

The tradition of printmaking on Mount Athos (Markos Kampanis)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Artistic tradition on Mt Athos is usually connected to icons and religious murals. There is however another artistic practice, usually underrated and in general unknown to the majority, that is the art of printmaking mainly woodcuts and copper engravings. It is an art that flourished from the 17th c. until the end of the 19th, quite important for Athonite history, but also for contemporary Greek art history. Let us only mention that the first teacher of engraving in the school of Fine Arts (1843-1865), was an Athonite engraver, the monk Agathaggelos Triantafyllou. This tradition came gradually to an end with the introduction of lithography. Later on modern offset printing gave the final blow to the engraving tradition on Mt Athos.



Part of the ideas behind this Forum has to do with secularized societies being driven away from traditional values. At first let me put forward a thought claiming that driving oneself away from traditional values may not be a characteristic of secularized societies only. Such values are not only ethical or of everyday life practicalities, but may include aspects of aesthetics. We often refer to traditional values in art, and more so this is apparent when referring to religious art. And further more what exactly are traditional values (in aesthetics at this point)? If one adheres to traditional values by staying close to aesthetic forms of the past and using them only as an exterior form, does this make him traditional? In my opinion, being based on tradition is a pre requisite of being contemporary. In many less secularized societies, or groups within our society, such as religious groups or the Church itself which are part of the current religious revival, the adherence to tradition often leads to stagnation, and I believe that stagnation and spiritual or religious revival are contradictory ideas. This is of course an altogether interesting but different matter to be discussed here at length. However, I believe that it is somehow related to the history of Athonite printmaking. Some aspects of how this printmaking history developed may give us ideas and make us think about how to tackle similar problems today.

Religious Orthodox engravings often constituted the prayer icons for poor people, or of those unable to commission a hand painted icon. Moreover, they proved to be a very successful means of connecting and relating the monastic institutions to a large number of people; they were used in an effort to convince people to

undertake a pilgrimage and to contribute financially, in a period under Ottoman rule when the financing of monasteries was scarce. Print making proved the perfect means for such purposes, it was easy and cheap to execute and in a fairly short time hundreds of copies were available.

We know that the first Athonite engravings were made and printed in important European cities that had a strong Greek or Orthodox community. Gradually Athonite workshops took over most of this production. It is evident that the first "Western" Athonite prints are in a style characterized by naturalism, by the use of perspective and generally by aesthetic values that Orthodox societies in Greece and Mount Athos in particular were not accustomed to. However, they were still welcomed and used to promote and "advertise" the monasteries to future pilgrims. When Athonite print workshops had the lead, a characteristic style gradually developed, an Athonite style of printmaking that stands between Western - sometimes Baroque- aesthetic values and Byzantine and post Byzantine art icon painting. The first images were based on Western prints, but the other way round was also true- prints produced in Vienna or Venice for Mount Athos were based on ideas or earlier prints that came from the Holy Mountain. Even when Athonite workshops were well established, some monasteries did not hesitate to commission a new print to a European workshop for practical purposes. That means that they were willing to associate themselves to both Western and Byzantine aesthetic. I believe that this attitude proves that they were open to contemporary ideas and thus -according to my argument- indeed traditional and not falsely so.

One group of prints is the one depicting the whole of the Athonite peninsula, by placing the two sides of Mt Athos next to each other, as if it was a two peaked mountain (*Dikorfon*= Two peaked). The first images of this kind were engraved and printed in cities like Vienna or Venice (ph.3,4,5) Similar images engraved on Athos itself started gradually adhering to more Byzantine or post Byzantine ways of rendering (ph 6) with the elimination of the dimension of depth and perspective, and finally with the absolutely simplified, almost naïve, vision of the landscape as seen on ph.7. It is interesting however that this Athonite style reminds us so much of much earlier depiction of Athos "maps" from Western Europe (ph.8,9)

Continuing this comparison let us proceed to prints depicting specific monasteries. Two images of Vatopedi (ph.10, 11) and two of Dionysiou (ph.12, 13) are all engraved outside Athos. They may be compared to more purely Athonite prints, like the images of Grigoriou (ph.14, 15), the monastery of Simonopetra (ph.16), or the one of Karakallou (ph.17).

