

Article

Physical and Metaphysical Visualities: Vasily Rozanov and Historical Artefacts

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Abstract: In Russian modernism, the work of writer Vasily Rozanov (1856–1919) presents an understudied case of constructing a worldview based on the study of the parallel history of human physicality and artefacts, which he articulated within the framework of the physical and metaphysical. I argue that Rozanov widened the domain of what was viewed as “compelling visuality” at his time, in line with the subjective synthesising principles of his worldview. He looked in art for the manifestations of that which he considered to be eternal and trans-historical: the mystery of the metaphysical roots of human sexuality.

Keywords: Russian modernism; art historical hermeneutics; compelling visualities; embodied sexualities



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1. Introduction

The culture of early European modernism was characterised by a heightened interest in the world of things and materiality. Emergent museum displays and ethnographic exhibitions created analogies between the exhibited objects and bodies. Such correlations between people and artefacts brought together humans and things, and these visuality-based narratives migrated to literature, with writers devoting themselves to “exploring slippage of fluctuation between the physical and metaphysical referent” (Brown 2003, p. 142). In Russian modernism, the work of writer Vasily Rozanov (1856–1919) presents an understudied case of constructing a worldview based on the study of the parallel history of human physicality and artefacts, which he articulated within the framework of the physical and metaphysical. Rozanov viewed his own writing activities as a mission to reform his contemporary Russian culture’s somatophobia. In addition to historical and religious writing, his gaze searched for visual artefacts that provided indication of the “noumenal” in physicality (Rozanov 1971, p. 144). Since he often considered Christianity as the main cause of dominance of asceticism, his scope of collecting evidence included pre-Christian cultural productions related to the mystery of sexuality.

In his most famous work, *Fallen Leaves* (1915), Rozanov explained that his “philosophy of life” started from his “visual perception [zrenie] and surprise” (Rozanov 1971, p. 144), thus stressing the role of seeing and viewing as an experience foundational for the conceptualisation of a worldview. He noted that this new philosophy of life was no longer a philosophy of abstract ideas and intellectual understanding, obliquely referring to his earlier philosophical investigation *On Understanding*. Yet already in this early philosophical tract, *O Ponimanii* (On Understanding) written in 1886, he explored the question of meaning embodied in shapes and forms. He postulated that every individual work of art embodies a range of human moods that due to their universality continue to impact the perception of future generations (Rozanov 1996, p. 418). Thinking about the intellectual and spiritual effect of objects of art, he noted that creativity has its “objective and subjective sides” (Rozanov 1996, p. 416), and that there is little existing methodology that pays attention to the study of creative subjectivity. This remark registers Rozanov’s early interest in the subjectivity of perception. In his later writing he used historical artefacts as objects that

conveyed encoded meaning. As his interest turned to the materiality of the human body as inseparable from spiritual and metaphysical spheres, he used historical artefacts as the source material to understand the meta/physical body. Various aspects of visibility became central to his investigations. The scope of this visibility was typical for the interest of turn of the century modernism in artefacts as inseparable from (quasi)anthropological thinking (Bell and Hasinoff 2015), which in Rozanov's case materialised in his collecting ancient coins, discovery of new cultural objects during international travels, visits to museums and art exhibitions, as well as studies of drawings of material objects brought from various ethnographic expeditions. These activities formed a foundation for his "philosophy of visual perception" (Rozanov 1971, p. 144), which aimed to promote the main overarching idea of his oeuvre: to prove that the spiritual and ontological side of human life is homogenous with the life of the physical body.

Rozanov's method of interpretation of art is based on his quest to understand the hidden meaning of historical artefacts, albeit within the main problematics of his writing. It is noteworthy that he turned to this subject in the tract *On Understanding*, which indicates that his interpretation of visual art is driven by the need to comprehend its meaning. This is in line with theorising on hermeneutics of interpretation of historical visual artefacts articulated in recent scholarship. Oscar Batschmann, in his authoritative "A Guide to Interpretation: Art Historical Hermeneutics", writes about the role of understanding in the interpretative dynamics in relation to a historical visual artefact:

It also happens, though, that we are looking at a work and that we experience its "call," or that we are struck by its mystery or incomprehensibility. It may be either such a call or our incomprehension—our *Unverständnis*—that prompts us to engage in the act of interpretation. We can describe the interpretation of a visual artwork in general terms as the act by which we seek to do away with our incomprehension. (Batschmann 2003, p. 182)

As will become clear in my article, this element of perceived "mystery" in historical visual images is particularly applicable to Rozanov's visibilities. In line with early Russian modernism's conflation of history and myth (Matich 2005, p. 246), Rozanov used historical artefacts as evidence of lost beliefs and historical myths pertaining mystery of the corporeal Creation.

