

# The Splendour of Byzantine Art



**S**taro Nagoricane, a village in a rural district near Kumanovo, possesses such a rich cultural heritage that many towns would admire. Its Kokino Megalithic observatory was ranked the 4th oldest in the world by NASA. There is the cell of Saint Prohor Pcinjski, the most famous local saint in this part of the Balkans. Then, it has one of the biggest military monuments, Zebrnjak, devoted to the Serbian army in World War I, as well as a few churches with rich cultural and spiritual heritage. Among them is the church devoted to Saint George which is one of the most important examples of medieval Byzantine art in Macedonia. It was built in 1068 by the Emperor Roman IV Diogenes who wished to honour Saint Prohor and the cell in which he started his monastic life. The legend says that when the future

emperor once followed a wounded deer during a hunt, the bloody trail led him to the monk's cell. The monk pleaded not to shoot the deer and prophesised that Roman would soon become Byzantine Emperor. The prophecy came true. The grateful Emperor built the church devoted to Prohor Pchinjski. From that time only the facade walls and a very small fresco fragment remain, but they are a sufficient indication of how richly the old church was decorated. The present church was renewed by the Serbian king Stephan II Milutin (1282-1321) in 1313, which is written on a stone at the rear entrance. The church is a monumental building with five richly decorated domes.

The fresco painting dates back to 1318 and was done by the most renowned Thessaloniki masters Michael and Eutychios. They painted the St. Nagoricane

Church at the pinnacle of their careers. The church is a masterpiece of the new Palaeologue style, close to that of the royal workshop of Emperor Andronicus II. They have also painted the church devoted to the Mother of God in Ohrid, but it seems as if only the signatures of the painters connected the two churches. The forms in Nagoricane are smoother than the ones in the Ohrid church, the modelling is more diverse with rich colouristic relations and tonal strength, and the line of drawing is steadfast, with exceptionally rare wavering. In the composition of the Throne of the Mother of God in the conch, the Byzantine classicism is transformed: inlay of precious stones and wood carving are faithfully rendered by the painters. The faces of the saints are incarnadine with wide pale pink surfaces which almost unnoticeably fade into light green which then fade into dark brown around the edges. The faces are realistic and unusually expressive. In the altar one of the depictions of the Mother of God is the only fresco painted on stone and not on the wall. The donors (*kititors*) of the monastery, the Serbian King Milutin Stefan II with his wife Simonida, daughter of the Byzantine Emperor Tsar Andronik II Paleolog, are represented in the usual



way: they are accompanied by an image of St. George holding a sword, a gift to the king.

Byzantinologists agree that while working in this church Michael and Eutybios reached their artistic zenith, and that this is one of the most beautiful examples of the classical Byzantine style. Sadly, the church is in a precarious situation, humidity damaging the precious frescoes. Macedonian conservators hope to save the frescoes with the aid of foreign grants as they have already done in the Ohrid Church St. Mother of God Peribleptos decorated by the same artists.