The Filotheou monastery image in typical Athonite style (ph.18) reverses this series of influences, since we find a Moscow engraved print two years later, copying the same image but in a totally naturalistic style (ph.19,20).

Two images depicting the Skete of Iveron (ph.21) are almost identical in style, but one comes from Venice, the other from Athos.

More images of similar monastic engravings may be seen on photos 22, 23,24,25,26.

Let us examine some examples from the next important group of prints, the one depicting saints or religious scenes. Most of the prints depicting saints are pure Athonite productions, but still in certain cases comparisons may prove useful:

Starting with images of St Athanasios of Lavra were apart from the first one which is clearly a western naturalistic depiction (ph.27) the other three are of mixed style from both Mt Athos and Venice (ph.28).

St George prints are a good example as well. The one printed in Livorno (ph.29), in a clearly western manner, may be compared to the Athonite one with still strong western influences (ph.30) and to the purely Athonite works (ph.31, 32). Finally, we find a seemingly Athonite one, so close to the two previous ones, which is however engraved in Vienna (ph.33).

Prints are made to reach a great number of people and that is one great difference they have from paintings, there is no single owner, and each one of the owners has in his procession not a copy but an original work. Most of the Athonite prints had the name of the saint or even lengthy passages or stories engraved in two or sometimes even three languages, Greek, Slavonic or Russian and sometimes Latin or Italian.

The number of prints circulating amongst people in Greece, the Balkans and Russia must have been very large, An example is the case of St George the new martyr in Ioannina, who became a martyr in 1838 and within only 13 days of his death the first engraving appeared to be followed by 13 more variations of the first one

printed during the next 30 years. (ph.34, 35, 36, 37, 38). Another source of information comes from a Greek that was the liaison between Mt Sinai and printers in Europe. From his correspondence we know that printed engravings were shipped in wooden boxes containing 1000 copies each. The number of printmaking workshops in Karyes, the capital of Athos, is also characteristic. It seems that a realistic number of workshops operating there would be 23!! Unfortunately none of these survive, having become unnecessary since the end of the 19th c. Many of the copper plates were destroyed to produce other copper objects, and the presses were certainly made of wood so were very easy to deteriorate.

Around 1990 a serious effort started on Mt Athos to try and collect, preserve, study and publicize what was left over from this magnificent tradition. The first serious study was made by Dori Papastratou with her book on paper icons published in 1986. Since then the hieromonk F. Ioustinos and Simonos Petra monastery took over the effort and continued the task of exploring this art practice on Mt Athos. The Athos Art Archives were formed, a print making workshop was set up by myself in Karyes to help preserve and reprint some of the original plates. The effort is continuing, and today we have managed to locate around 1100 different engraved images –some of them in multiple copies– and 300 plates of which 120 belong to Simonos Petra. This effort is now at a turning point. New funds are needed to enable us to explore further and complete this task. The printmaking workshop (ph.39) was organized in order to reprint from the original copper plates, but we do not hide the fact that there was a dream that this might evolve in a nucleus for the creation of new prints, by monks or artist-visitors. This has not been possible for several reasons and the workshop has been used in reality only by me to create some new Athonite prints.

The production of Athonite engravings of a religious character like the ones examined, might have stopped at the end of the 19th c. but Athos has continued to be a focal point and a magnet during the 20th c. for a number of artists and intellectuals from Greece and other countries. It has been a motivation for many important Greek artists to make prints, not for religious use, but still inspired by the Athonite way of life or the landscape. Artists like Kogevinas, Rengos, Papadimitriou, Moschos and lately myself amongst others (ph.40 to 50) but also European artists like Zuve, Zens, Zwerger and others (ph.51,52).

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Much of his artistic work is related to Mt Athos and he is also the curator of The Mount Athos Art Archives, which deals with contemporary artistic production related to the Holy Mountain.

Pictures from his presentation are available in: <http://www.holy-mount-athos.org/en/speeches-rhodes-forum/143-the-tradition-of-printmaking-on-mount-athos>