

# Functions of Mountains in Visual Composition of Christian Paintings in the Chora Church

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**Abstract:** This paper clarifies the functions of mountains in the visual composition of the Christian paintings in the Chora Church. We enumerated the elements of each painting, traced their outlines, and made “explanatory drawings.” In each explanatory drawing, we divided each painting into scenes, which we analyzed and discussed to determine the relationships between the mountains and the backgrounds of the people. In the Christian paintings in the Chora Church, the mountains comprise the area with special meaning and divide one painting into different scenes and one scene into different areas. In the paintings, the mountains are drawn as “frames” that divide the world.

## 1. Introduction

In Europe, people<sup>1</sup> were historically expressed as the main theme of paintings. Paintings whose themes expressed the beauty of nature were first categorized as a genre after the 16th century. However, even before that, nature was painted not as the main theme but in the background or along with something else. What meaning does nature have in paintings before it was recognized as a potential main theme?

In the medieval age, Christian paintings comprised the majority of European paintings. Christianity profoundly affected people in medieval Europe and supported a world view. Sacred art vividly reflected the mindsets of the people. Christian paintings of medieval Europe provide a glimpse of the era's view of nature.

We studied the Christian paintings in the Chora Church<sup>2</sup> because they are masterpieces of Byzantine art and were painted in the center of the Christianity world in medieval Europe. This paper clarifies the functions of mountains in the visual composition of these paintings to identify the medieval European view of nature. Clarifying the functions of mountains in visual composition leads to learning their meaning in medieval Europe and the fundamental relationship between people and nature. This research offers numerous suggestions about the view of nature in medieval Europe.

## 2. Related Works and Position of Research

There is much historical research on Christian paintings in medieval Europe. Underwood (1966-75) and Ousterhout (2002) are well-known works on Christian paintings in the Chora Church.

In European paintings, much research on paintings has focused on the post-Renaissance where nature was drawn, and most of these paintings are drawn in perspective. In contrast, the paintings in the Chora Church and many other Byzantine paintings are not drawn in perspective, but two-dimensionally.

Their visual composition is greatly different. In this context, to the best of our knowledge, no research exists on the functions of mountains in the visual composition of Christian Paintings in the Chora Church. And, many previous studies say that nature was not a beautiful landscape in medieval Europe, but there are many unclear points. This research consider medieval European view of nature in detail and visually.

## 3. Research Method

### 3.1. Analysis Object

In the Chora Church, mosaics are drawn in the naos and in the inner and outer narthexes. Frescoes are drawn in the parekklesion. In the naos, there are only three paintings, including “Jesus Christ.” The cycles of the lives of the Virgin can be found in the inner narthex, and the cycles of the lives of Christ can be found in the outer narthex. Other paintings, including the Old Testament or “Christ in Judgment,” are drawn in the parekklesion<sup>3</sup>. Here, based on “The Art of the Kariye Camii” (Ousterhout, 2002), which counts 94 Christian paintings of the Chora Church, we analyzed 16 paintings where mountains<sup>4</sup> are drawn (Figs. 1-16)<sup>5</sup>.

### 3.2. Analysis Outline

We enumerated the elements<sup>6</sup> of each painting, traced their outlines, and made “explanatory drawings.” People, mountains, architecture, trees, animals, and so forth are drawn as the elements; people are the main themes in all 16 paintings. Mountains, which also occupy a large area in each painting, are drawn in parallel with the other elements or as background behind other elements. We divided each explanatory drawing into scenes based on the narrative to determine the relationships among the elements. Next, we analyzed and discussed the functions of mountains in the visual composition to see the relationships between the mountains and people's backgrounds<sup>7</sup>.

In explanatory drawings, such numbers as “①” indicate different scenes. When more than one mountain is drawn on a single painting, they are called mountain I, mountain II, and so forth.

#### 4. Analysis

Next we enumerate the elements of each painting, trace their outlines, and make explanatory drawings. We divide each explanatory drawing into scenes (Figs. 1-16).

