

APOCALYPSE IN COLORS: VISUAL SEMIOTICS OF THE END TIMES IN MODERN UKRAINIAN CHURCH MURALISM

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INTRODUCTION

The word *Apocalypse* derives from the Greek ἀποκάλυψις, meaning “revelation,” “unveiling,” or the gaining of new knowledge. It serves as the title—taken from its opening word—of the final book of the New Testament, which describes the cataclysms and wonders that precede the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Apocalyptic symbols in Christian art function as complex visual signs that mediate between theological revelation and cultural imagination. These symbols—rooted in the eschatological narratives of the *Book of Revelation*—serve as semiotic condensations of ultimate meanings: divine judgment, the transfiguration of the world, and the restoration of cosmic order. While the *Revelation of St. John the Theologian* occupies a central place within Christian eschatology, it remains outside the sphere of Orthodox liturgical practice. Consequently, the apocalyptic imagery that arises from its textual tradition belongs to a distinct semiotic field: one of **theological reflection, symbolic speculation, and visual hermeneutics** rather than formal iconographic canon.

Among the most significant apocalyptic motifs represented in monumental church painting are the **Prepared Throne (Etimasia)**, the **Icon of Light**, and the **Vision of the Prophet Daniel**—images that not only embody eschatological content but also function as cultural signs, articulating the relationship between the temporal and the eternal. Within the Orthodox visual system, these symbols constitute a *metasemiosis*—a secondary layer of meaning through which theological concepts are encoded in artistic form and transmitted across generations.

In the context of **Ukrainian monumental church painting of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries**, the revival of apocalyptic themes reflects profound cultural and spiritual transformations. Following decades of ideological repression and the erosion of religious knowledge under Soviet rule, artists and theologians alike turned to apocalyptic imagery as a means of reasserting spiritual depth, reclaiming lost traditions, and rearticulating the sacred in a post-secular age. The renewed interest in these symbols reveals not only a search for theological meaning but also a **semiotic**

negotiation between historical memory, national identity, and contemporary religious consciousness.

This article explores the **cultural and semiotic dimensions** of apocalyptic symbols in modern Ukrainian church art, examining the reasons for their resurgence and the interpretive mechanisms through which they engage both ecclesiastical and secular audiences. By analyzing the multilayered functions of these signs—at once doctrinal, aesthetic, and existential—the study seeks to illuminate how apocalyptic imagery serves as a medium for expressing collective spiritual experience and redefining the sacred in the visual culture of post-Soviet Ukraine.

1. The Prepared Throne (Etimasia)

The *Etimasia* (from the Greek Ἐτοιμασία, meaning “preparation” or “readiness”) represents the throne prepared for the Second Coming of Christ—the righteous Judge who will return to judge the living and the dead. While its immediate theological foundation lies in the Psalms (“You have sat on the throne, O righteous Judge,” Ps. 9:5–8), the motif also carries a broader cultural resonance within the Christian imagination. Across Byzantine and post-Byzantine visual traditions, the *Etimasia* functions as a symbolic condensation of eschatological expectation: not merely a doctrinal reference, but a visual metaphor for cosmic order being readied, laid open, or “set in place” before the final revelation of divine justice.

The iconographic structure of the Prepared Throne typically features a church throne on which rests the closed Gospel—an object that mediates between text and mystery, between divine wisdom and the sealed future of the world disclosed in the Book of Revelation. This Gospel-book becomes a cultural signifier of sacred authority grounded in scripture and tradition. Instruments of the Passion, such as the crown of thorns or the cross, may be placed upon or near the throne; they embody the historical memory of Christ’s suffering and anchor the eschatological vision in the narrative of salvation history. Above the Gospel, artists often depict either a dove—symbolizing the Holy Spirit—or a royal crown, which manifests Christ’s universal sovereignty. In many regional traditions, these elements served not only as theological markers but as visual tools for instructing viewers, embedding complex doctrinal themes within the familiar symbolic language of sacred art¹.

