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## VASNTSOV'S MOTIVES IN THE SPACE OF MODERN UKRAINIAN ORTHODOX CHURCHES

### Abstract

The article is devoted to the study of the most/least common iconographic plots based on Vasnetsov's brush in the interior space of modern Ukrainian Orthodox churches. The author discusses the reasons for the choice from the point of view of cultural studies. Why are they relevant to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century? In this article, we will consider the inclusion of Vasnetsov's motifs in the programs for painting modern Ukrainian churches, what significance they have in the space of the temple, as well as time and space in Vasnetsov's artworks themselves.

The **purpose** of the work is to determine the most common iconographic scenes (created by V. M. Vasnetsov) in the inner space of Orthodox churches in the east of Ukraine, features of time and space in these subjects, as well as the reasons that incline designers and customers of church painting to such a choice.

**Methods:** iconographic, iconological, cultural, hermeneutical, historical-comparative, observational, analysis and synthesis, semiotic.

**Keywords:** Vasnetsov, monumental church painting, church painting program, church art, Orthodox church, iconography, iconographic plot.

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### 1. Introduction

The painting of St. Vladimir's Cathedral in Kyiv, which appeared in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century thanks to the work of the outstanding artist V. M. Vasnetsov, served as the beginning of a new trend in religious art, more precisely, in monumental church painting. Creating new compositions, the artist was based on texts from the Holy Scriptures. The motives of V. M. Vasnetsov also played an important role in the design of Orthodox churches in the East of Ukraine, painted in the late XX — early XXI century, that is, in the historical period after the celebration of the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Baptism of Rus'.

Analyzing the features of the painting of Orthodox churches in the east of Ukraine at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> — beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one cannot ignore the widespread use of the plots of the artist Viktor Mikhailovich Vasnetsov in monumental church painting. Iconographic compositions, created by the master as early as the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, began to be actively embodied in church painting: somewhere only individual plots were included, and in some churches even the painting program for

St. Vladimir's Cathedral in Kyiv, painted by V. Vasnetsov, was reflected quite fully.

### 2. The painting of the church similar to the Kyiv Vladimir Cathedral

One of these churches is the church in honor of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos, located in the village of Novoeconomicheskoye, Pokrovsky district, Donetsk region, which was painted in the period from 1999 to 2004 by icon painter Anatoly Boyko under the rector of the church, Archpriest Alexander Nikolaev (customer of the painting). The temple was built at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1906–1911) in the neo-Byzantine style, the most common in the sacred architecture of the Art Nouveau era, and almost until the end of the century it remained without painting.

Since the interior of the temple is one of the most important factors influencing the formation of its painting program, the architectural decision in favor of the Byzantine (neo-Byzantine) style was not taken by chance. Like the St. Sophia Cathedral in Constantinople, which later became a symbol of Byzantine architecture, in the

Church of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos, the main load-bearing elements of the entire building are four powerful semicircular elevated arches, on which the drum and dome of the temple rest, connecting the circumference of the drum of the dome with the main volume of the building cruciform in plan. This provides the effect of increasing space. The originality and solidity

of this architectural system is also facilitated by the uniform distribution of the entire mass of the dome and the drum due to the “sails” — triangular segments formed by connecting the arches and the circumference of the drum. The Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary is three-aisled, like the Vladimir Cathedral in Kyiv (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. The interior of the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin in the village of Novoeconomicheskoye. Photo by Timofey Cherepanov. URL: [https://sobory.ru/pic/05100/05113\\_20150104\\_130718.jpg](https://sobory.ru/pic/05100/05113_20150104_130718.jpg)

