

ROSY-TRIANTAFYLLIA ANGELAKI ORCID: 0000-0002-5096-2211  
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

## Ideology in Nonfiction Picturebooks for Children and Museum Pamphlets

**Abstract:** The idea of a narrative approach to archaeological objects that Museum Studies have adopted derives from the Theory of Literature, which deals with a reconstruction of the past by means of accessing archaeological documentation or by making use of historical sources. Interpretations of the past, management of collective memory, introduction of nation building ideologies, experiential learning and contact with timeless values in ways that are fulfilling, are the goals set in both children's nonfiction books that deal with History and Archaeology and History or Archaeological museums' pamphlets. Based on scholarly work on Children's Literature Studies, History, Archaeology and Museum Studies, this article focuses on nonfiction picturebooks for children that reflect the contemporary museographic explorations and compare them to the educational pamphlet of the Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki, Hellas; Given that byzantine heritage was embraced as an integral part of Hellas' national heritage when the country's affinity to classical antiquity was disputed, therefore, since the early twentieth century Hellenic national museums perpetuate nationalist narratives, the article observes the manner in which information about the byzantine past and art is communicated and examines the authors' ideological orientation, as well as whether the narratives familiarize readers with interpretations of historical sources and archaeological artifacts.

**Keywords:** nonfiction picturebooks; museum pamphlets; historical knowledge; museum narratives; interpretations

### INTRODUCTION

By the end of the nineteenth century, the acceptance of Byzantium formed in the Hellenic national consciousness to support the notion that the Hellenic spirit is eternal. Specifically, the byzantine legacy was reassessed as an integral part of the Hellenic heritage after Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer's allegations that the Hellenes had no biological relation to the ancient Hellenes but were mixed with Slavs. Hellenes needed to prove the unbroken evolution of the Hellenic

nation mainly by claiming that the ancient Hellenic civilization had been reshaped as it met with Christianity during the Byzantine era (Liakos, 2008: 208). It was then that history and literary texts supported the threefold historical scheme that had been crystallized by the first decades of the twentieth century, according to which the byzantine heritage was an integral part of Hellas' national History. The byzantine era has been a source of inspiration to Hellenic writers, especially to those whose readership was children. Byzantium provided them with an opportunity to write books that highlighted the importance of Byzantine culture and its connection to Hellenism by bringing it to the forefront (Angelaki, 2018: 59–62).

Museums are informal learning environments accessible by the public. Their purpose is to recreate the historical past and by collecting and preserving naturfacts and artefacts and making them accessible for purposes of study, education or pleasure (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007: 2–4). Since they can construct social realities (Bennet, 1995: 59), Hellenic museums<sup>1</sup> supported the tripartite distinction of the Hellenic nation's main periods, which are ancient Hellenism, medieval Hellenism and modern Hellenism, through museum exhibitions (Gazi, 2011: 363). Thus, museums in Hellas can be considered an example where “alternative” narratives of the past were perpetuated and supported, according to which the continuity of the Hellenic nation is unbroken; at least this was the belief until 1999, when the country's museums and, particularly, the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens and Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki cast off the outmoded profile that had characterized them and overcame the aforementioned narrative (Konstantios, 2009: 122–23). Since 2000 instead, in view of the strong association of Byzantium and the Church and the fact that Orthodoxy was the cornerstone of Hellenic nationalism, curators exhibited the byzantine objects and the Christian heirlooms in ways that suggested a “self understanding and knowledge of a complex past” (Konstantios, 2007: 13) and not the dominant narrative of a continuous Hellenism.

#### THE RELATION BETWEEN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE, DISCOURSES OF POWER AND MUSEUM NARRATIVES

As the educational role of museums became a main concern and there was an increasing interest in finding ways to attract children to museums to acquaint them with the exhibits, Hellenic museums organized educational programs impacted by Dewey's and Vygotsky's theories (Tsakmakidou, 2018) and, under the influence of the “narrative turn”, developed new forms of publications, brochures and narrativized texts that encouraged young visitors to familiarize

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this article we refer to a specific type of museum, the History and Archaeology Museum; specifically, the Museum of Byzantine Culture of Thessaloniki.

themselves with objects on display; highlighting the fact that archaeological past is being quoted and interpreted in many ways (Alberti, et al 2016; Andreou & Kotsakis, 2002:102–103) museums professionals aimed to familiarize children with the artifacts in such a way that they could understand and interpret them in accordance to their own personal experiences and to think of themselves as “readers” of History (Baron, 2014: 35). The idea of a textual approach to archaeological objects adopted by Museum Studies has derived from the Theory of Literature, which also deals with the re-creation of the past on the basis of archaeological documentation and by making use of historical sources. It is, in fact, classified amongst the plethora of existing historical sources that help teach children to evaluate the validity of historical sources (Trisno et al, 2020: 1146).

