



**CHURCH OF METAMORPHOSIS TOU SOTIROS
(THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE SAVIOUR)-PALAICHORI**

REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS
DEPUTY MINISTRY OF TOURISM

The church of the Transfiguration of the Saviour is a small chapel that was built at the beginning of the 16th century with a wooden steep pitched roof and an enclosed gallery-shaped narthex on the south west. Most probably the gallery was built in 1655 according to the built-in stone above its west entrance. As you can see, the church has two entrances, in the centre of the south wall and in the centre of the west wall and there is an arched recess in each of the side walls, as in the church of the Holy Cross of Agiasmati and other churches of the same type.

We see that the interior of the church is completely painted with one of the most accomplished series of wall paintings of the post-Byzantine period in Cyprus, influenced by the Style of the Palaeologues! while the technique for facial differentiation classifies the frescoes of Cyprus prior to the Cretan School of the 16th century. The dedicatory inscription in the church is partly destroyed and we do not know the precise date that these frescoes were painted, nor the donors and neither the painter. However, as we will see later on many of the iconographic compositions resemble to those made by the painter Philip Goul in the churches of the Holy Cross in Agiasmati and of Saint Mamas at Louvaras, as well as with those painted by Symeon Axenti in the churches of Saint Sozomenus and of the Archangel at Galata.

As we go on to describe the paintings in detail, we see the standard iconographic programme with the side walls being divided into two zones and the west one into three zones plus the pediment. The upper zones belong to the Christological cycle and are dedicated to the subject of the New Testament opening up with the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary in the east pediment, culminating with the Crucifixion in the west pediment, and ending with the Pentecost of the Holy Spirit on the north wall, before the entrance. In the lower part a series of Saints are depicted. Equally exceptional is the representation of the prelates in the apse.

Starting from the top of the eastern pediment above the apse, we see the Annunciation of Virgin Mary. To the north of the apse we see King David, the prophet Isaiah and the representation of the Lamb and to the south the prophets Solomon and Jeremiah, and Saint Stephen.

In the conch of the apse, the Virgin Mary is portrayed praying or as inscribed as “The Lady of the Archangels”, in a simplified form of the subject with the Virgin standing without the medallion with Christ on her chest. Here, we notice the technique used by the painter to attribute an expression of joyfulness on the face of the Virgin. The painter stresses the face by illuminating it progressively through fine long white-yellowish strokes that are joined together to reach white highlights. Furthermore, the wide use of this technique by the painter on the other frescoes such as the Apostles, the soldier-saints, the monks and the prelates that we will see later on, elects Cyprus ahead of the Cretan School as pioneer in the post- Byzantine art development,.

Below in the central zone of the apse the Communion of the Apostles is depicted, one of the finest compositions in this church. Christ is pictured with clipped beard and moustache shedding His Byzantine attributes. This is one of the two wall paintings in Cyprus in which Christ has with Him all the disciples pictured on both scenes, the “ Take ye, and eat, drink ye all of it”, instead of the usual depiction of six on either scene; the second wall painting is in Agios Nicolaos near Galataria. Christ distributes the bread to the disciples on the left, headed by Peter; Judas coming last spits the bread into his hand and walks away. On the right, he pours wine to the disciples, headed by young John while we see that Judas is now missing. The buildings in the background have influences from the West, as well as the representation of the Hospitality of Abraham, which has an architectural background of Italian style, on the eastern edge of the north wall, behind the iconostasis,

Below are the two Cypriot Saints John Lampadistis and Athanasius Pentaschenitis are depicted.

Continuing to the south wall, we see the Birth of Christ in a usual representation. The Presentation of Christ in the Temple comes next, with the Virgin Mary and Joseph on the left holding a cage with two doves while on the right, Symeon Theodochos is about to hand the Christ to His mother; further back is Prophetess Anna with the scroll. Generally speaking, the figures are light and their expression and garments are lit up, except that of Virgin Mary. We proceed to the Baptism and the Raising of Lazarus; here, it is worth noting that this composition is very similar to the composition of Symeon Axenti in the Archangel at Galata. We notice the

same for the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem further down, in which the painter of this church used the same model as Symeon Axenti. The composition of the scene, the posture of Christ on a donkey and the crowd that receives him, as well as the figures and characteristics of the Apostles are identical in both churches, with minor differences. The Transfiguration comes next with an impressive presentation.

In the bottom zone of the south wall, in the arched recess the Saints George and Demetrius are depicted, riding side by side, ready to help those in need, like the Dioscuri in ancient Greece. This is also the only iconography in Cyprus in which we see the two saints together, although this subject is very common in the 14th and 15th century churches in Crete.

On the reveals of the arch are Saints Spyridon and Tychon.

East of the south entrance, Saint Paul the Apostle comes next with a multi-pointed curly beard which is a usual depiction of that time, escaping however from the mid-Byzantine representation. West of the south entrance are the Saints Antonius, Athanaseus, Savvas, Theodosius the Cenobiarch, Arsenius, Hilarion and Onoufrios.

On the west wall are The Passions: the Last Supper on top, where the composition and the arrangement are referring us to the Macedonian School of the Palaeologue period, that is to say the last phase of the Byzantine period. Close beside we also notice the same characteristic, in the Prayer in the Garden of Gethemane. This type of composition is presented in the same subjects in the Monasteries of Protato and Vatopedio on the Mount Athos. Finally the depiction of the Betrayal comes next, which is almost the same with the subject of Goul in Agios Mamas and of Axenti in the Archangel.

Below are the depictions of Jesus in front of Annas and Caiaphas, Pilate washing his hands, the Denial of Peter and the Mocking of Christ.

We see Saint Paraskevi and Saint Marina to the south of the west door, and to the north Saint Mamas riding a lion, a subject adopted in Cyprus since the 14th century.

The pediment is fully covered with the Crucifixion in which the painter adopts elements from the beginning of the Byzantine period; he paints for example the two robbers although their characteristics have Western attributes and two female figures as well. Appearing from behind the walls of Jerusalem, one of them is collecting the blood from the wound of Christ. The other one is moving away urged by an angel. These personifications of the Church and the Synagogue appear in the early Byzantine art.

Continuing to the north wall, we see in the top zone the depictions of The Via Crucis, the Lamentation of the Epitaph and the Resurrection. In the Resurrection of Christ the painter adopts the western models with the Christ stepping out of a sarcophagus, and the three soldiers sleeping. Then the Myrrh Bearers are pictured in front of the Empty Tomb, the Ascension and the Pentecost.

Behind the iconostasis on the top zone the Sacrifice of Abraham is represented.

In the bottom zone of the north wall starting from the west are depicted the soldier-saints Mercurius, Nestor, Eustace and Theodore Stratelatis, all robust with armours, shields, swords and bows. This overloaded representation is a tendency of the Macedonian School that the painter seems to adopt completely.

We continue with the Saints Andrew, Luke, Nicholas and Peter.

The Archangel Michael is pictured in the arched recess; Saints Cosmas and Damian in the archivolt and in the west reveal Saint Symeon Stylites.

Having analysed the wall paintings of the church, the composition and the style as well as the final output to the visitor, we realise that the unknown painter of the church of the Transfiguration is one of the best representatives of the Cypriot School.