Despite the fact that the church was painted at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the chosen program for painting this church is typical for Orthodox churches painted at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the model for which was St. Vladimir's Cathedral in Kyiv. What elements in the

painting programs of these two temples coincide? First of all, it is the painting of the dome, drum belt, sails, vaults of the central parts of temples. In the dome of the temple is written “The Lord Almighty” or “Pantocrator”, made according to the sketch of V. Vasnetsov (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Painting of the under-dome space of the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Photo by Timofey Cherepanov. URL: [https://sobory.ru/pic/05100/05113\\_20150104\\_130753.jpg](https://sobory.ru/pic/05100/05113_20150104_130753.jpg)

“The Lord Almighty” blesses with his right hand, and in his left hand he holds an open Gospel with the text:

«Аз есмь свет миру. Ходяй по мне, не имать ходити во тьме, но имать свет животный» (John 13–46). The

Savior is depicted against the background of the starry sky, referring to the events of the Nativity of Christ and the Second Coming of Christ. The face of the “Pantokrator” by V. Vasnetsov is comparable to the mosaic images in the St. Sophia Cathedral in Kiev (2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century) and the Chora Monastery (14<sup>th</sup> century) in Constantinople.

The belt of the drum is divided into four equal parts by the image of a cross in a medallion, three of them (northeast, southeast and southwest) are occupied by the three-part composition “Joy of the righteous in the Lord. The Threshold of Paradise”, which is a reproduction of the painting on the drum of the Vladimir Cathedral, the fourth (north-western) part depicts a composition with many people accompanied by angels, complementing the plot. Most likely, the inclusion of the fourth plot in the painting of the drum is due to its diameter (since it significantly exceeds the diameter of the drum of the Vladimir Cathedral in Kyiv). The painting of the drum is replete with ornaments and images of angelic forces.



Figure 3. The interior of the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
Photo by Priest Oleg Kruchinin

The sails of the temple depict the Apostles Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, who spread the Gospel teaching

throughout the world (respectively, to the 4 cardinal points) and their apocalyptic symbols, mentioned in the book of Revelation of John the Theologian (angel, lion, calf, eagle), which here also reproduced according to the samples of V. M. Vasnetsov. In the vaults of the central part of the temple, the compositions “God Sabaoth”, “Crucified Jesus Christ”, scenes of the passionate cycle are depicted (Fig. 3).

The painting program of the temple includes images of holidays, saints (in medallions and in full growth). The lower tier of the painting (mainly on the columns) is occupied by the most revered images of the Blessed Virgin Mary (“The Sign”, “Kazanskaya”, “Indestructible Wall”, etc.), which is probably due to the artist’s desire to emphasize the dedication of the temple (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. The interior of the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin in the village of Novoekonomicheskoye.  
Photo by Priest Oleg Kruchinin

This church painting program corresponds to the ancient patterns of building a painting program, mentioned, for example, in one of the sermons of Patriarch Photius of Constantinople (in the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century), where he described the painting of a new church built during his reign in the imperial palace. According to this description, Christ the Almighty was depicted in the dome in a medallion surrounded by archangels. In

the temple there were numerous images of saints: forefathers, prophets, apostles and martyrs [2].

It should be noted that the proposed painting program corresponds to the three-part division of the internal space of the temple into the “mountainous” one, which includes the space of the dome, drum and conch of the apse, the “Holy Land” (or Paradise), which includes the register of sails, sometimes the upper part of the walls, and as in this example — the lower area of the drum, and the “longitudinal”, corresponding to the zones of the central and lower parts of the walls and columns.

In the program of painting the considered temple of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the plot is “Joy of the righteous in the Lord. The Threshold of Paradise” occupies a special place, since it is written at the bottom of the drum, which quite accurately corresponds to “The Threshold of Paradise” in the inner space of an Eastern Christian church. The composition “The Threshold of Paradise” (you can also find the name “At the Gates of Paradise”) is the author’s interpretation of the plot “the souls of the righteous at the gates of Paradise” (an episode from the “Apocalypse”).

