

The Greek World under  
Ottoman and Western Domination:  
15th-19th Centuries



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Proceedings of the International Conference  
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Onassis Cultural Center, New York

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Edited by

Paschalis Kitromilides and Dimitris Arvanitakis



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Benaki Museum, Athens

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## CHAPTER VII Religious Art under Foreign Rule: The Case of the Painter

*Maria Vassilaki*

The aim of this paper, given at a conference organized on the occasion of the exhibition "From Byzantium to Modern Greece: Hellenic Art in Adversity, 1453–1830" presented by the Benaki Museum, Athens, at the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation in New York, is to discuss how monumental and icon painting developed in Greek territories that were under foreign rule. It will focus on painting in Venetian Crete and in Ottoman-held mainland Greece. The main questions to be asked are: How did Orthodox painters exercise their profession while working in territories under foreign control? How did it affect their profession? How did they respond to their circumstances? What was the difference for a painter working under Venetian versus Ottoman rule?

Some of the icons selected for the exhibition at the Onassis Foundation offer a convenient introduction to this paper, as they illustrate several of the issues I will try to raise. I will begin with two icons painted on Venetian Crete. *Icon with the Virgin and Child and Angels* (fig. 1) shows the Virgin enthroned with Christ Child and venerating archangels on either side.<sup>1</sup> Surrounding the figures is a rectangular raised border depicting four of the Twelve Great Feasts, the so-called Dodekaorton, along the top—Annunciation, Crucifixion, Deposition from the Cross, and Descent into Hell—and busts of saints on the remaining three sides. Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Theologian, the apostles



Fig. 1. Attributed to Andreas Ritzos or workshop. *Icon with the Virgin and Child and Angels*. Benaki Museum (inv. no. 3051).



Fig. 2. Andreas Ritzos. *Icon of the Virgin Pantanassa*. Monastery of Saint John the Theologian, Patmos.

Peter and Paul, Saint George and Saint Demetrios, and Saint Catherine and Saint Anthony are depicted on the two vertical sides of the border. The lower register includes representations of Saint Gregory and Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Constantine and Saint Helen, and Saint Basil and Saint Nicholas. This icon is dated on iconographic and stylistic grounds to the second half of the fifteenth century and has been attributed to the workshop of the well-known Cretan painter Andreas Ritzos.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, an icon of the enthroned Virgin and Christ Child (fig. 2) from the iconostasis of the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian, Patmos,<sup>3</sup> which bears the signature of Andreas Ritzos, appears to share many iconographic and stylistic similarities with the *Icon with the Virgin and Child and Angels*.

This panel bears all the iconographic and stylistic features of a late Byzantine Palaiologan icon. It would be difficult to uncover evidence indicating that it was executed in Venetian Crete. There is, however, such evidence regarding another panel from the exhibition, *Icon of the Madre della Consolazione* (fig. 3), which does not appear Byzantine to our eyes.<sup>4</sup> It is, however, the work of a Cretan workshop and a typical product of Venetian Crete and of the special historical, political, ecclesiastical, and social conditions that prevailed on the island and affected both painters and painting.<sup>5</sup> The icon dates from the second half of the fifteenth century. It is, therefore, contemporary with the *Icon with the Virgin and Child and Angels*. This second icon has adopted a Western—in fact, Italian—iconographic type, that of the *Madre della Consolazione* (the Virgin of Consolation). The Western appearance of the *Icon of the Madre della Consolazione* is further emphasized by features, such as the Virgin's diaphanous head covering, the dark green lining of her deep red maphorion, Christ's diaphanous undergarment, and above all, the gilded frame with colonnettes at the sides and a relief vegetal ornament at the top. Neither of the two icons bears the signature of its painter.



Fig. 3. *Icon of the Madre della Consolazione*. Benaki Museum (inv. no. 22059).



Fig. 4. El Greco. *Adoration of the Magi*. Benaki Museum (inv. no. 3048).

