# Sacred Neo-Byzantine Decorative Arts and European Philhellenism during the nineteenth century, regarding the work of Ludwig Thiersch

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ABSTRACT

Greece experienced a troubled political and social context during the nineteenth century. Seeking to identify an official identity and culture, independent Greece associated itself with European monarchies. Their joint project at the time was to "regenerate" Greece through reference to the classical model, in an effort to definitively break with the century of Ottoman influence. European artists and scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Lord Byron (1768-1848) or François-René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848), saw the influence and posterity of ancient Greece as the creative crucible of modern Europe. One of these artists, the Bavarian Ludwig Thiersch (1825-1909), went against the grain in 1850 by established himself as the leader of the neo-Byzantine movement. His works, which spread throughout Europe in a few decades, helped to rehabilitate Byzantine art and Empire, and to thereby stress the importance of this secular culture preserved by his Greek contemporaries. The neo-Byzantine style subtly took hold in European art and architecture through a process of emulation: honoring without imitating.
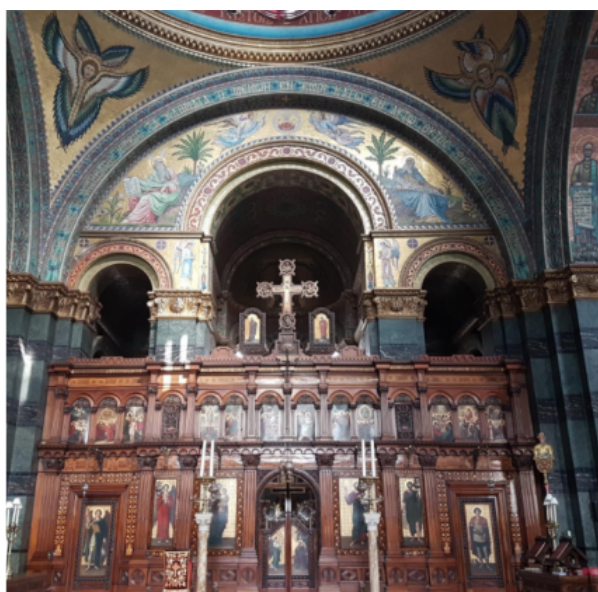
Iconostasis and mosaics of the triumphal arch, Saint Sophia's Cathedral of London, Iconostasis by Ludwig Thiersch and mosaics by Mercenero & Co and Boris Anrep, 1879-1882.

The war of independence fought by the Greeks throughout the 1820s was supported, beginning in 1825-1827, by European nations (Russia, Germanic Confederation, France, and the United Kingdom). While their interventions had different motivations, they nevertheless cannot be dissociated from the philhellenism that spread through Europe at the time. This movement emphasized the continent's historic debt through the legacy of Antiquity, one that had to be honored by liberating Greece from Ottoman control. The conclusion that the true past of the Greeks was that of Pericles, Plato, and Homer took hold at the time.

Yet beginning in the 1850s, the Byzantine era and its culture were in turn rehabilitated, notably thanks to the publications of Greek historians such as Spyridion Zambelios (1815-1881) and Konstantin Paparrigopoulos (1815-1891). This reversal, which was fostered by archeological discoveries, was firstly encouraged with political aims in mind in order to legitimize the expansion of the Hellenic area, and helped to build a coherent and continuous national narrative that could serve as a cohesive factor between contemporary Greek populations. Their folklore and popular culture actually derived much more from Bytantine culture than that of Pericles. The rehabilitation of Byzantine art was also connected to religion, as it included Orthodoxy within Hellenic identity.

This renewal spread rapidly throughout Europe by adapting to different national contexts. Ludwig Thiersch (1825-1909) can be considered as the leader of this movement. His father Friedrich Thiersch (1784-1860), a professor of literature in Munich, had established himself as a notable philhellene, who contributed to having the Great Powers elect his compatriot Prince Otto of Bavaria as King of Greece in 1832. Ludwig, who trained as a painter in Munich, was from his early years seen as an artist with an academic and naturalist style. He completed his Grand Tour and visited Rome to study the work of Raphael and the Renaissance masters. In 1852, clearly thanks to his father's influence, he was appointed as the director of the Athens School of Fine Art, where he taught painting to his Greek contemporaries. A special bond between Munich and Athens was quickly established: Western artists were marked by Greek painting, while Greeks learned Western academic art in Bavaria.