In Fig. 1, “Joseph Dreaming; Journey to Bethlehem,” Joseph and the Virgin journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the Roman census. While asleep, Joseph is visited by an angel (scene ①), the Virgin and a companion have a conversation (scene ②), and Joseph, the Virgin, and a man make a journey (scene ③). The buildings on the left of the mountain show Nazareth. In Fig. 2, “Nativity of Christ,” the birth of Christ is drawn. The Virgin is at the center of mountain I, and Christ is inside a cave in mountain I (scene ①). Christ in the bath and two women are at the lower left of mountain I (scene ②), Joseph is asleep at the lower right of mountain I (scene ③), angels are at the left of mountain II (scene ④), and shepherds are visited by an angel on the right of mountain II (scene ⑤). Fig. 2 is “displaying standard Byzantine features” (Ousterhout, 2002, p. 49). In Fig. 3, “Journey of the Magi; Magi before Herod,” the Magi ride horses from the East to Jerusalem by following the star (scene ①) and lay gifts before Herod (scene ②). In Fig. 4, “Flight of Elizabeth,” a soldier threatens to kill Elizabeth and John with his sword for “the Massacre of the Innocents,”<sup>8</sup> but they miraculously escape when a mountain opens up and hides them. Elizabeth and John are inside a cave in the mountain (scene ①). In Fig. 5, “Joseph Dreaming; Return of Holy Family,” an angel informs Joseph in a dream that it is safe to return from Egypt to Palestine (scene ①). Christ, the Virgin, and Joseph journey to Nazareth (scene ②). The buildings on the right show Nazareth.

In Fig. 6, “John the Baptist Bearing Witness,” John gestures toward Christ and proclaims Christ’s divinity to the people (scene ①). In Fig. 7, “Temptation of Christ,” the Devil challenges Christ to prove his divinity by changing stones into bread (scene ①). Christ is offered the kingdoms of the world (scene ②). The Devil takes Christ to a mountaintop to show him the kingdoms (scene ③). The Devil challenges Christ to prove his divinity by casting himself down unharmed (scene ④). In Fig. 8, “Christ Healing a Blind and Dumb Man,” Christ with St. Peter see a blind and dumb man. Christ gestures toward the afflicted man and heals him (scene ①). A mountain is drawn on their right. In Fig. 9, “Two Blind Men,” Christ and two apostles see two blind men. Christ gestures toward the seated blind men and heals them (scene ①). A mountain is drawn on their left. In Fig. 10, “Jacob Wrestling Angel; Jacob’s Ladder,” Jacob wrestles with the angel (scene ①) and dreams of a ladder leading to heaven that angels ascend and descend (scene ②). In Fig. 11, “Moses and the Burning Bush,” at the foot of Mt. Sinai, God appears to Moses who removes his sandals before the Burning Bush. An angel, Christ and the Virgin is above the bush (scene ①). In Fig. 12, “Bearing of the Ark of the Covenant,” three priests bear the Ark, represented as a triangular-shaped box, to Solomon’s temple. The temple is inside a cave in the mountain (scene ①). In Fig. 13, “Bearing of the Sacred Vessels,” two priests carry the sacred vessels, the seven-branched candelstick, and the stamnos of manna (scene ①). In Fig. 14, “Solomon and All Israel,” Solomon, the king of Israel, leads the elders of Israel (scene ①). In Fig. 15, “Raising of Widow’s Son,” Christ sees a funeral cortege at the town of Nain. Christ raises the widow’s son who is wrapped in a sheet. The buildings on the right show Nain (scene ①). In Fig. 16, “Anastasis,” Christ descends into hell to redeem the souls of the righteous people of the Old Testament led by John. Christ grabs Adam and Eve by their wrists and lifts the people from hell (scene ①).



Fig. 1 Joseph Dreaming; Journey to Bethlehem: (mosaic) picture (left) explanatory drawing (right)

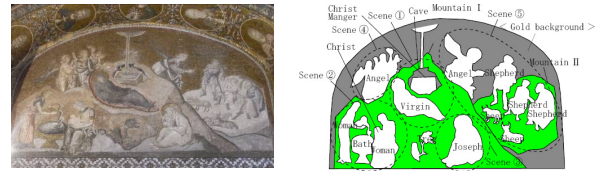


Fig. 2 Nativity of Christ: (mosaic) picture (left) explanatory drawing (right)

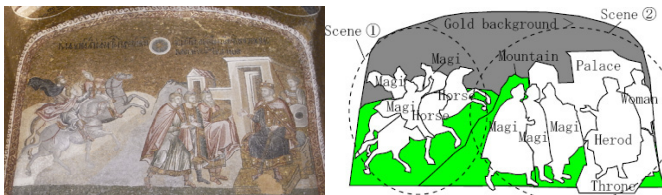


Fig. 3 Journey of the Magi; Magi before Herod: (mosaic) picture (left) explanatory drawing (right)