The accompanying motifs of the sun, the moon, and two seraphim reflect Christ’s apocalyptic prophecy in the Gospel of Mark: “The sun shall be

¹ Khlystun Yu. I. The Use of Symbolic Signs in Modern Ukrainian Monumental Church Painting: Classification and Hidden Semantics. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology. 2022. Vol. 188(8). P. 398–404. URL: <https://publications.waset.org/pdf/10012622>

darkened, and the moon shall not give her light... Then shall they see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory” (Mark 13:24–26). Within the cultural history of Christian art, these celestial symbols articulate the idea that the entire created cosmos participates in the drama of the Last Judgment. Their presence frames the throne not simply as a liturgical object but as the axis of a transformed universe, where time, nature, and divine presence converge.

In modern Ukrainian monumental painting, the image of the *Etimasia* continues to evolve as both a theological and cultural marker. It appears as an independent composition—such as in the vault of the Church of the Resurrection in Slovyansk and in the Church of the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin in Boyove (Donetsk region)—where it functions as a visual proclamation of eschatological hope within local community identity. At the same time, the motif remains integral to more complex narrative cycles, particularly representations of the Last Judgment, as seen in the frescoes of the Assumption Cathedral in the village of Nikolskoye. Here, the *Etimasia* serves as the conceptual and compositional center around which the moral, spiritual, and cosmic dimensions of eschatology are organized. In this way, contemporary Ukrainian church art preserves the continuity of Byzantine tradition while engaging regional historical memory, cultural resilience, and modern visions of sacred space.

2. The Icon of Light

Another key symbol of the Second Coming is the Icon of Light, an abstract and cosmically oriented image that expresses not only divine illumination but also the broader cultural imagination of the Christian world, in which light functions as a metaphor for truth, revelation, and eschatological transformation². One of the earliest known examples of this motif appears in the fifth-century mosaics of the Baptistery of Albenga in Liguria, where the visual language of late antiquity blends with emerging Christian cosmology. The composition centers on a radiant disk formed by concentric circles of dark blue, blue, and white—an artistic evocation of the celestial spheres and the uncreated light of God that situates the viewer within a symbolic map of the universe³. At the core of this disk stands the *Chrismon*, one of the earliest cultural emblems of Christ, flanked by Alpha and Omega as a visual echo of His apocalyptic declaration: “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last” (Rev. 22:12–13). Surrounding this luminous center

² Lidov A. *Hierotopy and Iconicity. Spatial Icons versus Iconographic Devices*. International Congress of Byzantine Studies. Belgrade, 2016. P. 112–125.

³ Khlystun Yu. I. *Culturological analysis of the iconographic program of the refectory church of All Russian Saints in the Holy Dormition Nikolò–Vasilievsky convent*. *European Journal of Arts*. 2021. № 1. P. 174–183.

are twelve white birds, traditionally interpreted as the apostles who disseminate the Gospel across the world, while four six-winged seraphim at the cardinal points embody the perpetual glorification of the divine. This powerful and enduring iconographic type continues to appear in contemporary monumental painting, including in the Church of All Russian Saints in the village of Nikolskoye, Donetsk region.

3. The Vision of the Prophet Daniel

A third major apocalyptic motif in Orthodox monumental art is The Vision of the Prophet Daniel, or The Vision of the Four Apocalyptic Beasts, a subject that not only conveys theological meaning but also reflects the broader cultural imagination of societies shaped by biblical narratives. Frequently incorporated into Last Judgment compositions—as seen in the frescoes of the Assumption Cathedral in Nikolskoye—this motif bridges scriptural prophecy with the visual language of collective memory, where empires, historical cycles, and cosmic time intersect. In Orthodox interpretation, the four beasts symbolize successive earthly kingdoms—the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Macedonian (Greek), and Roman empires—serving as cultural representations of human ambition, political power, and their inevitable decline. Through this symbolic succession, the vision articulates a worldview in which history is understood as a drama guided by divine providence, culminating in the appearance of the “Son of Man,” who receives eternal dominion. The scene thus embodies not only eschatological hope for divine justice but also a culturally rooted reflection on the impermanence of human authority and the enduring aspiration for a transcendent, divinely ordered kingdom⁴.