Cretan icons with inscriptions bearing the names of their painter are included in the exhibition and allow us to make interesting deductions regarding the profession of painting and the status of painter in the society of Venetian Crete. *XEIP ΔΟΜΗΝΙΚΟΥ* (the hand of Domenikos) reads the panel of the *Adoration of the Magi* (fig. 4); the signature belongs to Domenikos Theotokopoulos—better known as El Greco—who painted it while still living and working in Candia, the capital city of the Regno di Candia, or Venetian Crete.<sup>6</sup> The signature of another Cretan painter, namely Emmanuel Tzanes, *XEIP ΕΜΜΑΝΟΥΗΛ ΙΕΡΕΩΣ ΤΟΥ ΖΑΝΕ* (the hand of the priest Emmanuel Tzanes), and the date *ΑΧΝΖ* (1657) appear on the *Icon of Saint Mark* (fig. 5).<sup>7</sup> Tzanes, a priest and a painter, was a native of the city of Rethymnon in Crete.<sup>8</sup> He was a member of a noble family and had two brothers; one was painter and the other a poet, the famous Marinus Tzanes Bounialis, who composed the poem *Κρητικός Πόλεμος* (The Cretan War). When Rethymnon fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1646, Emmanuel Tzanes moved first to the Ionian island of Corfu and then to Venice. This icon of Saint Mark, was, therefore, painted after he had left Rethymnon and had gone to Corfu, a year before he settled in Italy.

The case of Emmanuel Tzanes, who had to leave his home as a result of the conquest by the Ottoman Turks, was a common one for painters seeking secure places to live and exercise their profession. Two centuries earlier, the painter Xenos Digenis left his native village of Mouchli in the Peloponnese after its capture by the Turks (1458). He moved first to Venetian Crete, where he executed the fresco decoration (fig. 6) of the Church of the Holy Fathers (1470) in the village of Apano Floria, in the province of Selino<sup>9</sup> in western Crete; then to Myrtia in Aetolia, where he painted a series of frescoes (fig. 7) for its monastery church (1491);<sup>10</sup> and finally to Epirus, where he painted the wall decoration of the Church





Fig. 5.  
Emmanuel Tzanes.  
*Icon of Saint Mark.*  
Benaki Museum  
(inv. no. 11198).



Fig. 6. Xenos Digenis. *Saint Mamas.* Church of the Holy Fathers, Apano Floria, Selino, Crete.

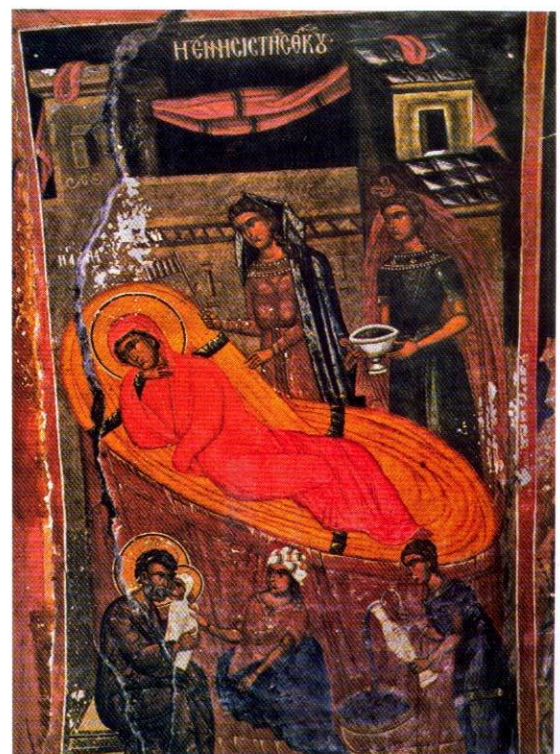


Fig. 7. Xenos Digenis. *Birth of the Virgin.* Monastery of Myrtia, Aetolia.



Fig. 8. Angelos Bitzamanos. Predella from a *pala d'altare*. San Fermo, Komolac, Dalmatia.



Fig. 9. Angelos Bitzamanos. *Icon of the Visitation*.  
Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (inv. no. 37.748).  
Photo © The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore



Fig. 10. Theophanes the Cretan. Dedicatory inscription (detail),  
Saint Nicholas Anapafsas Monastery, Meteora.

of the Virgin (1493) in the village of Kato Meropi.<sup>11</sup> He never ceased to mention his native village in his dedicatory inscriptions: *Ἐγένετω δέ διὰ χειρός καμοῦ Ξένου τοῦ διγενῆ ἀπό τόν μορέαν ἐκ χώρας μοχλίου* (This church was painted by the hand of myself, Xenos Digenis from the village of Mouchli in the Peloponnese).