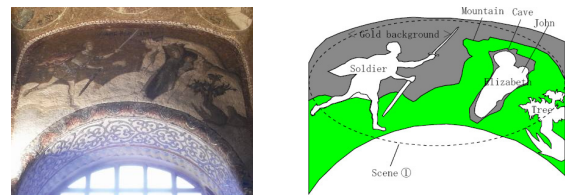


Fig. 4 Flight of Elizabeth: (mosaic) picture (left) explanatory drawing (right)

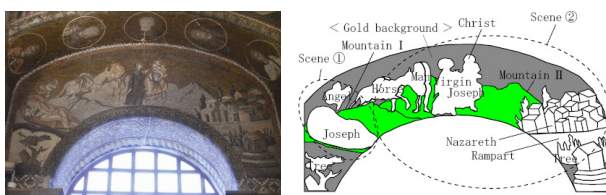


Fig. 5 Joseph Dreaming; Return of Holy Family: (mosaic) picture (left) explanatory drawing (right)



Fig. 6 John the Baptist Bearing Witness: (mosaic) picture (left) explanatory drawing (right)



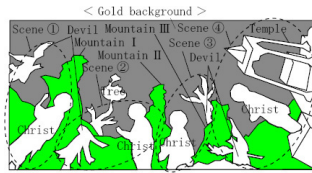


Fig. 7 Temptation of Christ: (mosaic) picture (left) explanatory drawing (right)

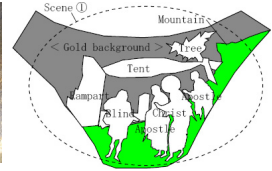


Fig. 8 Christ Healing a Blind and Dumb Man: (mosaic) picture (left) explanatory drawing (right)

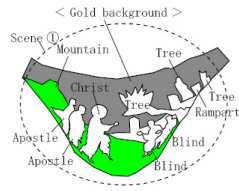


Fig. 9 Two Blind Men: (mosaic) picture (left) explanatory drawing (right)

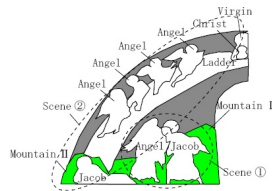


Fig. 10 Jacob Wrestling Angel; Jacob's Ladder: (fresco) picture (left) explanatory drawing (right)

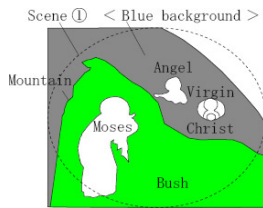


Fig. 11 Moses and the Burning Bush: (fresco) picture (left) explanatory drawing (right)

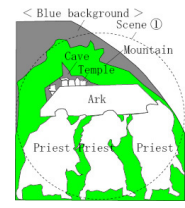


Fig. 12 Bearing of the Ark of the Covenant: (fresco) picture (left) explanatory drawing (right)

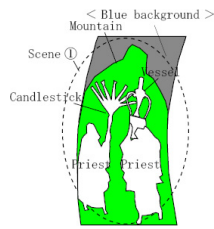


Fig. 13 Bearing of the Sacred Vessels: (fresco) picture (left) explanatory drawing (right)

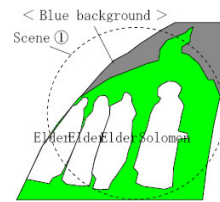


Fig. 14 Solomon and All Israel: (fresco) picture (left) explanatory drawing (right)

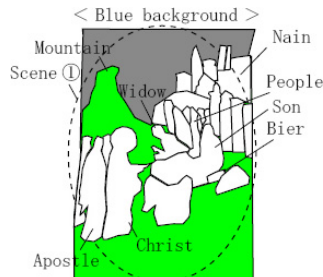


Fig. 15 Raising of Widow's Son: (fresco) picture (left) explanatory drawing (right)

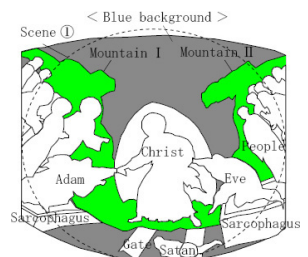


Fig. 16 Anastasis: (fresco) picture (left) explanatory drawing (right)

## 5. Results and Discussion

Here, we analyze and discuss the functions of mountains in the visual composition to see the relationships between the mountain and the people's backgrounds. A list of the analysis objects and the functions of mountains in the visual composition in each painting are summarized in Table 1.