The basis for writing the plot “The joy of the righteous in the Lord. The threshold of paradise” most likely the following words from the book of Revelation of John the Theologian became: «After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb”. All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”» (Rev. 7:9–12). This composition represents a multitude of righteous people flying across the heavens to the golden Heavenly City guarded by the archangels. They are located in the central (eastern) part of the composition, called “The Triumph of Angels”.

Among the characters in this composition, it is easy to recognize the prudent thief, who, according to the Holy Scriptures, was the first to enter Paradise according to the promise of the Lord “Today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23: 43). He is depicted walking ahead

of others and carrying a cross, since he was crucified on the cross at the “right hand” of the Savior. He is followed by the forefathers Adam and Eve, along with their son Abel, raising his hands to heaven. In the same part of the composition, the king, the prophet and psalmist David, is depicted.

In the foreground is also depicted one of the Myrrh-bearing Women, the Holy Equal-to-the-Apostles Mary Magdalene with a vessel in her hands, and the Reverend Mary of Egypt, who can be recognized by her long gray hair. Then they are followed by the holy martyrs Faith, Hope, Love and Sophia, accompanied by a flying angel.

On the right side of the composition, the Holy Great Martyrs Catherine and Barbara, surrounded by angels, are the central characters. Recognizable here are the Holy Equal-to-the-Apostles Prince Vladimir and the Holy Equal-to-the-Apostles Princess Olga, the Holy Princes Passion-bearers Boris and Gleb, followed by a host of righteous people. That is, in this iconographic plot, V.M. Vasnetsov included mainly especially revered saints in Kyiv.

A special place in this composition is occupied by the image of the Holy Great Martyr Catherine. S. P. spoke about this image in this way. Bartenev: “You can’t tear yourself away from this face. And the more you look, the stronger this inexplicable peace enters the heart, the premonition of such bliss, the words of which we do not have here on earth. Whoever heard the adagio of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and strongly feels the music will understand this state of mind, embracing the chest with an inexpressible languor of unknown bliss. And what are earthly torments in comparison with what awaits us, with this endless spiritual joy” [5, 71].

In the image of the Holy Great Martyr Catherine, one can notice an interesting artistic device: she does not seem to see the angel accompanying her, because her gaze is directed further, through him, to the gates of heaven, but she is horrified by the love of God.

Despite the fact that the composition “At the Gates of Heaven” is three-part and rather complex, the time in it is simultaneous. The composition is read all at once in the simultaneity of its meanings and does not imply a phased reading of events and following a certain route.

The images are characterized by movement and emotionality, which are characteristic of Western Christian monumental church art. E. N. Trubetskoy’s review of the painting “The Joy of the Righteous in the Lord. Paradise gate.” In his work “Speculation in Colors,” he wrote the following: “In Vasnetsov, the flight of the righteous

to paradise has an overly natural character of physical movement: the righteous rush to paradise not only with their thoughts, but with their whole body; this, as well as the painfully hysterical expression of some faces, gives the whole image that character that is too realistic for a temple, which weakens the impression”[4].

One of the plots of the Passion cycle “The Crucified Jesus Christ”, which is a copy of the plot of the same name of the Kyiv Vladimir Cathedral, is written in the vault of the central part of the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Fig. 3). This is one of the unique compositions of V. Vasnetsov, conveying the greatness of the Cross Sacrifice, as well as sorrow for the crucified Savior in the heavenly world.

It should be noted that Viktor Vasnetsov created a separate Passion cycle in a unique iconographic style, which became a kind of standard peak of religious and aesthetic ideals of his time. His mosaics on the theme of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the carrying and removal from the cross, the Descent into Hell, the famous fresco “The Joy of the Righteous in the Lord” are the greatest heritage of the religious painting of the Orthodox Church.

In addition, in the work of V. M. Vasnetsov, who tried to combine the Eastern Christian and Western Christian icon-painting traditions in his religious painting, clearly reflected the desire for a synthesis of arts, which in the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was considered one of the ideals of the then dominant Art Nouveau style.