4. Reasons for the Popularity of Apocalyptic Symbols (Subjects) in Ukrainian Monumental Church Painting of the Late 20th – Early 21st Centuries

Among the reasons for the growing interest in apocalyptic symbols and subjects in monumental church painting of the late 20th – early 21st centuries, several key factors related to both spiritual and cultural-historical processes in Ukrainian society can be identified⁵. First of all, the semiotic polysemy of apocalyptic symbols, their combination with elements of mystery and sacred uncertainty, make such images particularly expressive in the context of

⁴ Loades A. Sacramentality and Christian Spirituality. In: *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* / ed. by Arthur Holder. Oxford : Blackwell, 2005. P. 45–67. 254 p.

⁵ Khlystun Yu. I. The Use of Symbolic Signs in Modern Ukrainian Monumental Church Painting: Classification and Hidden Semantics. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology. 2022. Vol. 188(8). P. 398–404. URL: <https://publications.waset.org/pdf/10012622>

contemporary religious discourse. These symbols function as complex cultural signs, capable of simultaneously conveying dogmatic content, ethical instruction, and an existential experience of the limits of human existence⁶. Secondly, the "spiritual hunger" of people in the post-Soviet space, caused by the prolonged interruption in the transmission of theological knowledge and the destruction of the traditions of spiritual education during the Soviet era, has stimulated a turn to more meaningful and profound iconographic forms. Iconic images of saints no longer satisfy the need to comprehend dogmatic truth, giving way to subjects that reveal the eschatological perspective of the Christian worldview.

Thirdly, there is a cultural desire to revive early Christian symbolism, somewhat forgotten in previous centuries. This process can be seen as a manifestation of a broader trend toward the restoration of cultural memory, in which apocalyptic imagery serves as a mediator between ancient tradition and modern religious consciousness.

Furthermore, apocalyptic themes resonate with secular perceptions of the "end of the world" phenomenon, which is actively circulating in popular culture. Popular myths and pseudo-prophecies (for example, predictions of the "end of the world" on December 12, 2012) form the backdrop against which religious symbols of the end times acquire additional cultural weight and become a tool for dialogue between the sacred and profane dimensions of culture.

An equally important reason is the conscious desire to preserve and deepen Christian iconographic traditions. Turning to apocalyptic motifs serves as an act of symbolic consolidation—an attempt to restore the sacred image to its metaphysical depth. Of particular significance is also the eschatological awareness of the finiteness of the world, which prompts ethical and spiritual reflection on human existence. Experiencing the "end times" in an iconographic context heightens attention to the present moment, where every action, thought, and choice is perceived as having ontological significance and a reflection in eternity.

Finally, the appeal to apocalyptic symbolism can be understood as a manifestation of an inner desire for spiritual development, for genuine "work of the soul," as opposed to outward piety.

5. Images of the Last Judgment

It cannot be said that apocalyptic symbols are intended to frighten people, unlike the mystical symbols on the icons of the Last Judgment.

⁶ Sonesson G. Die Semiotik des Bilds. Zum Forschungsstand am Anfang der 90er Jahre. *Zeitschrift für Semiotik*. 1993. № 15. P. 131–164.

In Christian theology, the Last Judgment refers to the final, universal judgment of God over the world, which will take place at the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ (at which time all the dead will be resurrected, and the living will be changed (1 Cor. 15:51-52), and each person will be determined to have an eternal destiny according to their deeds (Matthew 25:31-46, 2 Cor. 5:10), words (Matthew 12:36), and thoughts).