Teachers who were supposed to lead the educational visits at the museums were to follow the instructions of the pamphlets. These types of narratives often look like iconotexts and/or sequential graphic narratives and are produced as part of the museums’ regular, periodical or special programs and are based on a dynamic interaction between text and image, in the same way as children’s books. Their aim is to help children gain a better understanding of the recreated reality as well as the history of the artifacts with which they have the opportunity to interact; they also contribute to the consolidation of a distinctive national identity as they are considered to be carriers of national, social, historical and political agendas (Sakali, 2012: 5).

Contemporary nonfiction books for children that deal with History, Archaeology, Religion, Cultures etc., are visually attractive and aesthetically pleasing books, as book designers “pay as much attention, sometimes more, to what readers look at as to what they read” (Meek, 1996: 44). Just like the museum pamphlets, they provide examples that portray historical “truth” visually and illustrate not only the artistic styles of the past but also the artistic resources found in museums, in order to introduce young readers to the world of visual art and to the history of a certain era (Sipe, 2001).

Throughout the last three decades, nonfiction has been earning a very strong place in the premises of Children’s Literature (Swanson, 2002: 53). Today, nonfiction children’s picturebooks is considered to be a hybrid form of literature that encourages children to think critically about the world (Sanders, 2018) while the authors, consciously or not, express their ideology since reality is perceived subjectively (Panaou & Yannicopoulou, 2021: 55–56, 64). The authors’ and illustrators’ subjectivity is acknowledged especially in the case of nonfiction books that employ a variety of techniques wherein the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity is represented, the past is reconstructed and objects of national symbolism are attended to (Angelaki, 2021).

Since nonfiction picturebooks can possibly enforce children’s engagement with artifacts and share many similar characteristics with museum pamphlets

(Dinç & Alaca, 2021: 237; Sakali, *ibid.*: 119), it is of interest to examine the function of children's nonfiction picturebooks and museum pamphlets as cultural and ideological tools, as carriers of social representations, as well as narratives that public archaeology produces within the context of museum education. This study provides a critical overview of previously published studies on Children's Literature, children's learning in museums, museum storytelling, visitor studies and learning History and Archaeology in early childhood. The article focuses on three nonfiction picturebooks titled as *Byzantine Art. A study guide for children* (1990), *Studying Byzantine Icons* (2008) and *A walk in the Byzantine era* (2011) written by the famous Hellenic author Mariza Decastro.

The selected books present museums as "storytellers" and objects as texts that "speak to the eyes" and the narrative framework they are placed within is viewed as that which "breathes life into" artefacts and historical and archaeological objects (Schwartz, 2008); they are examined in parallel with the printed material of the educational program of the Museum of Byzantine Culture of Thessaloniki, *Getting to Know Byzantine Icons* (MBC 2004), in order to compare the narratives' style, content and purpose and to evaluate whether the authors encourage readers to take an active role in creating meaning, on the basis of the museum experience offered by the texts. Recognizing that interpretation of the past is affected by present ideology (Shanks & Tilley, 2016:14); that nonfiction picturebooks communicate ideology (Angelaki, 2023:31); and that museum and museum narratives, regardless of which mediators are presented through, support ideologies too (Coffee, 2006), the article will also discuss whether the material being studied presents the holy icons in way that promotes the concept of the timeless continuity of Hellenism.

#### NONFICTION PICTUREBOOKS.

The primary aim of nonfiction books for children is to inform readers about the world they live in and to present facts or data through indexes, diagrams, tables of content, maps, pictures, sketches or photographs and descriptions that support children's learning. They are characterized by scientific validity and creativity in the use of language and it is vital that they encourage children's curiosity (Angelaki, *ibid.*:16; Kotaman & Tekin, 2016: 2). Typically, this genre is categorized in nonfiction books and books where fact and fiction are intertwined and share common characteristics with literary narrative texts.