Relevant for understanding Rozanov's visibility is the fact that his writing in its synthetic form is a form of creative writing. While his early work *On Understanding* was written as a systematic formal philosophical tract, the majority of his writing breaks boundaries between various genres. His essays and articles related to visibility are not written as academic investigations and refer to eclectic sources; they express evoked glimpses of subjective discovery. Rozanov not only wants to understand but also to explain historical objects. Elucidating on the role of explanation of historical artefacts, Batschmann notes that "in historical explanations, the rules of historical connections and the motives for a specific connection together make up the *explanans*" (Batschmann 2003, p. 197). This notion of "motive" is especially relevant for Rozanov's explanations. In what follows, I will demonstrate that Rozanov's main motive to create explanatory connections between visual objects, history, and mythology was to understand and explain the mystery of embodied sexuality. A recently used notion of "compelling visibility" in art history scholarship proposes that a sculpture or painting is defined not only by its historical domain, "but also—not least—by its significance or value to us, contemporary beholders" (Zwijnenberg and Farago 2003, p. xi). I argue that Rozanov widened the domain of what was viewed as "compelling" at his time, in line with the subjective synthesising principles of his worldview. He looked in art for the manifestations of that which he considered to be eternal and trans-historical: this eternal in his worldview was the mystery of the metaphysical roots of human sexuality.

As a religious thinker who looked for the monistic continuity of the divine presence in physical matter, Rozanov was particularly interested not only in written sources such as the Scriptures, but also in objects that were invested with religious meaning. One of his

ideas that helped him to show similarities between the divine and human essence related to the notion of the sexed body of God (Mondry 2021). In his essay *Judaism* (1903), he argued that the first human, Adam, was bisexual in a way that out of his body a female was created and this serves as a proof of God's intention to stress the importance of sexuality and procreation. Rozanov's fascination with the notion of bisexuality and androgyny materialised in a number of streams of thought. Evidence of divine origins of Adam's original bisexuality helped Rozanov to postulate the divine nature of sexuality, which, in turn, served his self-proclaimed mission to rehabilitate sexuality. He also looked for historical visual representations of human bodies that expressed celebration of sexuality and procreation as inseparable from the religious domain. Among the artefacts that caught his attention were sculptures, paintings, and frescoes in churches and cathedrals, figurines and stone reliefs from antiquity, all of which he interpreted as manifestations of the universality of his notion of the mysterious nature of sexuality. At the same time, in line with modernist culture's preoccupation with sexual "deviances" and "anomalies", he could explore cases of effeminate maleness and masculine femaleness as atavistic variations in nature. Yet, unlike the medicalised discourse around non-normative sexuality, Rozanov endowed cases of alleged androgyny, same-sex leanings, and asexuality with religious and metaphysical meaning. He often explained cases of ascetic religious leanings or cases of secular asexuality as evidence of the mysterious nature of sexuality. Historical artefacts served as a source and illustration of the core ideas of his "philosophy of life".

2. Italian Impressions: Visuality in Search for Features of Metaphysical Embodiments

In line with the cultural trends that ascribed value to visuality in the quest to understand history, Rozanov embarked on travels to search for the monuments of different and past cultures. His first destination was Italy, which for him as for his intellectual Russian milieu represented the land of a combination of pagan antiquity and Catholicism. Visual objects of a pagan past were the focus of his gaze, and he was similarly interested in the contemporary Catholic culture of the Vatican. The results of his trip in 1901 were essays that he later published as a book under the title *Italian Impressions* (*Ital'ianskie vpechatleniia*) (1909). His previous encounters with ancient artefacts were in the form of photographs and a handful of ancient coins brought by a colleague. In the first year of the new century, Rozanov had an opportunity to see and study historical artefacts in situ. This for him was an opportunity to experience the effects of created shapes and forms that he contemplated in an abstract vision in his philosophical tract *On Understanding* (1886).

While Rozanov finds signs of affirmation of love and acceptance of the natural world in samples of ancient artefacts, he pays attention to Catholic religious art that he juxtaposes to the vibrancy of the pagan worldview. Yet, at the same time, he searched for a synthesis between paganism and Christianity in order to show that Christianity can have life-affirming qualities.