The painting of the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the village of Novoekonomicheskoye surprisingly corresponds to the nature of the era of its creation, iconographic plots form a compositional unity in the painting program.

### **3. Vasnetsov’s motives in other Orthodox Ukrainian churches**

Some scenes, made according to the samples of V. M. Vasnetsov, are included in the painting of other Orthodox churches in the East of Ukraine. For example, the painting program of St. Vladimir’s Church in the city of Pokrovsk, Donetsk region, includes large compositions “The Baptism of Rus” and “The Baptism of Prince Vladimir” (on the southern wall), as well as the image of St. Olga reproduced according to sketches by V. M. Vasnetsov (in the early 2000 s), which quite clearly reflects the dedication of the temple and illustrates the most important events in church history.

An important fact for the analysis of Vasnetsov’s plots is that the construction and painting of the Kyiv St. Vladimir’s Cathedral (in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), for the painting of which V. M. Vasnetsov was invited, were timed to coincide with the date of the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Baptism of Rus’. The cathedral was supposed to appear as a monument of spiritual history, and the painting program, compiled by A. Prakhov with the participation of V. Vasnetsov, had an educational character and aimed to reveal the spiritual greatness of Kievan Rus.

Before starting to paint the walls of the cathedral, the artist Viktor Mikhailovich Vasnetsov visited Italy, where he studied the best examples of Renaissance masters: Michelangelo, Raphael, Veronese, Titian, as well as the mosaics of Ravenna. After that, while already in Kyiv, in 1885, he studied the mosaics and frescoes of the Hagia Sophia and the St. Michael’s Golden-Domed Monastery, which significantly influenced the formation of his own style, and then the features of the entire direction of academic painting in monumental church art. So, for example, one of the characteristic features of the artist’s works is the exaggeratedly huge, emphatically expressive eyes of all the characters without exception.

The plots “The Last Judgment”, “The Crucified Jesus Christ”, “God Sabaoth”, based on the samples of V. M. Vasnetsov, were used in the painting of the church of St. Basil the Great (Holy Assumption Nikolo-Vasilyevsky Monastery in the village of Nikolsky, Volnovakha District, Donetsk Region). Basil the Great Cathedral was built in 1912, destroyed by the Bolsheviks during the Soviet period, then was restored in the late 80s. The temple was painted in the period from the mid-1990s. to 2007. Various icon-painting styles were used in the painting of the temple, so the plots do not constitute a compositional unity.

The Last Judgment composition, painted on the western wall of St. Basil’s Church, illustrates the last, universal Judgment of God over the world, which will take place at the second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ (in this case, all dead people will be resurrected, and the living will change (1 Cor. 15:51–52), and an eternal destiny will be determined for each according to his deeds (Mt. 25:31–46, 2 Cor. 5:10), words (Mt. 12:36) and thoughts.

This plot occupies the entire western wall of the temple, and traditionally combines large and small eschatology (the doctrine of the end of time). The upper

part of the composition (large eschatology) depicts the triumph of the power of Jesus Christ, the lower (small eschatology) is designed to reveal the posthumous fate of the soul. The Savior is depicted holding the Gospel and the Cross in his hand. Next to him is the Mother of God and John the Baptist. In the center of the Last Judgment composition is an angel holding a scale in his hand. The bowls of the scales are located on the same level, but the viewer has the impression that either one or the other bowl is about to outweigh. On one side of the angel are sinners and hellfire, on the other — the righteous. Moreover, on both sides there are people of different classes: rich, poor, kings, clergymen. The artist sought to show that everyone is equal before God at the moment of truth. There will be a just decision for all people at the last hour. The red background of this part of the composition is associated not only with fire, but also symbolizes justice and judgment. Time in this plot is simultaneous: the iconographic composition is read all at once in the simultaneity of its meanings.