However, the combination of fictional and factual elements that has been occurring with greater frequency in contemporary nonfiction picturebooks for children (von Merveldt, 2018:232) may be based on the assumption that

young readers can better experience a situation as being “real” as well as process the information more easily, if their imagination, which is activated through fictional elements, comes into play. Additionally, the trending “fictionalizing” as an authors’ stylistic option is understandable considering that the information they want to impart to children does not exist in a vacuum, but is comprised of events governed by a cause-and-effect relationship (Martinez & Nash, 1998: 78; Nora, 1978: 125). Thus, contemporary writers exploit narrative elements and techniques they previously used in literary texts. After all, the interpretation of events, phenomena, achievements etc., all contain the element of subjectivity and for their construction some type of representation is necessary (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003: 129, 138).

Although this trend, on the one hand, impedes the assignation of a clear-cut definition of the particular textual genre being discussed, on the other hand, it is possible that it motivates theorists and critics of Children’s Literature to devise classifications for these books. Of the many classifications that have periodically been recommended worldwide, the author of this article suggests the following categorization<sup>2</sup>: (i) Nonfiction illustrated books, (ii) literary nonfiction picturebooks labelled as nonfiction, wherein fiction and conveyance of knowledge are combined and narrative elements found in literary fiction are encompassed, and (iii) nonfiction picturebooks where the sketches have both an educational and an “artistic” (Grilly, 2021) character, aiding the reader to understand the provided information (Angelaki, 2023:33).

### THE INFORMATIONAL PAMPHLET

The adoption of storytelling in museums, usually presented through exhibition narratives, has been introduced as another means to contextualize artefacts as specific events in the museum’s school programs and by including personal stories related to historical events in exhibitions. These stories generate personal connections between visitors and content (Bedford, 2001; Pujol, et al, 2013:96). Additionally, since the contribution of museums in the educational process of young visitors, the production of printed material and the creation of a museum language through which heritage professionals could show children that “they were respected” and “perceived as peers and not as inferiors” (Andrews & Asia, 1979: 229) has increased. Museums’ narrative texts are discernible as informational texts and vary in both form and

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<sup>2</sup> The categorization arose in the context of the author’s unpublished Post- doctoral thesis titled *Byzantium in Children’s informational books. Comparative and ideological approach. Digital educational scenario* which was written between 2018–2022 in the Department of School of Early Childhood Education, Education Department, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Hellas.

content (e.g., pamphlets, catalogs, learning packages, guides, texts on walls, captions), depending on the type of the museum, the educational activities involved and/or the amount of money that is available for their production. Regardless the type of narrative, though, the museums' ideology regarding policy is made quite clear. (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994: 124–125; Frykman, 2009: 299–319).

Specifically, this type of material is categorized in (i) the pamphlets that are similar to children's nonfiction picturebooks, as they have both the quality features of a well-published commercial book and the typical structure of a children's nonfiction picturebook, (ii) informational pamphlets or worksheets and small museum guide books that motivate children during the educational program to explore the museum's space, solve exercises and express themselves through writing and/or sketching, and (iii) illustrated worksheets with explanatory texts that assist children in discovering objects in the museum, answering questions, reinforcing imparted information, constructing objects, etc. (Decastro 2010: 400; Plati, 2010: 392).

### DECASTROS' BOOKS AS A CASE STUDY

#### *BYZANTINE ART. A STUDY GUIDE FOR CHILDREN*

According to the proposed categorization, this book falls into the category of nonfiction picturebooks. Reading *Byzantine Art. A study guide for children* (fig.1), readers are encouraged to perceive artefacts as texts since, "byzantine art, like any other form of art, can be read"<sup>3</sup> (Decastro, 1990: 9). The author employs many narrative techniques suitable to the understanding and perception of the children she addresses to, so as to present the byzantine culture as one of the milestones of European cultural heritage. Byzantine art is presented as communicative event, carrier of meaning and evidence of the past that serve the management of memory (Hamilakis & Labanyi, 2008: 17), but nowhere in the text it is implied that Hellenes were the heirs of the byzantine legacy, which was the backbone of national master narratives. The images play a dominant role in the narrative emphasizing the interplay between verbal and visual codes and serve as cultural documentation. According to the third-person narrator, the pictures of the holy icons "are didactic narratives that used to tell worshippers everything they needed to know about their faith" (Decastro, *ibid*: 20), while for the illiterate ones, they constituted "an alternative form of literature" (*ibid*, 24).