Almost every icon of the Last Judgment reproduces in a generalized form an iconographic scheme that was finally formed in Byzantine art of the 10th-11th centuries. This scheme is a complex semiotic construct in which visual codes and symbolic images are correlated with theological discourse and collective ideas about the end of history. It is based on a synthesis of apocalyptic motifs from the Book of Revelation, Gospel parables, Old Testament eschatological prophecies, as well as hagiographic and apocryphal texts, led to the formation of a stable cultural archetype. Thus, the icon of the Last Judgment functions not only as an object of religious veneration but also as a sign system, enshrining and transmitting the cultural memory of the ultimate fate of the world and humanity⁷.

As a stable iconographic model, the image of the Last Judgment possesses not only a substantive but also a spatial-semiotic organization. The visual elements here function as signs, interrelated within a specific coordinate system, which makes the composition legible both at the level of theological message and at the level of cultural code. This spatial structure is not accidental: it allows the viewer to interpret the image as a holistic text, in which every detail occupies a strictly defined place and is imbued with symbolic meaning⁸.

It should be noted that the iconography of the Last Judgment experienced particular development in the 17th century, when Orthodox culture increasingly emphasized mystical and apocalyptic motifs. This period was marked by the active incorporation into the visual language of iconography of numerous symbols whose origins stemmed not so much from the canonical texts of Holy Scripture as from "folk ideas" about the afterlife, largely based on apocryphal tradition⁹. Such elements—the figure of a man at a column, the image of the "serpent of the tollhouses," the personification of the angel of death, and others—served as cultural markers through which the experience of the collective imaginary, associated with eschatological fears, was

⁷ Khlystun Yu. Vastsov's motives in the space of modern Ukrainian Orthodox churches. *European Journal of Arts*. 2023. № 2. P. 43–50. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29013/EJA-23-2-43-50>

⁸ Maguire H. Images of the court. In: *Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A.D. 843–1261* / eds. Helen C. Evans, William D. Wixom. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997. P. 182–192.

⁹ Berezhnaya L., Himka J.-P. The World to Come. *Ukrainian Images of the Last Judgment. Religion and the Arts*. 2016. № 20. P. 231–249.

articulated. Semiotically, these motifs were terrifying and served not so much a theological interpretation as a pedagogical and moralizing effect: they visualized ideas about the diversity of eternal torment, thereby reinforcing in the public consciousness the idea of the need for spiritual repentance and adherence to Christian moral norms¹⁰.

The serpent of the tollhouses appears as a complex artistic image, combining the archetypal symbolism of the serpent-tempter and ideas about the path of paying spiritual "taxes"—the tollhouses—for the sins committed by the soul. Its body acts as a visual text, where each sin or passion is symbolically designated through corresponding inscriptions, transforming the image into a kind of "table" of moral categories.

The "Serpent of the Tollhouses" is the personification of personal sin. It emerges from the mouth of a huge serpent, writhing and filling the central space of the icon, its head positioned near the heel of Adam, who bows before the Throne of God. This image is based on the Old Testament curse of the serpent: "And I will put enmity... between your seed and her [wife's] seed; it shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15).

Semiotically, this image is constructed from the overlap of several layers of meaning: the biblical symbolism of the serpent as temptation and curse, the legal and moral understanding of sin as "duty," and a visual strategy of intimidation. As a result, the "Serpent of the Tollhouses" becomes not only an element of iconography but also a powerful cultural symbol, structuring the perception of sin and retribution in the collective consciousness. In order to perceive and interpret the entire complexity of a composition as a holistic message, it is necessary that the artist and the viewer share not only common signs and symbols, but also have an equal potential for assimilating visual information¹¹.

The image of a man tied to a column has its own genealogy in the Byzantine iconographic tradition of the Last Judgment and is associated with the narrative of the "merciful sinner", common in the Middle Ages¹². From a cultural perspective, this motif reflects the persistent focus of Orthodox consciousness on the dialectic of sin and virtue, where mercy acts as a mitigating factor in the system of afterlife retribution. In semiotic terms, it can be viewed as an iconic sign, symbolically marking the intermediate space between heavenly bliss and hellish torments. "The Tale of a Certain Fornicator, Who Gave Alms, Yet Did Not Forsake Fornication" is included in the book "Prologue" under August 12 (the period of the Dormition Fast).

