time: saturated red, glistening gold, and royal purple (fig. 4).

<sup>4</sup> For more on Monreale Cathedral, see John Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, London, Phaidon Press Limited, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Lowden 329.

<sup>6</sup> "Byzantine Majesty: Dolce & Gabbana AW13," February 26, 2013, <http://simplyfrabulous.blogspot.com/2013/02/byzantine-majesty-dolce-gabbana-aw13.html> (accessed November 1, 2016).

Appropriating the tedious technique of mosaic making, Dolce and Gabbana transformed the pieces of clothing into real works of art, and executed them stitch by stitch to convey the complexity of Byzantine craftsmanship (fig. 5).

With this particular collection, Dolce and Gabbana posed the question of whether it is possible to use selected iconographical elements and themes purely for their esthetic value, without the intention to offend the faithful. It is the general opinion that using religious symbols for commercial reasons may be blasphemous. However, it has happened before. In the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy, Empress Theodora and her entourage are depicted as almost being in a modern walkway setting, intentionally posed to display the splendid silk and embroidered dresses, expensive jewelry, and infamous red—and in Theodora’s case, golden—shoes (fig. 6).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the hem of the Empress’s robe is decorated with a scene of the Adoration of the Magi, and it is logical to assume that depictions of the Virgin and Child are hidden inside the folds (fig. 7). This is an obvious use of specific iconography for didactic reasons, even disregarding the fact that Theodora is the only one with a halo, further indicating her divine appointment as Empress. Similar to the Ravenna panel, Dolce and Gabbana’s female models wore royal diadems and headdresses, suggesting their high social status parallel to *augustae* or *principessae*, and further emphasized by large cross earrings, and “delightfully playful” shoes, made of royal purple or red velvet (fig. 8).<sup>8</sup>

The designers have used the artistry and appeal of the Byzantine mosaics for a personal vision of intricately gilded and embroidered textures. One of the reviewers examined this attempt by discussing the infamous period of iconoclastic fighting in Byzantine history: A parody of the conflict between



Fig. 2 Façade of the Cathedral of Monreale, Italy, 1174-1182

Сл. 2. Фасада катедрале у Монреалеу



Fig. 3 Interior of the Cathedral of Monreale, Italy

Сл. 3. Ентеријер катедрале у Монреалеу

<sup>7</sup> Katherine R. Brown, “The Mosaics of San Vitale: Evidence for the Attribution of Some Early Byzantine Jewelry to Court Workshops,” *Gesta*, Vol. 18, No. 1(1979): 57–62.

<sup>8</sup> Britteny Dee, “On the Runway: Dolce & Gabbana Fall 2013,” *Fashion Times*, July 31, 2013, <http://www.fashiontimes.com/articles/322/20130731/runway-dolce-gabbana-fall-2013.htm> (accessed November 1, 2016).



Fig. 4 Milan Fashion Week - Fall 2013 - Details of the Dresses

Сл. 4. Недеља моде у Милану, јесен 2013, детаљи хаљина

iconodules and iconoclasts, icon-worshippers and icon-destroyers seems appropriate in this regard and it is quite possible that Dolce and Gabbana is making a feminist point by translating the female form into that of a living icon, to be both worshipped and objectified. Are we, in keeping with iconophilic theology, supposed to worship the icon itself, or the form that the icon represents? Or are we in fact, supposed to worship the exquisite handbag that bears the image of the empress and thus becomes the icon. It is all rather confusing and not a little seductively blasphemous.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to highlight another fact, which is that Dolce and Gabbana are known as creators of luxury goods. According to sociology professor Fred Davis and his book *Fashion, Culture and Identity*, “the modern culture of consumption and the money culture of capitalism have democratized desire by suggesting that satisfaction, based on accumulation of things, is possible for all.”<sup>10</sup> Presence of the elite and its desire for luxury, created demand for fashion designers such as Dolce and Gabbana who for this collection, unlike other colleagues, searched for a new idea in the past.<sup>11</sup> According to Davis, “this is not a re-

cycling process—it is a resurfacing, a cultivation of the surface of the old across the surface of the new—it is looking to the past to re-imagine the present.”<sup>12</sup> Another fashion columnist, Holly Brubach, explains why designers of fashion such as Dolce and Gabbana’s Byzantine collection seek inspiration in the past: “Fashion exists in that tension between the past and the future, the familiar and the undiscovered.”<sup>13</sup> There is no doubt that Dolce and Gabbana are aware that the Byzantines “invented” the fashion show, known as the “bride show,” back in the 830s under Emperor Theophilos (813–842), who with summoned a crowd to his palace to choose a wife. His stepmother, Euphrosyne, invited the most attractive and talented virgins of Constantinople to a gathering in her private apartments. The Emperor entered the room, and walked forward with a golden apple in his hand. According to some rumors, one of the main contestants, Kassiani,

<sup>9</sup> Dean Kalimniou, “Dolce’s Byzantine Gabbana,” July 27, 2013, <http://diatribe-column.blogspot.com/2013/07/dolces-byzantine-gabbana.html> (accessed November 1, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture and Identity*, Chicago, University Press, 1992, 141.