The narrator uses explanatory and simple language to explain to children that byzantine art is divided into the Early Byzantine, the Middle Byzantine and Late Byzantine period, as well as to clarify that the term "byzantine" wasn't

<sup>3</sup> The translation is done by the author.

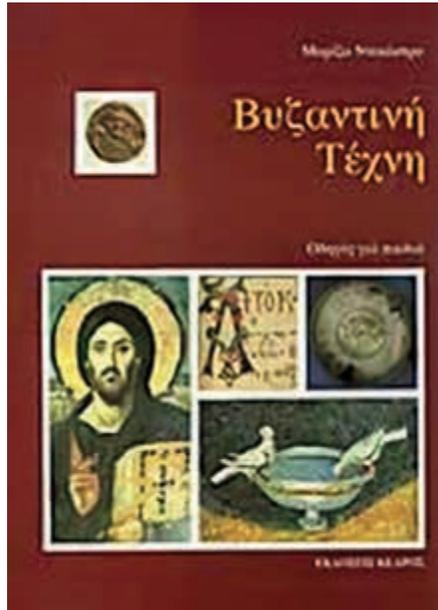


Fig. 1

used back then, since “in the consciousness of the Byzantines the Empire was perceived as the continuation of the Roman Empire” (ibid, 11). Apart from helping them to gradually grasp the notion of historical continuity, the narrator also informs them that “byzantine art is mainly religious” (ibid: 9), “but also special”, since the hagiographers “whose talent was Godsent” (ibid:15), “produced the holy icons so as to speak to the worshippers’ soul” (ibid :19).

The text provides information regarding the Macedonian and Cretan schools of icon painting , “the byzantine perception of the universe”, “which quickly led Byzantines to build churches with a dome, symbolizing the celestial sphere” (ibid: 23), as well as useful details concerning the brushstrokes of the hagiographers or the origin and symbolism of the colors they used- information supported through the the visual code, too. Also the author, in an effort to enable children to connect the past with the present mentions through the narrative voice that the byzantine manuscripts, codices Psalters and Hymn books “were illustrated”, for example with full-page portraits of the Saints or the evangelists, “just like contemporary informational history picturebooks” (ibid: 28). A detailed catalog of the byzantine frescoes, wall paintings, and hagiographies, which are presented as objects of worship and described as ‘icons that reflect the soul of the Byzantines’ (Decastro, ibid: 12), can be found at the end of the book, along with an index and a glossary. Children can refer to these resources to address any questions related to what they have read. Additionally, activities and puzzles are provided, formulated to assess the knowledge acquired by the children, help them express themselves creatively, and develop their historical imagination.

## STUDYING BYZANTINE ICONS

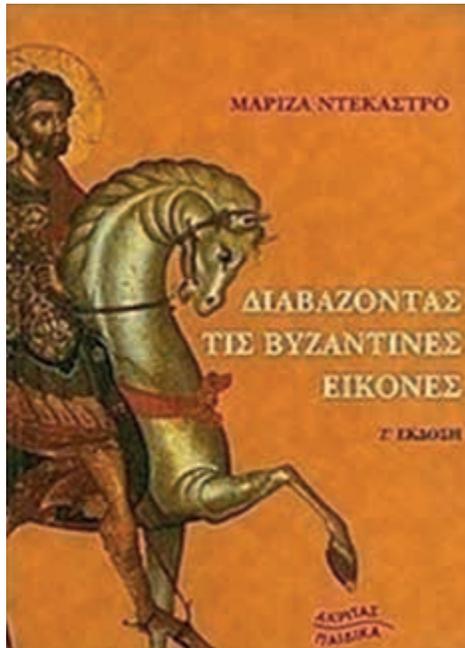


Fig. 2

In this nonfiction picturebook (fig. 2) the byzantine hagiography is viewed “not merely as painting, but as a divine experience” and, therefore, byzantine icons are presented as objects embedded in cultural significance (Decastro, 2008: 5). The author chooses a playful way to organize the content of the book and to present to children several Saints of the Orthodox Church, while helping them learn about the calendar months; each section of the book corresponds to one of the twelve months and includes an archeological and religious story, which concisely and pleasantly narrates the lives of the presented Saints.