Notably, his search for synthesis in religions is paralleled by the search for manifestations of blurred borders between the male and female physicality.¹ His gaze discovers and stops at those artefacts that help him to formulate his views on the necessity to rethink the relationship between religion and nature, to destigmatize the life of the body, and to unravel the mystery of sexuality and love. As early as the first page of his first essay, "Good Friday in St. Peter's Cathedral" ("*Strastnaia piatnitsa v sobore Sv. Petra*"), Rozanov introduces the theme of synthesis in the description of the clothing of the Catholic priests. He searches for commonalities between ecclesiastical garments both in the West and in the East and suggests that the cut and bright colour of these ceremonial robes signify important tendencies. Rozanov examines the Catholic cardinal Rampolla clad in colourful and effeminate garment and presents the clothing as a meaning-creating artefact of ecclesiastical culture:

A striking feature of priests' clothing in both the West and the East is that its cut is typically feminine, not at all masculine: sleeves which broaden at the cuffs, a wide-banded girdle (men never wear such a thing), and finally, even a train.

And in the actual colour of the clothing there is something bright: lilac, green, blue, red, something one never finds with men. And yet this choice of clothing and colour expresses an unconscious and very profound part of the human soul. (Rozanov 1994a, p. 21)

While Rozanov does not directly articulate the idea of an androgynous character of priestly attire, he nevertheless raises the issue of latent inclination of priests to choose effeminate cut and colour. Using the notion of the unconscious leaning of the human soul, he suggests that male priests express their inner nature via their sensed tastes. Rozanov's impressions made by the shape of the garment echo his early formulations about the impact of art expressed in the tract *On Understanding* by means of outer shapes. Yet, he also tries to fit his a priori ideas about metaphysical physicality into this visual sphere. He clearly pursues the notion of bisexuality embedded in his idea of God's bisexuality and hints at the existence of hidden unconscious leanings that prove his idea about the mystical nature of sex.² The fact that Rozanov registers that he notices an effeminacy of priestly costume in the opening paragraph of his first essay on his travel impressions emphasizes that he uses visuality to support his theorizing of the physical and metaphysical materiality.

Rozanov's interpretation of the psychological aspects expressed in the choice of clothing presents an early case of theorizing clothes. Carl Fluegel's influential *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930) classifies two types of dress codes as most resistant to fashion and changeability: dress as a sign of rank and dress as a sign of nationality: "All the costumes or decorations falling within these two categories possess an important feature in common—their tendency to immutability" (Fluegel 1966, p. 32). Fluegel's most original contribution to interpretation to the history of costume relates to his psychoanalytical approach to clothes. He views clothes as a coded message of sublimated inner desires, and these include sexual tendencies. Rozanov's visuality in interpretation of priestly garments identifies signs of aspects of sexuality that fall into his notions of mystery of sexuality as inseparable from religion. He searches for the remnants of the past in ecclesiastical clothes that due to their "immutability" (Fluegel 1966, p. 32) encode historical knowledge, some of which is lost in culture.

Rozanov likewise imputes similar features of gender and sexuality to bodies of canonical ecclesiastical personalities depicted in sculpture. In the essay "In old Rome" ("Po staromu Rimu"), he comments on the striking impression made on him by a statue of Saint Francis carrying a child in the Santa Maria in the Cosmedino Church in Rome. He states that he had previously seen, more than once, statues of the Saint in other churches during his journey through Italy, and in order to typify the sentiment expressed in the sculpture, he notes that Saint Francis has become a favourite among the Italian Catholics in spite of the humble origins of his early followers. Rozanov admits that the statue captivates his attention because of the representation of a male figure carrying a child in a stylistic borrowed from the representation of the Madonna. Rozanov formulates the idea of this statue as a "male Madonna" (Rozanov 1994b, p. 36), with an infant touching lovingly the Saint's face and the Saint tenderly holding the infant on his left arm. Polemically, he observes that this composition catches his attention as a Russian Orthodox person because such a plot does not exist in Eastern Orthodox art. Drawing parallels between art and life, Rozanov states that it is inconceivable to imagine a representation of love between a cleric, especially a monk, and a baby, as it is similarly impossible to imagine the existence of such love in real life in Russian society. In his interpretation of the sculpture, Rozanov implicitly introduces the notion of the gendered character of Russian Orthodox life and art, and he displaces the binary opposition of male–female. By pairing "male" and "Madonna", he challenges the gender concepts embedded in Russian Orthodoxy and icons. He also makes his personal mission evident by stating that there is a lack of tenderness towards children in Russian culture that is influenced by the severity of the rules of family conduct canonized in the sixteenth-century *Domostroi*. In this essay and others in the series, Rozanov's visuality allows him to notice ideas and messages in surrounding artefacts that lead him to religious-philosophical conclusions. He maintains that the philosophical position of