The space of the Last Judgment icon is revealed through a system of coordinates that is universal for such plots. The lower left corner (when viewed from inside the composition) symbolizes hell, sin and death; the top right symbolizes paradise [1]. According to the author of this article, this system corresponds to the image of the Orthodox eight-pointed cross, in which one end of the diagonal line points to heaven at the top of the composition, to the right of the Savior, and the other to hell below, to the left. The vertical line of the cross corresponds to the image of an angel. The conditional horizontal line of the cross divides the composition into two parts, representing the major and minor eschatologies (Fig. 5).

The compositions “The Crucified Jesus Christ” and “The God of Sabaoth” are written in the upper part, in the vault of the central part of the Basil the Great Cathedral near the western wall (Fig. 6, 7).

The plot of “The God of Sabaoth” illustrates the creator of the world in the form of an ancient majestic old man with white hair and a gray beard, surrounded by heavenly forces. White hair in iconography is a symbol of wisdom and omniscience. He is also recognizable by a halo with a six-pointed star of David. The pink color of the angel wings contrasts with the dark sky. The Holy Spirit is depicted on the elder’s chest in the form of a flying white dove.

The painting of the mentioned plots was made by Schema-Archimandrite Alipiy (Bondarenko), icon

painter and rector of the monastery from 2004 to 2013. To date, the painting has not been preserved, since the church of St. Basil the Great was destroyed by Russian invaders on March 13, 2022.



Figure 5. “Last Judgment”. The western wall of the St. Basil’s Church in the village of Nikolskoye, Donetsk region



Figure 6. “The God of Sabaoth”. The painting of the St. Basil’s Church in the village of Nikolskoye, Donetsk region

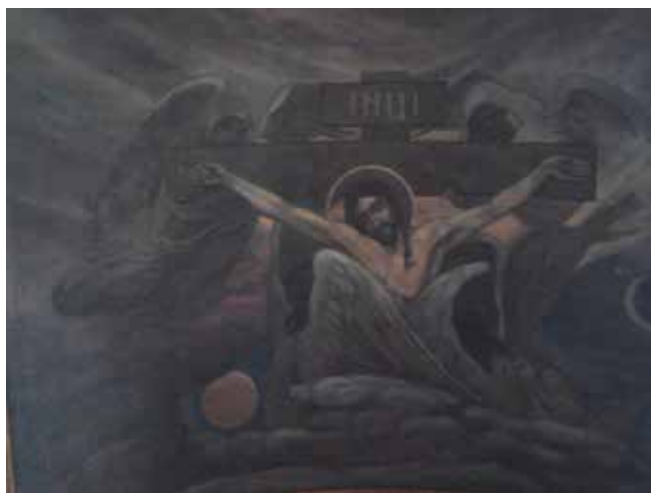


Figure 7. "The Crucified Jesus Christ". The painting of the St. Basil's Church in the village of Nikolskoye, Donetsk region

Iconographic compositions based on the motives of V. Vasnetsov "The Only Begotten Son, the Word of God", "The Crucified Jesus Christ" and "The God of Sabaoth" are also present in the painting of the "mountains" of the church of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker in the village of Nikolsky, Donetsk region. The temple was built in 1911. The interior of the temple is a cross. The plot "The Only Begotten Son, the Word of God" is written in the vault of the northern part of this cross and illustrates Jesus Christ in adolescence with a cross and a scroll in his hands, surrounded by an eagle, a lion, a calf and an angel, symbolizing the evangelists. The plot "Crucified Jesus Christ" is located in the vault on the south side, "God Sabaoth" is written in the vault of the central part of the temple. The temple was painted in the early 2000s by a group of icon painters from western Ukraine (the Lviv icon painting school). Schema-Archimandrite Alipiy (Bondarenko) was the customer for the painting.