The book contains terminology relative to the byzantine art but at the same time accessible to children. Even though the information provided in the text concerning byzantine architecture, hagiography and mosaics, the Cretan School of Painting or the fresco technique and the Iconoclastic controversy is scientifically valid, Decastro makes use of narrative techniques traditionally associated with fiction ;for example, she appeals to her readers’ sentiment, when describing the “hardships and sufferings” of John “the prophet of the desert”, after he fell victim to the schemes of “the wily Herodias” and “her enchanting daughter” (ibid: 8). She thus emphasizes the fact the nonfiction picturebooks are hybrid creations. The merging of fact and fiction in children’s nonfiction picturebooks, typically marketed as nonfiction, is criticized primarily for heightening readers’

disorientation (Colman, 1999: 217; Freedman, 1998: 225). However, in this case, it cannot be assumed that children would become so engrossed in Decastro's artful prose and imaginative writing that they would be unable to distinguish between reality and fiction.

The pictures are integrated into the narrative flow, explaining and reinforcing the text. The symmetry between verbal and visual narration becomes evident either on the book's double-page spreads, where one side holds the text and the other showcases the image, or on pages where corresponding illustrative inserts are placed alongside short paragraphs. The hagiographic style reminiscent of the byzantine period is encountered even in the decorative vignettes. It's worth noting that the pictures emit reverence, melancholy, moderation, awe and self-sacrifice. This could be considered to be in accordance with the text, where a rather minor severity is found due to the Hellenic archaic polytonic orthography<sup>4</sup> that Decastro chooses to use, arguably in order to lend yet another historical element to her text, as well as to spark the children's interest in the development of the written form of the Hellenic language (Apostolidou 1999: 347; Barton, 2008: 65). This way it is verified that ideology in nonfiction picturebooks and in literary nonfiction picturebooks is communicated both through verbal text and illustration. However, at this point it should be stressed that the fact that the narrator states that the "byzantine letters and numbers were the heritage of the Ancient Hellenes" (Decastro, *ibid*: 41), does not indicate the author's effort to refute Fallmerayer's theory and present the byzantine heritage as an indispensable theoretical acquirement for the modern Hellas' aspirations.

Finally, every chapter in the book is followed by a section called "Processing", which includes activities based on discovery learning, encouraging children's critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Readers are also motivated to creatively express their thoughts by writing stories so that to contextualise the actions of the Byzantine worshippers by explaining and evaluating their actions, for instance the fact that icons were attributed with extraordinary powers and healed the sick or were carried into the battlefields, and to develop a sense of empathy through imagining the past (Savenije & de Bruijn, 2017). They are also motivated to engage themselves in arts and crafts projects relevant to the represented objects, a strategy used by museums as a valuable prerequisite for sharing knowledge. This section also includes a questionnaire that checks the readers' knowledge. Additional information is provided by the writer about the historical

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<sup>4</sup> While the simple monotonic orthography introduced in 1982 corresponds to modern Hellenic phonology, and requires only two diacritics (*tonos* to indicate stress, and *diaeresis* to indicate a diphthong), the Hellenic polytonic orthography, which was used since the Hellenistic period, required seven diacritics, notating Ancient Hellenic phonology: (i) the acute accent (*oxeia* – sharp or high), (ii) the grave accent (*bareia* – heavy or low), (iii) the circumflex (*perispomene* – twisted around), (iv) the rough breathing (*dasi pneuma*), (v) the smooth breathing (*psilon pneuma*), (vi) the *diaeresis* to indicate diphthong, and (vii) the *iota* subscript t (*hypogegrammene* written under).

books she studied to gather the provided information, as well as the current exhibition locations of each presented artifact. This may aim to encourage children to visit museums and archaeological sites.