It seems that the wandering that has always been an essential part of the activity of painters was now either caused or facilitated by historical circumstances. The Cretan Angelos Bitzamanos (1467–1532)<sup>12</sup> was taught the art of painting in Venetian Candia between 1482 and 1487 at the workshop of the famous Cretan artist Andreas Pavias.<sup>13</sup> An accomplished painter, he was commissioned in 1518 by the brotherhood of Santo Spirito to execute a *pala d'altare* (fig. 8) for the Church of San Fermo in Komolac, Dalmatia, where he went to work. From Dalmatia he moved to Italy and established himself and his brother Donato, also a painter, in Apulia, working in Barletta and Otranto. *Angelus Bizamanus grecus candiotus pinxit a Otranto* reads one of his icons, which shows the Visitation (fig. 9). The icon illustrates the Meeting of the Virgin with Elizabeth, the mother of Saint John the Baptist, while they were both pregnant (Luke 1:40–56). The way Angelos Bitzamanos describes himself in the inscription of this icon as *grecus candiotus* is of special interest.

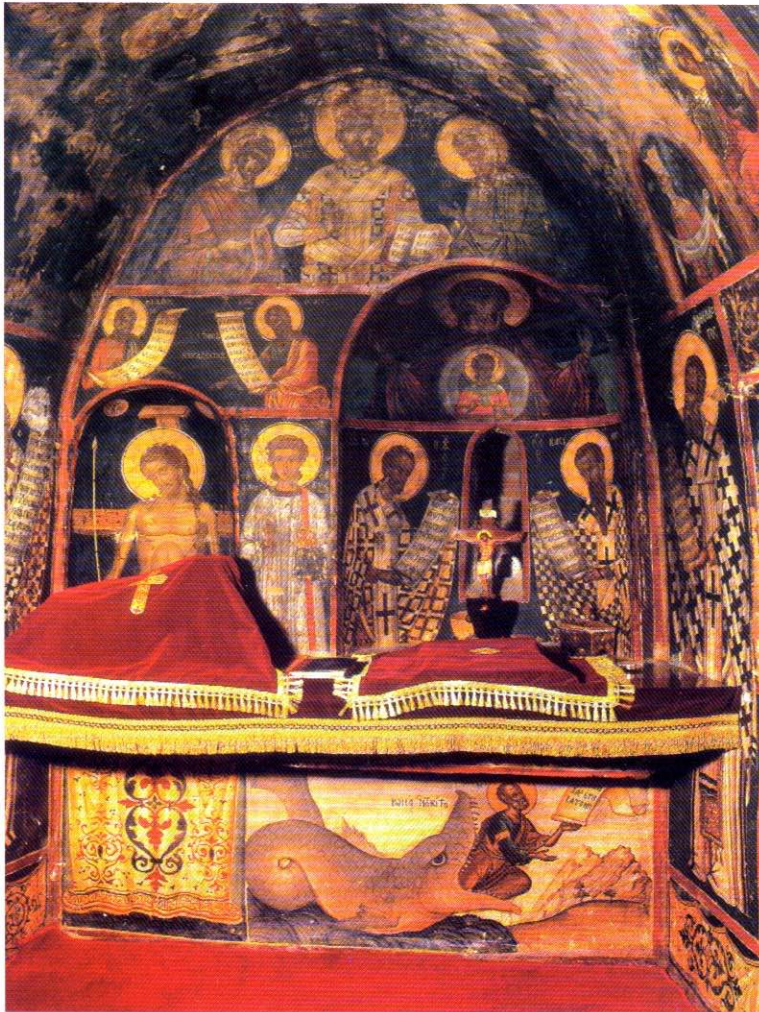


Fig. 11.  
Theophanes the Cretan. Sanctuary,  
Saint Nicholas Anapafsas Monastery, Meteora.