Catholic ecclesiastical culture reaffirms the notion of “*Sancta Natura*” (Rozanov 1994b, p. 37) and notes that as opposite to this, Russian Christianity has the cult of saintly personalities, but never of sacred spiritual nature. Rozanov uses examples of Catholic art as evidence in his formulation and promotion of the main ideas of his body politics.

In his essay “Fading Pictorial Art” (“*Vytsvetaiushchaia zhivopis'*”), he once more returns to the leitmotif of gentility and femininity in Catholic art, this time drawing parallels between Rafael’s frescoes and his personal traits of character. In his search for religious pagan/Christian synthesis, Rozanov evaluates Rafael’s work as unique in this ability to portray spirit in matter:

Affection, meekness, some sort of paradise in the human face—these are characteristics of his art. [. . .] Only Rafael has captured the ancient Psyche, the Soul. He fantasizes, meekly, sweetly, charmingly, at times borrowing from Christianity, at other times borrowing from paganism; he does it without effort, without tension, like a king, who takes everything because everything belongs to him. (Rozanov 1994c, p. 50)

Turning to Rafael’s self-portrait, Rozanov continues to pursue the theme of mystery in sexuality, explaining Rafael’s unique gift by his maiden-like nature:

Raphael is known to have had a face different from that of all other people: the face of the purest of maidens, a long and tender face, without a trace of beard or moustache. In history he is the same kind of miraculous phenomenon as Joan of Arc, i.e., a phenomenon specially forged in the depths of the earth, a supernatural creature, to a higher degree than all the rest of us, natural people. (Rozanov 1994c, p. 51)

Notably, in his later work, *People of the Moonlight* (1911), devoted to the exploration of bisexuality in its relation to asexuality and homosexuality in the context of mysterious and metaphysical origins of sex, Rozanov will again mention Raphael’s face as an example of what is mystical and incomprehensible in sex. Rozanov’s visuality of perception of artefacts is a complex process, in which he looks for manifestations of conscious and unconscious drives. His aim is to identify in these manifestations a range of beliefs, knowledge, or intuition that was lost in the history of civilization. These visualities feed into his “philosophy of life” as he formulated it later in *Fallen leaves* (1915).

In his other essay in *Italian Impressions*, “In the Vatican Museums” (“*V muzeiakh Vatikana*”), Rozanov continues to use perceived sculptural representations of the androgynous thematic to eliminate the binary opposition between paganism and monotheism:

Of the interesting features which strike one when observing Greek art, I shall draw attention merely to one: the male appearance of the female faces and the female appearance of the male. Pallas Athene is not merely a warrior by reason of her weapon and helmet, not a warrior by virtue of all the mythological stories told about her: she is a warrior as the Greeks actually portrayed her—she is masculine, male in form, manlike. What is this idea? Juno, i.e., the Greek Hera, is also manlike. And in the myths neither of them has any children. (Rozanov 1994d, p. 57)

The above passage indicates that Rozanov treats sculpture as an authentic primary source that has a value in culture no less important than a written source. Furthermore, having legitimized sculpture as a cultural canon, he proceeds to interpret its significance as a source with higher meaning. The description of the manlike goddesses is followed by a description of womanlike male figures. Having prepared the ground by using the image of “male Madonna” in the earlier essay (Rozanov 1994b, p. 36), he now draws a parallel between Christian saints and pagan gods, using their perceived androgenized femininity as indicative of the riddle of sexuality:

In the Capitoline Museum I simply stood in amazement before a statue of full human size: it was a Greek Saint Francis, holding the Holy Infant. And in the Vatican Museum there is an even more striking form of the same statue: its male forms are preserved, but the head is completely feminine, its long hair is

plaited like a woman's, and it too is carrying a child! The hair of the so-called Apollo Musagetes [. . .] is female, long, not plaited, but hanging down in two unattractive broad tresses, and the Apollo is wearing female clothing! So what is all this blatant unattractiveness? For it is not natural for us to admire a masculine appearance in women or a female appearance in men. If these images were created it means that they indicated ancient Greeks were searching for something. (Rozanov 1994d, p. 58)