*A WALK IN THE BYZANTINE ERA*

This nonfiction picturebook (fig. 3) promotes children's interaction with the legacy of the divine art with which Byzantine Empire endowed the world, clarifying in a simple and explanatory way that Byzantium was a cultural and political powerhouse influenced by Christianity and that it produced enormous artistic output, focused on piety and religious virtuosity. For example, children are informed that byzantine jewelry had to observe strict religious rules and standards and the Cross was the ultimate jewel that the Byzantines wore to profess their faith. It could be claimed that Decastro's intent is to underline the semi-otic and narratological reading that antiquarian encounters offer, as she states that her book "can serve as a guide for readers not only to approach the byzantine archaeological artifacts, but also to hear the stories they narrate" (Decastro, 2011:11). The pictures eloquently succeed one another and depict each historical and cultural artifact presented in the text.



Fig. 3

In the preface, the curator of the Byzantine Antiquities of Athens at the time mentions that byzantine art "can be 'read and re-read'" (ibid: 9). Then the author, through the narrative voice, taking into consideration the existing knowledge

of the children she addresses, simplifies historical information and ventures in a pleasant way to transform the byzantine mosaics, frescoes, icons and the temples into “speaking” archaeological knowledge analogically to the Christian art of Byzantium, that “teaches worshippers whatever the sacred texts teach” (ibid). Considering that museums reinvent and reconstruct our understanding of past periods, the process and reasons for “establishing a museum in Athens where byzantine artifacts would be preserved and exhibited” (ibid: 9) is also explained.

Notably, the author does not imply the dominant narrative of a continuous Hellenism and through the narrative voice underlines that the data about past periods and actions are incomplete, contradictory and ambiguous and that historians and archaeologists interpret individual pieces of evidence and fit it into coherent and “truthful” stories (Bounia & Nikonanou, 2008). For example, aiming to underline that heritage professionals often conceptualize, contextualize and interpret events and circumstances of the past and, as a result, there are multiple inconsistent narratives shaped by powerful institutions and political or religious interests that can be told for certain archaeological materials, the narrator focuses on a specific marble artifact and mentions that “it might represent Orpheus, the mythical musician worshiped by the Ancient Hellenes”. In the following phrase, the narrator wonders “whether it symbolizes Christ, who died and was then resurrected and enchanted people with his words” (Decastro, ibid: 20).

Indicating that archaeology is a semiotic enterprise engaged in the study of meaning-making practices, in the adjacent page readers are prompted to observe and wonder who the depicted young shepherd might be, while being informed that “archaeologists have linked the specific relic to what John writes in his Gospel” (ibid: 21). Since the symbol of the Holy Cross was deeply embedded in Orthodox tradition and in byzantine art, the narrator goes on to emphasize that many findings were “**rebaptized**” (ibid: 23) after Christianity was established as the official state religion. This word written in bold font that is supposed to make children aware, on the one hand, that Byzantium’s ideology and culture were heavily permeated by Christianity and, on the other hand, that heritage professionals often rely on the so-called “archaeological imagination” and take into account the religious and moral values that existed in a certain period- let alone the byzantine era, where the culture and art of the Empire were profoundly influenced by the Christian religion-, so as “to recreate the world behind the ruin in the land, to reanimate the people behind the sherd of antique pottery” (Shanks, 1992:25).

#### GETTING TO KNOW BYZANTINE ICONS

The pamphlet of the Museum of Byzantine Culture of Thessaloniki (fig. 4) uses spatial, narrative and material engagements in order to facilitate children’s processing of artifacts (Yohlin, 2012: 261), just as in the case of the aforementioned picturebooks. It is included in the Museum’s educational folder and is

addressed to teachers of Hellenic pre-primary and first-grade primary school that take part in a specific educational program, which is designed based not only on the permanent exhibition which promotes the aesthetic qualities of byzantine icons that are restituted as part of medieval European art, but also on the perception that museum spaces are pedagogical spaces with an anthropocentric character that should provide interactive and multisensory experiences and enable the visitors to experience the exhibits (Hod-Shemer & Sher, 2021:43; Nikonanou, 2009: 38).