The motives of V. Vasnetsov are found in the program of painting the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Kramatorsk, which was painted in 2004–2007 by the icon painter Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Pashkovsky. The customer for the painting was Archpriest John Ustimenko. These are the plots "The Lord Almighty" in the dome of the temple, the compositions "God Sabaoth", "The Crucified Jesus Christ" located in the vault of the western part of the temple, the images of the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, located on the 4 sides of the naos. It should be noted that such an architectural element as sails is absent in this temple, and the domed skuf of the temple forms at the base not a circle, but an octahedron,

in which eight twelve feasts are depicted, among which the Trinity occupies a central place on the eastern side.

The plot "Crucified Jesus Christ" is present in the painting of the "high" of the Exaltation of the Cross Church in Severodonetsk (located in the village of Lesnaya Dacha) — in the vault of the central part of the temple. The temple was built in the early 2000s and painted in the next few years. It should be noted that the color scheme of this composition differs from the traditional one: lighter tones are used here, which prevail in the painting of the rest of the temple. Unfortunately, during the hostilities in the spring of 2022, the temple was significantly damaged.

In some churches, the composition "The Last Judgment" is partially presented: for example, in the Church of the Holy Great Martyr Panteleimon in Kharkov (painted in 2019–2021), only the upper part of the plot is presented on the western wall above the choirs, reflecting a great eschatology (the triumph of the power of the Savior).

The famous image of the Mother of God with the Child by V. M. Vasnetsov, which adorns the altar wall of the Kyiv Vladimir Cathedral, is found in the interior decoration of the central part of the church in honor of the Holy Spirit in the city of Slavyansk, Donetsk region, built in 2007. However, this image cannot be completely attributed to monumental church painting, since it is made on canvas and enclosed in a wooden frame. The Mother of God painted by Vasnetsov became one of the most beloved images immediately after the consecration of the Kyiv Cathedral, its reproductions could be found in many Orthodox churches of the early twentieth century. It is this composition that is considered the best church work of the famous master.

#### 4. Conclusions.

Iconographic plots by V. M. Vasnetsov played an important role in the design of Orthodox churches in the East of Ukraine, painted in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Most of the master artists, as well as the customers of the mural, at that time did not have experience in compiling mural programs and borrowed these programs in whole or in part from the surviving temples of the past and the century before last.

One of the reasons for the wide dissemination of Vasnetsov's motifs at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is also the availability of these subjects for reproduction by secular artists who are not icon painters, who are unfamiliar with the canons of the classical Byzantine icon painting style.

However, most of the Orthodox churches built and restored during this historical period were painted by such masters. Therefore, the use of plots by V.M. Vasnetsov is typical for Orthodox churches, painted in whole or in part in the style of academic painting. The inclusion of these plots in the program of church painting often does not imply compositional unity with all other plots, so that they often stand out against the general background.

Common to most of Vasnetsov's plots is the perception of time: even in complex iconographic compositions, time is instantaneous, that is, the events depicted occur simultaneously, which gives the plots greater richness and even tension.

His works largely corresponded to the spiritual needs of that era: on the one hand, originality and a new look at religious subjects, on the other hand, it was not a departure for free creativity, some traditions of icon painting in his paintings, albeit partially, were preserved.

The most widespread plots were “The Last Judgment”, “The Crucified Jesus Christ” and “The God of Hosts”, which were written in 1885–1896 for the Kyiv Vladimir Cathedral (to the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Baptism of Rus'). The “Last Judgment” is depicted on the western wall, the plots “The Crucified Jesus Christ” and “God Sabaoth” are most often located in the vaults of the central and lateral parts of the temple.

Sufficiently high level of skill in performing the mentioned compositions was demonstrated by artists from different regions of Ukraine. Nevertheless, among the works of V. Vasnetsov there are also plots that have not aroused interest among modern masters and customers of painting: for example, the compositions “The Bliss of Paradise”, “The Temptation of Eve”. The reason for “ignoring” these plots is most likely that these works are closest in style to paintings on religious themes, but not to icon art and are completely far from icon painting canons.

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