Much can be learned from the signatures preserved on Cretan icons. There are now more than twice as many signed icons as unsigned ones. From the moment painters were able to record their names on their artistic creations, it seems that their status in society had improved.<sup>14</sup> Cretan icons were in great demand from Cretan and Venetian inhabitants of Crete. Soon Cretan icons reached not only Venice but also the rest of Italy and even as far as Flanders. At the same time, the major Orthodox monastic centers of Sinai and Mount Athos as well as Orthodox churches and monasteries in Crete regularly commissioned Cretan icons, some of which still survive in situ. Not only did the icons of Crete become an exportable product but so did the painters themselves, who undertook commissions outside Crete, as in the case of the painter Angelos Bitzamanos.

The great demand for Cretan icons led Cretan painters to work almost exclusively in that medium, while fresco painting was restricted from the middle of the fifteenth century onward. Due to space limitations, I will not try to give an explanation of this phenomenon but will just take it for granted. It is interesting to give some numbers, though. Seventy-five Cretan churches with wall decorations, securely dated to the first half of the fifteenth century by dedicatory inscriptions, have survived; five wall decorations have been preserved from the sixteenth century and none survives from the seventeenth. Even so, monumental painting of the sixteenth century can be studied through decorated churches, which, though located outside Crete, were executed by Cretan painters.

Such is the case of the well-known painter Theophanes Strelitzas Bathas.<sup>15</sup> He was from a family of Peloponnesian origin that appears to have fled to Crete from Mouchli, at about the same time as Xenos Digenis, in order to escape the Ottoman Turks, who had just arrived. Theophanes was born in Candia (modern Herakleion) in the last fifteen years of the fifteenth century. He must have learned the art of painting in Candia, but the first record of his artistic activity is found in the dedicatory inscription (figs. 10–11) of the Monastery of



Fig. 12. Theophanes the Cretan. Eastern wall of the narthex, Stavronikita Monastery, Mount Athos.

Saint Nicholas Anapafsas (1527) at Meteora.<sup>16</sup> Nine years later (1535) he appears to be living and working on Mount Athos with his two sons, Symeon and Neophytos, also painters, and to have executed fresco decorations and icons for Athonite monasteries (fig. 12) such as the Great Lavra (1535) and Stavronikita (1546).<sup>17</sup> The dedicatory inscription at Saint Nicholas Anapafsas gives the name of the painter and his place of origin: *διὰ χειρὸς κυροῦ Θεοφάνη μοναχοῦ τοῦ ἐν τῇ Κρήτῃ Στρελήτζας* (by the hand of the monk Theophanes, by the name of Strelitzas, while living on Crete).

Theophanes and his sons were not the only Cretan painters of the sixteenth century that were commissioned to work for the major monastic centers of mainland Greece. Two contemporaries of Theophanes, namely Euphrosynos and Zorzis, also undertook commissions outside Crete. Euphrosynos is known by the icons he painted in 1542 for the templon (fig. 13) of the Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos.<sup>18</sup> According to later information included in the *typikon* of the monastery, Zorzis executed the wall decoration for the katholikon in 1547. In 1557 he executed the wall decoration for the katholikon of Moni Dousikou in Thessaly, and he is also believed to have painted the frescoes for the katholikon of the Monastery of the Transfiguration at Meteora (fig. 14) and for the Docheiariou Monastery on Mount Athos.

The artistic activity of Cretan painters, such as Theophanes and his sons, Euphrosynos and Zorzis, has taken us to mainland Greece. It is there that I am planning to stay for the rest of this paper in order to investigate how artistic production and creativity developed in Ottoman-held territories of mainland Greece.<sup>19</sup> The main question that I will try to answer is: For a Greek painter, what was the difference between working under Venetian versus Ottoman rule?

Frangos Katelanos from Thebes in Boeotia was active in mainland Greece for most of the sixteenth century and thus was a contemporary of the Cretan painters mentioned above. His name has been associated with an impressive number of fresco decorations scattered from Aetolia to Ioánnina, from Kastoria and Meteora to Mount Athos.<sup>20</sup> His name appears in the dedicatory inscription of a single church—the chapel of Saint Nicholas in the Monastery of the Great Lavra on Mount Athos.<sup>21</sup> The rest of the monuments associated with Frangos Katelanos are attributions made on iconographic and stylistic grounds. The earliest work is of 1539 and consists of the fresco decoration (fig. 15) for the nave of the katholikon of the Monastery of Myrtia in Aetolia, where Xenos Digenis had worked a century earlier. Katelanos moved to Ioánnina and in 1542 worked