Through its artful prose the pamphlet offers information and enjoyment to readers, whose imagination is sparked and their engagement with the exhibits (e.g., byzantine icons painted on wood with egg tempera and gold leaf surfaced with gesso and linen that survived the Iconoclastic vehemence) is supported (Nakou, 2000: 237). The folder, besides the teacher's book includes the program's material (pictures of the byzantine icons as well as entertaining puzzles), contained within a small case that the teachers picks up upon their arrival at the Museum. It also supplies descriptions of the educational program, which is supposed to take place in the 10<sup>th</sup> room of the Museum, where the icons are exhibited in the same order as the text presents them.

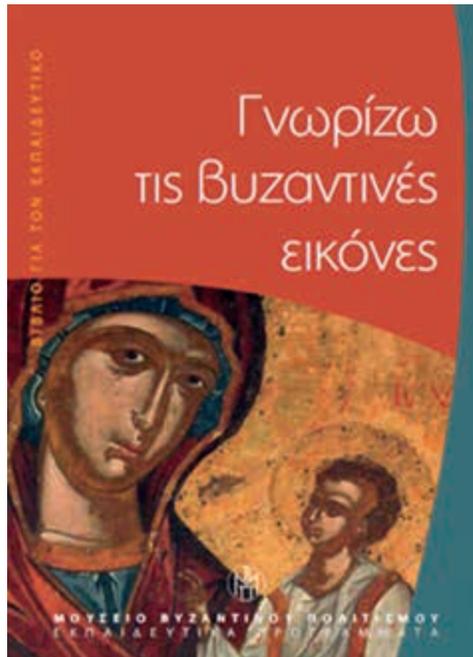


Fig.4

The pictures of the byzantine icons become an extension of the pamphlets' text and function in relation to words in didactic panels – just as the icons that are exhibited at the Museum, which “are caught up in, best explained by, and most

enjoyable in relation to a context of verbal language” (Nodelman, 2016: 16). In the exhibition narrative it is clarified that the byzantine icons are not simply a painting of an artist, but they were considered to have divine properties and were also objects of ritual veneration.

The suggested activities in the pamphlet, according to the editors’ note, aim to facilitate children’s historical understandings by developing more empathetic perceptions of the Byzantines. Taking under consideration “the value of learning through the senses” (Hooper- Greenhill, 2007:374) as well as the object-based learning, the Museum’s educators organized activities to encourage children to construct meaning by way of interacting with the byzantine icons and, generally, with the museum objects (jewelry, vestments, coins, medallions, etc.). The activities include narration, puzzles, drawing, book-reading, games of mimicry, shadow play theatre, etc. (fig. 5). They are also developed based on discovery learning, a type of learning that is mainly applied in games exploring museum space, and are carried out in an effort to approach museum exhibits and to get to know the exhibition environment in general (Kanari et al, 2022).



Fig. 5

Regarding the suggested activities, it could be argued that questions such as “how do we use the byzantine icons today?”, demonstrate the editors’ intent to help children to make sense of the world and, by realizing that veneration of icons is actively practiced to date as a strong expression of Eastern Orthodox faith, to become historically conscious and be able to make connections

between interpreting the past, understanding the present and having a perspective of the future (Dixon & Hales, 2014: 7). It should be underlined that nowhere in the pamphlet is it implied that Byzantium is a vital component of Hellenic national History, even though it mentioned that it maintained Hellenic as its official language and the language of the Church. Children are motivated to learn more about this by studying the relevant sources the editors propose at the end of the booklet along with the citations of various books they have consulted.

According to many museum educators, one of the best ways to prepare a child for visiting a museum is through books, specifically historical novels, the genre of travel literature and informational books (Anagnostopoulos, 1999: 118, 139–140). Conversely, the pamphlet encourages children's exposure to literature; the suggested activities include the reading of a well-known Hellenic author's picturebook, Eugene Trivizas' *Young Hermes* (fig. 6). The book's plot is based on Bennet's argument that "it is through movement, bodily acts, walking and touch that museum visitors create meaning" (1995: 37). Consequently, the reframing of the museum visitors as active meaning makers through their interaction with artefacts and each other in the Museum is promoted through the pamphlet and, indirectly, through Children's Literature. According to the pamphlets' instructions, the teacher can ask children to comment on the content of the narrative, connecting it to their own experience at the Museum.