### 5.1. Mountains that comprise an area

In Figs. 1-7 and 10-16, a mountain is in a person's background.

In Fig. 1, the mountain is in the background behind the Virgin and Joseph who are on a dangerous journey from

Nazareth to Bethlehem. The mountain is in the background behind Joseph who is listening to an angel. In Fig. 2, mountain I is in the background behind the newborn Christ, the Virgin, Joseph, and a woman. The mountain seems to protect Christ inside the cave. Mountain II is in the background behind the shepherds who are listening to an angel. In Fig. 3, the mountain is in the background behind the Magi on a dangerous journey from the East to Jerusalem. In Fig. 4, the mountain is in the background behind Elizabeth and John who are in front of the soldier. The mountain again seems to offer protection, this time to Elizabeth and John inside the cave. In Fig. 5, mountain I is in the background behind Joseph who are listening to an angel. In Fig. 6, mountain I is in the background behind the people in front

Table 1: List of Analysis Objects and Results

Fig	Title		Functions of Mountains in Visual Composition	
1	Joseph Dreaming; Journey to Bethlehem	Mountain	comprise an area of the Virgin and Joseph Divides scene ① into areas of mountain and gold background Divides scene ③ into areas of mountain and gold background Divides scenes ② and ③	Mountains that comprise an area Mountains that divide one scene into areas Mountains that divide one scene into areas Mountains that divide one painting into scenes
2	Nativity of Christ	Mountain I	comprise an area of Christ, the Virgin, Joseph and the woman Divides scenes ① - ③ and ④ Divides scenes ① - ③ and ⑤	Mountains that comprise an area Mountains that divide one painting into scenes Mountains that divide one painting into scenes
		Mountain II	Divides scene ⑤ into areas of mountain and gold background	Mountains that divide one scene into areas
3	Journey of the Magi; Magi before Herod	Mountain	comprise an area of the Magi Divides scene ① and ②	Mountains that comprise an area Mountains that divide one painting into scenes
4	Flight of Elizabeth	Mountain	comprise an area of Elizabeth and John Divides scene ① into areas of mountain and gold background	Mountains that comprise an area Mountains that divide one scene into areas
5	Joseph Dreaming; Return of Holy Family	Mountain I	comprise an area of Joseph Divides scene ① into areas of mountain and gold background Divides scene ① and ②	Mountains that comprise an area Mountains that divide one scene into areas Mountains that divide one painting into scenes
6	John the Baptist Bearing Witness	Mountain I	comprise an area of the people Divides scene ① into areas of mountain and gold background	Mountains that comprise an area Mountains that divide one scene into areas
7	Temptation of Christ	Mountain I	comprise an area of Christ Divides scene ① into areas of mountain and gold background Divides scene ① and scene ②	Mountains that comprise an area Mountains that divide one scene into areas Mountains that divide one painting into scenes
		Mountain II	Divides scene ① and ②	Mountains that divide one painting into scenes
		Mountain III	Divides scene ① and ②	Mountains that divide one painting into scenes
8	Christ Healing a Blind and Dumb Man	Mountain	Divides fig 8 and fig.9	Mountains that divide one painting into scenes
9	Two Blind Men	Mountain	Divides fig 8 and fig.9	Mountains that divide one painting into scenes
10	Jacob Wrestling Angel; Jacob's Ladder	Mountain I	comprise an area of Jacob Divides scene ① into areas of mountain and blue background	Mountains that comprise an area Mountains that divide one scene into areas
		Mountain II	comprise an area of Jacob Divides scene ② into areas of mountain and blue background	Mountains that comprise an area Mountains that divide one scene into areas
11	Moses and the Burning Bush	Mountain	comprise an area of Moses Divides scene ① into areas of mountain and blue background	Mountains that comprise an area Mountains that divide one scene into areas
12	Bearing of the Ark of the Covenant	Mountain	comprise an area of the priests	Mountains that comprise an area
13	Bearing of the Sacred Vessels	Mountain	comprise an area of the priests	Mountains that comprise an area
14	Solomon and All Israel	Mountain	comprise an area of Solomon and the elders of Israel	Mountains that comprise an area
15	Raising of Widow's Son	Mountain	comprise an area of Christ and the apostles	Mountains that comprise an area
16	Anastasis	Mountain	comprise an area of the people	Mountains that comprise an area
			Divides scene ① into areas of mountain and blue background	Mountains that divide one scene into areas