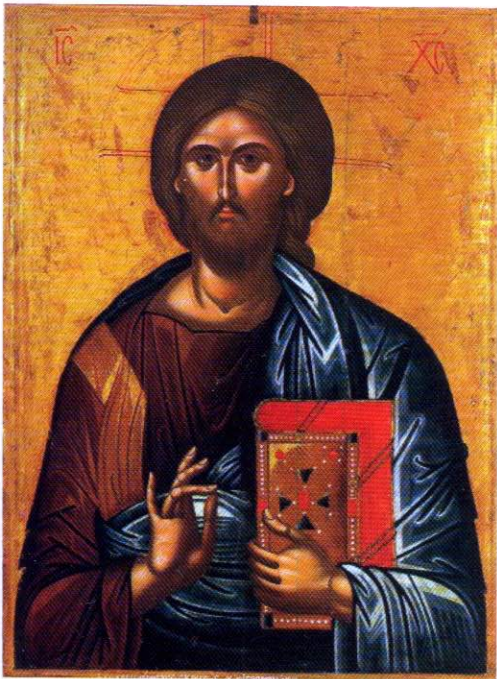


Fig. 13. Euphrosynos. *Icon of Christ Pantocrator*.  
Dionysiou Monastery, Mount Athos.



Fig. 14. Attributed to Zorxis. West wall of the nave, Monastery of the Transfiguration, Meteora.



Fig. 15.  
Frangos Katelanos. *Descent into Hell*.  
Monastery of Myrtia, Aetolia.

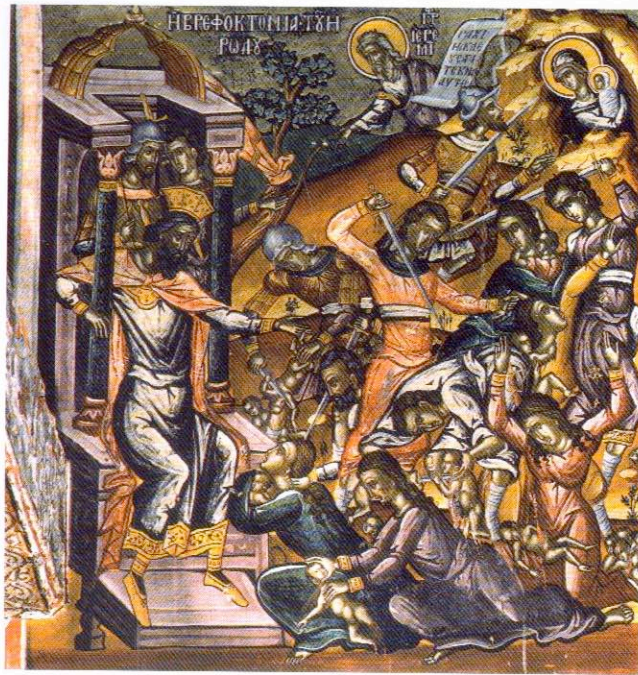


Fig. 16. Frangos and Georgios Kontaris. *Massacre of the Innocents*. Church of the Transfiguration, Veltsista.

Katelanos working as a painter for almost sixty years. Even if we leave the date of this last monument aside, we have to agree that Frangos Katelanos was an extremely active painter who traveled and worked continuously for more than thirty years in churches and monastery churches in Ioánnina, Kastoria, Kozani, and Aetolia as well as at the monastic centers of Meteora and Mount Athos. His case is most interesting to us, as he represents a painter working exclusively in areas under Ottoman rule.

Another such case is that of the painter brothers Frangos and Georgios Kontaris, also from Thebes.<sup>24</sup> Their wall decorations date between 1560 and 1580 and are mainly located in the wider area of Ioánnina (fig. 16). They also worked in Meteora and executed frescoes for the narthex of the Varlaam Monastery. Their names have also been associated with fresco decorations at the Monastery of Hosios Meletios in Kithairón and at Moni Galataki in Euboea.

The above-mentioned painters can, through their wanderings and activities, give us a rough idea of the direction the profession of painting had to take in order to accommodate itself to the historical and religious circumstances prevailing at the time.