¹⁰ Bhalla N. *Experiencing the Last Judgement*. Routledge, 2021. 268 p.

¹¹ Khlystun Yu. Plots of the "Last Judgment" in the Monumental Church Painting as an Element of the Culture of Fear. The 13th Annual Lotman Conference at Tallinn University: Fear in Culture and Culture of Fear. Abstracts. June 15–17, 2023. P. 34–35.

¹² Свенціцкий І. Іконопись Галицької України XV–XVI віків. Львів, 1928. 256 с.

During the time of Leon the Isaurian, a certain very merciful but prodigal man lived in Constantinople. After his death, his fate in the afterlife was revealed in a vision to a pious elder: for the sake of his mercy he was spared from torment, but for the sake of fornication he was not deemed worthy to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

CONCLUSION

Thus, apocalyptic motifs in Ukrainian monumental church painting of the late 20th and early 21st centuries not only reflect the religious mood of the era but also function as a semiotic mediator, uniting sacred knowledge, cultural memory, and the existential experience of modern man.

From a semiotic perspective, such images function as socially marked signs: they act as codes that convey a collective assessment of certain individuals and events through religious art. From a cultural perspective, this demonstrates that the iconography of the Last Judgment is not only a theological and aesthetic phenomenon, but also a tool of social pedagogy that has retained its relevance over the centuries. Through such inclusions, the visual composition not only depicts a universal eschatological narrative but also responds to specific historical challenges, becoming a kind of "mirror" of the spiritual and social life of the era.

The examples examined demonstrate that the scenes found in the iconography of the "Last Judgment" serve a multi-layered function: they not only convey theological truths but also possess didactic potential, fostering the "fear of God" as a moral and psychological category that shapes the believer's behavior. Reminding us of the punishment for sin and the fate of the soul after death, these images become tools of cultural pedagogy, addressing both individual and collective consciousness.

In its cultural dimension, the iconography of the Last Judgment reflects the worldview characteristic of each specific historical era, integrating theological teachings, apocryphal traditions, and folk beliefs about the afterlife. Originating in Byzantine art, this scene has undergone semiotic "renewal" throughout the history of the Church, enriched with new motifs and images that correspond to the cultural and social challenges of the time. Thus, the iconography of the Last Judgment appears as a living and dynamic system, uniting dogmatic, artistic, and pedagogical dimensions. It serves as a powerful mechanism of cultural memory, in which the sacred and the social, the eternal and the historical, form an inseparable unity. This is the source of its enduring relevance and value both for understanding spiritual tradition and for comprehending human cultural experience.

SUMMARY

Apocalyptic symbols in Christian art are visual signs that allude to the Second Coming of Christ and the final judgment of humankind. While the Book of Revelation of St. John the Theologian (or Apocalypse) holds a central place in Christian eschatology, it is not used in liturgical worship in the Orthodox tradition. Consequently, the visual language derived from its imagery functions primarily within the sphere of theological reflection and symbolic expression rather than in liturgical iconography proper. Among the most significant apocalyptic symbols represented in monumental church painting are the Prepared Throne (Etimasia), the Icon of Light, and the Vision of the Prophet Daniel.

Apocalyptic symbols in contemporary Ukrainian monumental church painting are often less immediately intelligible to viewers unfamiliar with the dogmatic teachings of the Church than the more traditional symbols of the Last Judgment. Their meaning does not lie on the surface; instead, it requires a deeper theological literacy and an understanding of the visual language inherited from Scripture, patristic exegesis, and the broader iconographic tradition. As a result, modern apocalyptic imagery can appear opaque or enigmatic, especially when artists reinterpret canonical motifs or introduce new semiotic layers in response to current cultural or historical contexts.

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