of Christ and John. In Fig. 7, mountains I, II, and III are in the background behind Christ in front of the Devil. In Fig. 10, mountain I is in the background behind Jacob who is wrestling with the angel, and mountain II is in the background behind Jacob who is lying. In Fig. 11, the mountain is in the background behind Moses who is in front of an angel, Christ and the Virgin. In Fig. 12, the mountain is in the background behind the priests with the Ark, possibly protecting the temple inside the cave. In Fig. 13, the mountain is in the background behind the priests holding the sacred vessels. In Fig. 14, the mountain is in the background behind Solomon and the elders of Israel. In Fig. 15, the mountain is in the background behind Christ and the apostles. In Fig. 16, mountains I and II are in the background behind Adam, Eve and the other people being lifted from Hell by Christ.

As exemplified above, a mountain's ridge line comprises one area within which a person is enclosed. For example, in Fig.

2, "Nativity of Christ," mountain I comprises an area, within which the newborn Christ and the Virgin in scene ①, Christ and women in scene ② and Joseph in scene ③ are enclosed, is in the backgrounds behind a miracle of the birth of Christ. Furthermore, there is a cave in the mountain where Christ is drawn inside; the mountain seems to protect the newborn Christ. The mountain's function comprises an area with a special meaning that is different from its surroundings. Sometimes mountains are drawn as places that offer protection.

## 5.2. Mountains that divide one scene into areas

In Figs. 1 and 2, 4-7, 10, 11, and 16, a mountain is the background behind a person; gold or blue is the background behind another person<sup>9</sup>.

In Fig. 1, scene ①, the mountain is in the background behind Joseph, and the background is gold behind the angel. In Fig. 1, scene ③, the mountain is in the background behind Joseph and the Virgin, and background is gold behind the man. In Fig. 2, scene ⑤, mountain II is in the background behind the shepherds, and the background is gold behind the angel. In Fig. 4, the mountain is in the background behind Elizabeth and John, and the background is gold behind the soldier. In Fig. 5 scene ①, mountain I is in the background behind Joseph, and the background is gold behind the angel. In Fig. 6, mountain I is in the background behind the people, and the background is gold behind Christ and John. In Fig. 7, scene ①, mountain I is in the background behind Christ, and the background is gold behind the Devil. In Fig. 10, scene ①, mountain I is in the background behind Jacob, and the background is blue behind the angel. In Fig. 10, scene ②, mountain II is in the background behind Jacob, and the background is blue behind the angel. In Fig. 11, the mountain is in the background behind Moses, and the background is blue behind an angel, Christ and the Virgin. In Fig. 16, mountains I and II are in the background behind the people, and the background is blue behind Christ.

As exemplified above, one person is drawn in the area of a mountain; another is drawn in the gold or blue background. In other words, the ridge line of the mountain divides one scene into areas of mountain and gold or blue backgrounds. For example, in Fig. 11, “Moses and the Burning Bush,” the ridge line of the mountain divides the scene into the area of mountain in the background behind Moses and the area of blue background behind an angel, Christ and the Virgin. The area of the mountain indicates that Moses is in the earthly world, the area of blue background indicates that the angel, Christ and the Virgin are in the world of God and not the earthly world. A miracle that God appears to Moses is expressed on the whole. The mountain’s function divides one scene into different areas. Furthermore, the background behind angels is either gold or blue, and no mountain is in the background behind them. In other words, a person in front of angels is drawn in the area of a mountain, and the angels are drawn in the gold or blue background areas.

### 5.3. Mountains that divide one painting into scenes

In Figs. 1-3, 5, and 7, a mountain is in people’s background and more than one scene is drawn.

In Fig. 1, the mountain is in the background behind Joseph and the Virgin in scene ③. Scene ② is on the left of the mountain. In Fig. 2, mountain I is in the background behind Christ and the Virgin in scene ①, Christ and the women in scene ② and Joseph in scene ③. Scene ④ is on the left of mountain I, and scene ⑤ is on the right of mountain I. In Fig. 3, the mountain is in the background behind the Magi in scene ②. Scene ① is on the mountain’s left. In Fig. 5, mountain I is in the background behind Joseph in scene ①. Scene ② is on the right of mountain I. In Fig. 7, mountain I is drawn between scenes ① and ②, mountain II is drawn between scenes ② and ③, and mountain III is drawn between scenes ③ and ④.