Theophanes of Crete and Frangos Katelanos of Thebes appear to be the two leading artistic personalities in mainland Greece in the sixteenth century. Theophanes introduced Cretan painting into the monastic communities of Meteora and Mount Athos, and his iconography and style were closely followed not only by his contemporaries but also by the following generations of painters. Frangos Katelanos established the so-called local Epirote School of painting and made his mark on contemporary and later generations of painters. The painting of Theophanes (fig. 17) was the outcome of the conditions prevailing in Venetian Crete. It represents a style that flourished in the urban areas of Crete and especially in Candia, which had become the most important artistic center of its time. The painting of Katelanos (fig. 18) represents a completely different case. The Ottoman-held cities of mainland Greece never could have become artistic centers of their time in the way as had Venetian Candia. It appears, however, that the cities of Kastoria and Ioánnina facilitated the creation of local schools of painting that had an impact in those regions as well as in the neighboring countries of the Balkan Peninsula. It seems that Ottoman-held mainland Greece facilitated the activity of single painters, who would travel and work nonstop throughout their lives. But it was mainly the monastic centers of mainland Greece, Meteora, and especially Mount Athos that became the focus of intense artistic activity and production. Monasteries were able to invite the leading painters of their time to work for them, as the cases of Theophanes, Euphrosynos, Zorzis, and Frangos Katelanos clearly demonstrate (figs. 19–20).

for the katholikon of Moni Philanthropinon.<sup>22</sup> The next commission took him to Meteora, where in 1548 he painted the fresco decoration for the katholikon of the Varlaam Monastery. He then moved to Kastoria and in 1553 undertook the wall decoration for the Rasiotissa Church.<sup>23</sup> The wall decoration for the Churches of Hagioi Apostoloi and Saint Zacharias, also in Kastoria, has been attributed to Katelanos. After Kastoria, Katelanos went to Mount Athos and in 1560 executed the frescoes for the parekklesion (side chapel) of Saint Nicholas in the Monastery of the Great Lavra. The dedicatory inscription preserved there refers to the painter as follows: *χείρ εὐτελεστάτου Φράγγου τοῦ Κατελλάνου ἐκ Θηβῶν τῆς Βοιωτίας* (the hand of the humblest Frangos Katelanos from Thebes in Boeotia). His final commission is believed to have come from the Monastery of Zavorda in Grevena, near Kozani, where he executed wall paintings for the katholikon. A dating of 1590 for that commission is problematic, as it would show



Fig. 17. Theophanes. *Supper at Emmaus*. Stavronikita Monastery, Mount Athos.



Fig. 18. Frangos Katelanos. *The Painter Lazaros*. Chapel of Saint Nicholas, Monastery of the Great Lavra, Mount Athos.



Fig. 19. Theophanes. *The Donors of the Anapafsa Monastery: Dionysios, Metropolitan of Larissa, and Nikanor, Exarch of Stagoi*. Meteora.



Fig. 20. Attributed to Zorzi. *The Holy Fathers Athanasios and Ioasaph, Founders of the Transfiguration Monastery*. Meteora.

TABLEAU INDICATIF  
DU NOMBRE DES PEINTRES GRECS,  
DISTRIBUE PAR PERIODES ET PAR DISTRICTS

PERIODES	TOTAL	CRETE	ILES IONIENNES	EPIRE	GRECE CENTRALE	ILES DE L'EGEE	PELO- PONNESE	DIVERS	POURCENTAGE CRETE	EPIRE
A										
1454-1526	180	145	2	4	-	-	8	21	81%	1%
B										
1527-1630	280	156	15	2	12	5	7	83	55%	
C										
1631-1700	305	68	22	17	10	17	10	161	22%	5,5%
D										
1700-1820	740	52	76	85	49	75	53	350	6,6%	12%
	1505	421	115	108	71	97	78	615		

Fig. 21. Chart showing the number of painters working in Venetian and Ottoman-held territories of Greece.

The fall of Crete to Ottoman Turks in 1669 soon brought the flourishing artistic activity of the urban centers of Crete to an end. From the last decades of the seventeenth century onward, painting gradually came to flourish in mainland Greece and especially in Epirus and western Macedonia, while the role of Meteora and Mount Athos continued to be decisive and they never ceased being centers of artistic activity and production.