When he discovered Byzantine art in his new country, Thiersch developed a keen interest in its aspects, and even had himself called Ludovicos Thirsios. On the occasion of a restoration campaign initiated by the Russian Tsar Alexander II, in 1853 he reworked the decorations of Sotira Lykodimou, the old Byzantine church in Athens. To do so he took inspiration largely from paintings conserved in two monastic churches of the eleventh century located near the capital, the *katholika* of Daphni and Hosios Loukas. He projected a hitherto unseen hybridization and modernity on sacred Byzantine icons: depth, treatment of faces, *contrapposto*, and the volume of figures, all of which were techniques learned during his academic training, combined with narrative, liturgical, and hierarchical orthodox aspects, along with a gold ground and the ascetic and severe expression characteristic of holy Byzantine figures.

The career of this cosmopolitan artist subsequently became international. He enjoyed the patronage of various European committees representing the Greek diaspora, with notable donors such as the Greek-Austrian businessman Simon Georg Freiherr von Sina (1810-1876) and Demetrius Stefanovich Schilizzi (1839-1893), a banker established in London and Paris. These wealthy Greeks financed the construction within Europe of metropolitan Orthodox churches practicing Byzantine rites, all of which were consecrated by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. This resulted in the erection of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in Vienna between 1856 and 1858, Saint Sophia's Cathedral of London between 1890 and 1895, and Saint Stephen's Greek

Orthodox Cathedral in Paris. These three structures were entrusted to philhellenic architects of Austrian, British, and French nationality: Theophil Hansen (1813-1891), John Oldrid Scott (1841-1913), and Émile Vaudremer (1829-1914). They adopted a style that was more or less Byzantine, with the London cathedral using the Greek-cross plan topped with a large cupola, which evokes the archetypical model of Saint Sophia in Constantinople.

Patrons commissioned Ludwig Thiersch to produce the frescoes and icons; he intervened in Vienna in 1856, London in 1880, and then in Paris in 1892. The Bavarian painter sought to inscribe his works within the tradition of Byzantine practices, in which the iconography within churches focuses on the apse and altar, where a rich series of mosaics and icons painted on gold ground represents so many biblical and allegorical scenes. Iconostasis, the liturgical installation that forms a partition separating the sanctuary from the rest of the church in the Orthodox world, is present at Saint Sophia's of London as a genuine neo-Byzantine prototype. Consisting of three codified and hierarchical registers, it is in keeping with twelfth century models, for instance the iconostasis remains conserved at the Saint Catherine Monastery on Mount Sinai. Its primary register (also known as "local row") is thus dedicatory—as in an altarpiece—with icons representing different saints. As in the late Byzantine period, the second register (*dodekaorton)* consists of medallions representing the twelve feasts of the Orthodox liturgical calendar, from the Nativity of Mary to her Dormition.

At Holy Trinity in Vienna, Thiersch took the initiative of adapting the sacred decorations of the Byzantine cupolas in the three rows of a barrel vault, architecture that is much more Western. The compositions focus on the medallions that depict Byzantine types (God *Pantocrator*, Virgin *Theotokos*), and are framed by Old Testament Biblical characters, such as those adorning the four trunks supporting the dome in older churches. Yet it markedly diverges from its models by using processes developed during the Renaissance to simulate depth, thereby creating illusionist effects that are not present in Byzantine art. Another example of hybridization, albeit discrete, is Saint Stephen's Church in the rue Georges-Bizet in the 16th arrondissement of Paris. Thiersch once again produced an iconostasis, in which he followed the usual and resolutely Byzantine form, but introduced a new stylistic background. A contrast subsequently emerged, one that crystallizes all of the ambiguity of neo-Byzantine decoration, which is not a simple reproduction of ancient models.

In France, the neo-Byzantine style became a part of a pragmatic and rational vision of architecture, defended especially by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc in the second volume of his *Entretiens sur l'architecture* (Interviews on architecture) from 1872, or in Auguste Choisy's *L'art de bâtir chez les byzantins* (The art of building among the Byzantines) from 1883: their idea was to take up the "useful and true principles" of Byzantine architecture by applying them to modern structures, without for all that building according to a fixed stylistic dogma. The productions of Thiersch were in line with this syncretic approach: in painting they combined classical, Gothic, Baroque, and Romantic inspirations with lessons from sixth-century to fifteenth-century models; in architecture the Neo-Byzantine movement shone brightly through structures with Romanesque and Moorish inspirations, and was therefore in keeping with a historicist approach that led to a synthesis of the European art of the past.

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