As exemplified above, one scene is unfolded before the mountain; another is unfolded behind the mountain. In other words, the mountain’s function divides one painting into different scenes. For example, in Fig. 3, “Journey of the Magi; Magi before Herod,” the mountain divides the painting into scene ① that the Magi ride horses to Jerusalem and scene ② that they lay gifts before Herod. The Magi are drawn in both scenes; different scenes are unfolded on the sides of the ridge line of the mountain.

Figures 8 and 9 are connected by a gold background. A medaillon is drawn in the center of Figs. 8 and 9, and mountains are drawn on each side of it. Fig. 8 is drawn on their left, and Fig. 9 is drawn on their right. These mountains divide different paintings just like dividing different scenes.

As described above, in the Christian paintings in the Chora Church, the mountains comprise areas with special meaning. They are considered to be places where we connect to the world of God, function as “frames” divides the earthly world and the world of God. They divide one painting into different scenes and divide one scene into different areas, function as “frames” divides the narrative in the paintings. The mountains are drawn as frames that divide the world in the paintings.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper clarified the functions of mountains in the visual composition of the Christian paintings in the Chora Church. We enumerated the elements of each painting, traced their outlines, and made explanatory drawings. In each explanatory drawing, we divided each painting into scenes. Next, we analyzed and discussed the relationships between the mountains and the backgrounds. In the Christian paintings in the Chora Church, the mountains comprise areas with special meaning. They divide one painting into different scenes and divide one scene into different areas. The mountains are drawn as frames that divide the world in the paintings.

## Endnotes

1. In this paper, we treated Christ, the Virgin, and angels as “people” because they are drawn as human figures.
2. The Chora Church (The Church of St. Saviour in Chora), which is in Istanbul, Turkey, was probably built in the 6th century. It was rebuilt by Isaak Komnenos in the early 12th century. When restoration and renovation were undertaken by Theodore Metochites around 1316-21, the Church was decorated with mosaics and frescoes. After the 15th century, the Church was used as a mosque called “the Kariye Camii” and is now a museum. The cleaning and conservation of the mosaics and frescoes were undertaken by the Byzantine Institute of America in the 1950s (Underwood, 1966-75).
3. Paintings “The Annunciation,” “The Nativity of Christ,” “The Baptism of Christ,” “The Transfiguration of Christ,” “Crucifixion,” and so forth are considered to have been in the naos, but they are not existent (Lowden, 2000, p. 416).
4. In this paper, we defined a mountain as a rugged ground that greatly rises and excluded a smooth ground that only slightly rises.
5. In this paper, the titles of the paintings are based on “The Art of the Kariye Camii” (Ousterhout, 2002). Figs. 1-7 are mosaics in the outer narthex, Figs. 8 and 9 are mosaics in the inner narthex, and Figs. 10-16 are frescoes in the parekklesion. In “Joachim in the Wilderness” in the inner narthex, a mountain is drawn, but the relationship between the mountain and the theme is unclear, we didn’t study it as an exception. Two pictures are painted as “Moses and the Burning Bush” (Fig. 11) in the Chora Church, we studied one appeared in “The Art of the Kariye Camii” (Ousterhout), another is hereinafter described.
6. One main purpose of the Christian paintings in medieval Europe was to faithfully express a Biblical content (Wakakuwa, 2000, p.104). Such drawn elements are comparatively rare.
7. In this paper, “background” refers to what is drawn around the outline of a person. However, exceptions are hereinafter described.
8. After learning of the birth of Christ, Herod tried to murder all infants under two in Bethlehem.
9. In Figs. 1 and 5, Joseph listening to the angel protrudes from the area of the mountain to the area of the gold background. In Fig. 2, the shepherd listening to the angel protrudes from the area of the mountain

to the area of the gold background. In Fig. 7, Christ tempted by the Devil protrudes from the area of the mountain to the area of the gold background. In Fig. 10, Jacob wrestling with the angel protrudes from the area of the mountain to the area of the blue background. In Fig. 16, Adam and Eve lifted from Hell protrude from the area of the mountain to the area of the blue background. A person whose background is the mountain protrudes from the area of the mountain to contact the person in the area of the gold or blue backgrounds. In another “Moses and the Burning Bush” (Fig. 11), an angel, Christ, and the Virgin are drawn before a mountain, but in the area that is different from it. They seem to be on vines.

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## Sources

The pictures in Figs. 1-16 are by Asst. Prof. Dr. Murat Dündar of Bahçeşehir Üniversitesi in Istanbul, Turkey. The other figures and tables were made by the authors.