In the chart compiled by Manolis Chatzidakis (fig. 21), the numbers clearly speak for themselves.<sup>25</sup> During the first period (1454–1526) artists from Crete account for 81 percent of the painters working in Greek territories. During the second period (1527–1630) the number of Cretan painters is still very high but there is an increase in the number of painters in mainland Greece and the islands. During the third period (1631–1700) there is an obvious change in the number of painters in Crete and in the rest of Greece. In the fourth period (1700–1820) there is drastic change in numbers. Epirus, central Greece, the Peloponnese, and the islands have much greater numbers of painters than Crete. Times had changed decisively.

Having come to the end of this paper, I must admit that I was so ambitious as to believe that I could have discussed and compared the character of artistic production in Venetian Crete and Ottoman-held mainland Greece and that I could have drawn some conclusions in the end. Having chosen such a vast theme to cover in a short paper, I rather feel that I simply managed to give you only a small taste of a subject that is of immense interest and depth.

## Notes

1. New York 2005, no. 11, pp. 52–53 (A. Drandaki) with biblio.; see also Chatzidakis 1983, no. 18, pp. 29–30.
2. Andreas Ritzos was active in Venetian Candia (ca. 1421–92); see Cattapan 1973, pp. 238–83; and Chatzidakis-Drakopoulou 1997, pp. 324–32.
3. Chatzidakis 1985, no. 10, p. 61, pl. 12.
4. New York 2005, no. 10, pp. 50–51 (A. Drandaki).
5. On these conditions, see the introductory essay to Drandaki 2005; see also Chatzidakis 1974, pp. 169–211.
6. New York 2005, no. 9, pp. 48–49 (M. Constantoudaki-Kitromilides).
7. *Ibid.*, no. 13, pp. 56–57 (A. Drandaki).
8. On this painter, see Drandakis 1962; and Chatzidakis-Drakopoulou 1997, pp. 408–23.
9. Vassilaki-Mavrakaki 1981, pp. 550–70; Vokotopoulos 1983, pp. 142–45; and Chatzidakis-Drakopoulou 1997, p. 157, fig. 161.
10. Orlandos 1961, pp. 84–103; Vokotopoulos 1967, p. 330; Paliouras 1985, pp. 213–16; and Chatzidakis-Drakopoulou 1997, p. 255, figs. 162–64.
11. Vokotopoulos 1969, p. 257, pls. 260–61; and Chatzidakis-Drakopoulou 1997, p. 255.



12. Chatzidakis 1974, pp. 195–96; Bianco Fiorin 1984, pp. 89–94; Vassilaki 1990, pp. 81–88; and Chatzidakis-Drakopoulou 1997, pp. 293–95.
13. Andreas Paviatis is documented in Venetian Candia between 1470 and about 1512. See Chatzidakis 1974, pp. 188–95; and Chatzidakis-Drakopoulou 1997, pp. 259–64.
14. Vassilaki 1997, pp. 161–209.
15. Chatzidakis 1969–70, pp. 309–52; Chatzidakis 1986; and Chatzidakis-Drakopoulou 1997, pp. 381–97.
16. Chatzidakis 1969–70, pp. 315–17, figs. 1–16; and Sofianos-Tsigaridas 2003.
17. Chatzidakis 1969–70, pp. 317–27, figs. 17–85; Chatzidakis 1986, *passim*; and Thessaloniki 1997, nos. 2.54–2.72, pp. 125–42 (E. N. Tsigaridas).
18. Chatzidakis 1956, pp. 273–91, pls. KB–KZ; and Thessaloniki 1997, nos. 2.44–2.46, pp. 116–19 (E. N. Tsigaridas).
19. Garidis 1989; and Acheimastou-Potamianou 1991–92, pp. 13–31.
20. Garidis 1989, pp. 189–99; and Chatzidakis-Drakopoulou 1997, pp. 76–79.
21. Chatzidakis-Drakopoulou 1997, p. 76; and Semoglou 1999.
22. Acheimastou-Potamianou 1983.
23. Gounaris 1980.
24. Chatzidakis-Drakopoulou 1997, pp. 102–4; Stavropoulou-Makri 2001; and Kanari 2003.
25. Chatzidakis 1987, p. 15.
25. Chatzidakis 1987, p. 15.

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