

# ***Sailing Back to Byzantium: Art of Michael Galovic***

## **BOOK REVIEW – Gordon Morrison**

### **How should we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? Ps.136 (137)**

A new monograph on the art of Serbian Australian iconographer Michael Galovic, titled “Sailing Back to Byzantium”, endeavours to answer this question, posed in the psalm we know today as “By the Waters of Babylon”. The book’s title paraphrases another poem, William Butler Yeats’ “Sailing to Byzantium”, in which Constantinople, the Queen of Cities and Mother of Orthodoxy, is described as an ultimate spiritual goal, a place where “sages stand in God's holy fire as in the gold mosaic of wall”. The Psalmist on the other hand is an exile, torn from his homeland and far from holy ground.

“Sailing Back to Byzantium” is an impressive and beautifully illustrated summary of Galovic’s work, covering the period from his arrival in Australia in 1991 to the present. Essays on a range of themes have been contributed by scholars from Orthodox, Catholic and Anglican backgrounds as well as the artist himself. Importantly these writers have for the greater part, been patrons and commissioners of the artist’s work.

Michael Galovic grew up and trained as a painter in a land that during the Middle Ages had been a great Orthodox empire- in its splendour, a successor to Byzantium itself. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, churches and monasteries were built throughout Serbia, adorned with frescoes by artists trained in Constantinople and Thessalonika. Their works were imbued with the same artistic spirit that we still see in the miraculous frescoes of Chora Monastery in Istanbul. Galovic’s father was involved in the restoration of one of these Serbian churches in the ancient city of Prizren, and the experience of encountering this church left an indelible mark on the young Michael.

In each essay we discover the different ways that the artist has responded to finding himself ‘in a strange land’. The most straightforward of these is abundantly evident. We could refer to this as ‘keep the faith; sing the old songs loudly and with confidence’. Traditional icon making features very strongly here. Galovic is a master of different modes of iconography ranging from that of

Novgorod and North Russia to the complex and intensely coloured works of the Byzantine heartlands. Examples are the profoundly moving Christ King of Glory or Man of Sorrows - a portrayal of the dead Christ associated with Good Friday and known in Greece as “Utmost Humiliation”. Another is The Annunciation inspired directly by a famous icon in Ochrid that is regarded as a masterpiece of the Palaeologan Renaissance. As several of the essays argue, these – are no mere copies. Galovic’s technical skill and mastery of colour imbue these traditional images with great potency. They are spiritually ‘alive’

Another response to exile or dislocation is to adapt to one's new surroundings. Icon painters have been doing this for many centuries. Artists working in Crete and Cyprus where western Christianity was the religion of the ruling class painted many icons for Catholic patrons. Thus, we see Byzantine style icons of Saints Dominic, Francis and Jerome. Galovic has done precisely the same in Australia and icons of Saints Patrick, Benedict and Brendan feature prominently in this book. However, these are ancient saints from before the Orthodox-Catholic schism of the 11th Century, making these images ‘Orthodox’ even if the saints are unfamiliar. This is not the case with saints of more recent times, including Australia's own Mary MacKillop. Some of these uncompromisingly Catholic figures such as Oliver Plunkett and Peter Chanel, appear slightly unnerving if one is accustomed to the familiar saints of the Eastern Church. However, this has proved no obstacle to Galovic, who has essentially created new iconographic types for each personage. Mary ‘Help of Christians’ is a Catholic form of the Mother of God who has patronal status in Australia, but this ‘avatar’ does not exist in the Orthodox tradition. Icons created by Michael Galovic for her veneration are an eloquent testament to the ability of the artist to create an entirely new Marian type.

It is impossible to review Galovic’s work without reference to the most famous artist to have worked in a distant land: the Cretan born Domenikos Theotokopoulos - better known in the west as El Greco - who spent the latter part of his life in Spain. Master Domenikos’ works were created in a strictly

Catholic society during the early period of the Counter-Reformation. Working for Catholic patrons in Toledo, El Greco received commissions for images that had no basis in Orthodox tradition, particularly related to the narrative surrounding the Virgin Mary. Galovic himself writes about the challenge of creating four Marian images for a Catholic church in Sydney. The Annunciation follows the traditional Orthodox iconography. The Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin are inspired by El Greco. For the Immaculate Conception, a doctrinal image that dates from more recent times, the artist has created an entirely novel image. Each work is beautiful in its own way, but as a group they do not 'read' cohesively.

There is yet another response to dislocation and that is to chart a completely different spiritual and creative path. To paraphrase another Psalm: "To sing a new song unto the Lord". This brings us finally to a series of paintings that is pivotal in Galovic's oeuvre: the Uluru Series. As the essayist Guy Freeland observes in his impressive decoding of this Series, these are Icons, not of saints, but of a Rock. Not just any rock but Australia's 'iconic' Uluru. In modern usage of the word 'Icon' we find it applied to everything from Nike Shoes to Vegemite. In the Orthodox sense an icon represent holy personages or sacred events such as the Crucifixion. How can a Rock be an icon? As Freeland points out, rocks certainly have a place in Orthodox pictorial narrative: Mount Sinai, Golgotha and Mt Tabor spring to mind. However, to represent these formations without their human players is unparalleled in Orthodox iconography.

Nevertheless, Orthodox theology is very partial to paradox. In fact, Incarnation and Salvation are themselves seen in this way: the 'Uncontainable Deity' is contained within a Womb, and in the Tomb, the Dying becomes Deathless. In this context the significance of the Uluru series emerges. A Rock can indeed become an Icon - standing both for the ancient land in which the artist has placed down new roots and as an acknowledgement of the spirituality contained within Indigenous dreamings. The finest of these works: Uluru - My Dream Story Icon 2 is a powerful and beautiful painting; in every way an Australian Icon.

With their layers of pigments and subtle interplays of colour, icons are notoriously difficult to photograph, and even more of a challenge to reproduce. The publishers of *Sailing Back to Byzantium* are to be commended for their skill in capturing these images so beautifully. The essays themselves guide us skillfully on the various paths that the artist has trod over thirty years, and perhaps it is best to conclude by quoting from one of these. In a short essay that is a very personal response to Galovic's work, Professor David Hall FMS, Dean of La Salle Academy at Australian Catholic University writes: "This publication celebrates decades of imagining and risk taking, of orthodoxy at times inking towards heresy, of listening to the heart of humanity and of seeking to make meaning of our lives in union with the ultimate Truth that is Love."

**Gordon Morrison**  
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*Sailing Back to Byzantium: Art of Michael Galovic*  
is available to purchase on the website.

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