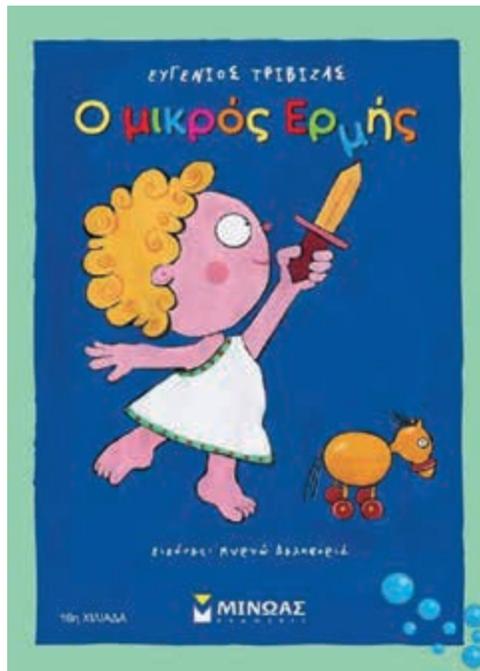


Fig. 6

It is also interesting to mention that the Museum of Byzantine Culture has created the activity “Playing with the Museum’s Vessels”, a digital initiative that aims to connect museum encounters, narrative engagements and Literature. Visiting the following website <https://www.mbp.gr/education/paizoume-me-ta-angeia-tou-mouseiou/>, children and their parents can learn about the shapes, names and uses of byzantine ceramic vessels, relate them to their modern counterparts in their homes and send the museum educators their photos. Children are also motivated to create narratives and write their own limericks and send them to the educators, too, after having read the provided information about this specific genre on the website or/and the relevant sources recommended by the museum educators, who also mention on the website the famous Hellenic poet George Seferis, awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1963 for his “outstanding collection of limericks for children”, that was published “four years after the poet’s death” (Politis & Yannicopoulou, 2023:12).

## CONCLUSIONS

This article focused on the comparison of Mariza Decastro’s three nonfiction picturebooks for children about byzantine icons to the educational pamphlet of the Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki, Hellas. In both types of texts, it seems that the narratives share common characteristics with exhibition narratives and serve as cultural tools shaping children’s beliefs about the byzantine historical past, while enhancing the reader’s comprehension of how the world has evolved over time in a historical context. The byzantine icons are represented both as historical and archaeological objects and as channels of engagement and learning and children are encouraged to perceive the Museum (and, in general, museums and archaeological sites) as informal learning environments. Both in Decastro’s books and in the pamphlet, children are prompted to learn about the byzantine icons while expressing themselves creatively through the art of narration and different types of game-playing and to connect the provided information with their background knowledge and experiences. They are also motivated to read books and actively engage with Literature.

It could be argued that even though nonfiction picturebooks and museum pamphlets that deal with History, Archaeology and culture are capable of conveying narratives generally viewed as definitive, neither Decastro’s books nor the Museum’s pamphlet promote Hellas’ unified national narrative; on the contrary, it could be claimed that Decastro motivates children to question “authoritative and objective truths” about the byzantine past and to consider the possible motivations of particular versions (Schwebel, 2011: 4–6). Additionally, apart from ensuring that in her book the represented artifacts are not viewed as emblematic of normative narratives, stressing the fact that

the archaeological imagination is crucial to the shaping of modern Hellenic society, she also exploits narrative elements and techniques usually appearing in literary texts to more effectively convey historical and archaeological knowledge. Thus it could be claimed that she verifies scholars' arguments about how hybridity can be considered as a common feature in contemporary children's nonfiction informational picturebooks (Angelaki, 2023: 32–33; McClure, 2003: 80–93).

Nevertheless, both Decastro and the museum educators may omit certain aspects of byzantine religious philosophy, leaving the complete truth untold; specifically, although Christianity and the Hellenic language may have been the fundamental pillars of Byzantium, it's worth noting that magic and superstitions also played a significant role during that era, although they did not conform to the dogmatic framework of the Christian Orthodox faith at the time of the Empire (Angelaki, 2018: 156). Perhaps these forms of religiosity should be taken into consideration when presenting Byzantines' religious beliefs in children's narratives.

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