<sup>11</sup> Giasni Versace said: “I am not interested in the past....I am never nostalgic....I want to understand my time.” Davis 129.

<sup>12</sup> Davis 129.

<sup>13</sup> Davis 130.



was turned down for being too witty. His final choice was Theodora, who in 843 finally ended iconoclasm.<sup>14</sup>

Essential to fashion is not only the desire for particular styles, but also a system where clothes are designed, created, and sold. The dresscode in the Byzantine Empire strongly suggests that a similar fashion system existed.<sup>15</sup> In the years between 900 and 1300, costumes had gradually developed from loose-fitting simple tunics and loose mantles to more closely fitting styles of a complex shape. As courts became centers of fashionable life, distinct dress codes developed. Professions, gender, and wealth can be read in depictions of people, and dress courtiers, emperors, empresses, farmers, and soldiers are signaled fashion choices.<sup>16</sup> A good example is a page from the *Vatican Greek Manuscript 1851* (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana) produced for the occasion of the marriage between Agnes, the 9-year-old daughter of Louis VII of France, and Byzantine Emperor Alexios II Komnenos in 1179 (fig.9).<sup>17</sup>

She was presented with an illustrated book containing a poem written in vernacular Greek, intended to introduce the future and unexperienced bride to the rituals and ceremonies.

In this full-page illumination, Agnes sheds the clothing of her homeland and accepts clothing appropriate for her new identity as an *augusta*, thus participating in a social system where her status was visually marked by a dress. The action unfolds from top to bottom: at the top, the narrative proceeds from



Fig. 5 Detail

Сл.5. Деталј



Fig. 6 Empress Theodora and Her Entourage, Mosaic, 548, Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy

Сл. 6. Царица Теодора и њена пратња, мозаик из 548.г., црква Св. Витала у Равени, Италија

<sup>14</sup> Juan Signes Codoner, *The Emperor Theophilos and the East, Court and Frontier in Byzantium During the Last Phase of Iconoclasm 829–842*, London and New York, Routledge, 2014, 73–74.

<sup>15</sup> Millia Davenport, *The Book of Costumes*, Vol. I, New York, Crown Publishers, Inc., 1979, 114.

<sup>16</sup> Mary G. Houston, *Ancient Greek, Roman & Byzantine Costume*, Mineola, New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 203, 154.

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed analysis, see Cecily Hennessy, “A Child Bride and Her Representation in the Vatican Epithalamion, cod. gr. 1851,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2006): 115–150.



Fig. 7 Detail of Empress Theodora's Hem with the Adoration of the Magi

Сл. 7. Детаљ одеће царице Теодоре са Поклоњењем мудраца

left to right as the figures move across the bridge, while information in the lower area is conveyed in strictly frontal and formal manner.<sup>18</sup>

Agnes stands in the upper left corner, in front of a small group of Western women. She is welcomed by several Byzantine women, depicted as being larger in scale. Fabric patterns are clearly visible: the members of the princess's entourage are dressed in solid red and blue, with the outer layer of their mantles pulled up to cover their heads. The Byzantine women wear elaborate headdresses and have hanging earrings and pearl-fringed cloaks. The princess wears a simple red tunic, but her head is bare and she has a red outlined

halo. In the upper right corner of the page, on the other side of the bridge, she appears again, dressed in Byzantine attire: a gold and purple dress with long sleeves, outlined with pearls, standing on the *suppedion* while two Byzantine ladies-in-waiting attend to her. The lower zone represents the culmination of the transformation process; she is depicted for a third time, recognized by her halo and new dress, seating enthroned and bejeweled surrounded by appropriately garbed Byzantine ladies-in-waiting. In the change of attire she became an *augusta*, and she is seen to be formally venerated by her frontal gaze.<sup>19</sup>

However, Dolce and Gabbana's models can be distinguished from their Byzantine counterparts in that their appearance resembles that of Byzantine empresses and holy personalities. Furthermore, this is based on their public roles and fashion accessories only, something that would have been inappropriate in Byzantium. On the other hand, each of the contemporary Byzantine look-alike "rulers" has a similar, detached and lofty gaze to that of Theodora, and one wonders what would transpire if these mosaic-clad, tiara-wearing beauties were set loose among the scholars, theologians and rulers of the world (fig. 10).<sup>20</sup>

According to the strictest sense of the word *idolatry*, Dolce and Gabbana's collection would be considered blasphemous because of its misappropriation of iconographic representation and misuse of religious symbols.<sup>21</sup> However, in a looser definition of the word, idolatry is simply an admiration, love, or reverence for something or someone. Accordingly, it is highly possible that Dolce and Gabbana's collection results from a desire to emphasize the complexity of their cultural heritage, which is deeply rooted and influenced by the Christian

<sup>18</sup> Cecily J. Hisdale, "Constructing a Byzantine 'Augusta': A Greek Book for a French Bride." *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 87, No. 3 (2005): 469.

<sup>19</sup> Hisdale, *Ibid.*, 469-470.

<sup>20</sup> See Kalimniou's discussion accessed November 1, 2016, at <http://diatribe-column.blogspot.com/2013/07/dolces-byzantine-gabbana.html>.

<sup>21</sup> *Webster's Universal College Dictionary* 405.

Fig. 8 Selected Shoes from the Byzantine Collection

Сл. 8. Ципеле из византијске колекције



Fig. 9 Arraval and Reception of the Princess, *Vatical Greek Manuscript 1851*, fol. 3v, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

Сл. 9. Долазак и пријем принцезе, Ватикански рукопис 1851, фол 3в, Ватикан, Апостолска библиотека Ватикана.



Fig. 10 Empress Theodora, Detail, and Katy Perry, Singer

Сл. 10. Царица Теодора, детаљ и Кејти Пери, певачица

religion and the Byzantine heritage in Sicily. Most likely, the creators wanted to pay homage to an integral aspect of their Italian identity and translated it in the best ways of their designer profession. To respond to the criticism that their clothing is pricy and not for everyday wear, they decided to offer simpler and less costly versions of selected items from their Byzantine collection—they are still available—less glamorous, but still with the fashion label that matters.

“Astonishing, magnificent, luxurious, dramatic, and absolutely extraordinary” is the typical perception of this collection. It reminded me of Procopius’ description when he entered the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople for first time in 537: “A spectacle of great beauty, stupendous, incredible, wonder-

ful in its beauty, yet altogether terrifying by the apparent precariousness of its composition.”<sup>22</sup> It only remains to be seen whether this particular collection of Dolce and Gabbana will be documented in 1500 years’ time in any source.

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#### ВИЗАНТИЈСКА УМЕТНОСТ И САВРЕМЕНА МОДА

У јесен 2013. године у Милану, популарни савремени модни креатори Доменико Долче и Стефано Габана представили су своју нову колекцију, инспирисану византијским мозаицима катедрале у Монреалу на Сицилији. Катедра је изграђена између 1174. и 1182. године и посвећена је Богородици, а главни ктитор је био нормански краљ Вилијам II. Катедра је освештана 1182. године од стране папе Луцијуса III, који је грађевини званично дао статус катедрале. Образован и просвећен, Краљ је за израду мозаика запослио најбоље арапске, византијске и локалне норманске мајсторе. Резултат је био спектакуларан, заснован на еклектичним комбинацијама архитектонских елемената, уметничких стилова и веома флексибилној иконографији. Катедра је по плану монументална базилика, прекривена мозаиком од 7,600-8,000 квадратних метара, што је око 1,5 јутара употребљеног материјала. Прикази Христа Пантократора, Богородице, ликови светитеља, старозаветних сцена и новозаветних епизода, изведени су у техници која подсећа на текстуру ткања најфинијих скупочених тепиха.

Колекција Долчеи Габана приказана у Милану може се најбоље дефинисати као бљештава апликација сакралних и секуларних елемената и симбола, изведених на хаљинама, ципелама, ташнама и накиту које су модели приказивали. Штампани мотиви визуелно имитирају изглед мозаика, укључујући употребу сваровски кристала и технику веза. Заступљене су боје типичне за византијску палету, од тамно црвене и сјајнозлатне, до краљевски љубичасте. Детаљи на одећи су изведени на начин да заиста имитирају прецизну технику слагања каменчића на зидовима катедрале. Опште је мишљење да су креатори желели да одају почаст византијској уметности и италијанском културном наслеђу вешто избегавајући баналност и вулгаризацију.

Један од присутних проблема је питање употребе иконографских елемената због искључиво естетских вредности и безнамере да се повреде верници. Владајуће мишљење је да се религиозни симболи несмеју користити у комерцијалне или пропагандне сврхе. Међутим, чак и у много ранијој византијској историји постоје сцене такве употребе, као што је, на пример, случај мозаика Царице Теодоре и њене пратње у цркви Сан Витале у Равени у Италији (мозаик из 548. године). Ова сцена је једна од најпознатијих у историји уметности, јер је у њој наглашен, кроз богато осликане костиме ликови, значај одевања и моде као статусног симбола и политичке пропаганде. Има и других примера који потврђују важност формалног костима у Византијском царству, што на изврстан начин оправдава одлуку италијанских креатора да потраже инспирацију за своју колекцију враћајући се у прошлост и на тај начин, још једном потврде популарност Византије кроз векове.

<sup>22</sup> Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453: Sources and Documents*, Toronto, University Press, 1997, 72–78.