In these passages, Rozanov's tactic is to find common ground between representations of historical and mythological characters that he takes from pagan and Christian traditions. In Batchmann's "A Guide to Interpretation: Art Historical Hermeneutics", a search for a historical explanation of the visual object using written references is viewed as part of the normative process of understanding, interpretation, and explanation of historical art. In this particular case, when Rozanov focuses on androgyny, he turns to mythology from two different traditions in antiquity: pre-Christian paganism and the Judaic Torah. Having stated that the Greeks were searching for "something", he not only interprets the image but explains it. His goal is to explain a cluster of ideas that are fundamental for his personal interest in the mystery of the meta/physical body. What Rozanov calls "something" is an understanding of the divine nature of sexuality, which relates to the bisexualities of the Biblical God and the gods of Antiquity.

Rozanov's explanation is akin to Batchmann's notion of explanation of historical artefacts. Batchmann uses two terms for explaining artefacts: *explanans*, "that which explains something" and the *explanandum*, "that which is to be explained" (Batschmann 2003, p. 197). In Rozanov's essay, the mystery of sexuality is that which is to be explained, while sculptural and religious texts are "that which explains something". Having described the sculptures, he develops an argument stating that the androgyny of the ancient statues expresses the way the Greeks were searching for features of the metaphysical in human beings, which would bring them closer to the divine. To explain this search, he turns to the Judo-Christian canon, to the "infallible Sinai account" (Rozanov 1994d, p. 58) and argues in favour of bisexuality as a characteristic common to God and to humans created in God's likeness. While discussing Ancient Greek art, he states that an androgynous Adam was created in the likeness of God and was "a perfect human being" (Rozanov 1994d, p. 58), before Eve was made out of Adam. This allows him to promote the idea of metaphysical physicality and sexuality in real life and he moves from interpretation of artefacts to physiology. He asserts that in the physiological development of every human, there is a period when the two sexes have not separated—the period of adolescence: "The mystery of the remarkable separation of the sexes, psychological and noumenal, happens with and in the growth of every human being. In every human the story of Adam and Eve is repeated." (ibid., p. 58). To assert the metaphysical importance of pagan art as a form of expression of spirituality, he concludes that "the Greeks sought God through a material human being. And the way of their search was a true one" (ibid., p. 58). I propose that with his statement about the "unattractiveness" of figures bearing the signs of a third sex, Rozanov employs his tactic of changing the stereotypical reception of sculptures of antiquity as inferior to Christian spiritual art. He counters modernity's stereotype of pagan art as a form of worship of "attractive" and, therefore, non-spiritual materiality. It was precisely this stereotype of the ancient statue that was often used in Russian high culture.

This particular understanding of pagan sculpture was articulated in Petr Chaadaev's influential *Philosophical Letters* (1836), where statues of pagan antiquity were characterized as provoking base sensual desires, and as such were juxtaposed to the sublime monotheism of the Ancient Israelites. Chaadaev's "Third and Fourth Philosophical Letters" singled out the architecture of Ancient Egypt, its pyramids, as an example of sublime spiritual shapes as opposed to "the lust-provoking bronze and marble bodies" of Ancient Greek and Roman art (Chaadaev 1971, p. 57). Going against this tradition of interpreting pagan sculpture as devoid of spirituality, Rozanov resorts to maintaining similarities between the sculptures' androgyny and the Biblical Creation mythology. He uses the concept of

androgyny to ascribe the sculptural representations of the body in Ancient Greece with the intuitive search for monotheistic notions of Creation. Androgyny put into the context of Creation helps Rozanov to dismantle Cartesian dualisms of body and soul, flesh and spirit (Mondry 2021).

His essays in *Italian Impressions* suggest that at this juncture of his oeuvre, Rozanov uses Ancient Greek sculpture as visual evidence of the metaphysical nature of human physicality. He boldly links the pagan art of antiquity with monotheism's notion of humans being created in God's image:

Looking at the first-class creations of an ancient carver a thought occurs: wasn't the ancient art more metaphysical [than modern art]? [. . .] We can find links between ancient Greek sculpture and religion: if human-being was created "in likeness", then it follows that in the image one can get closer to its prototype, and via the human and "measurements" find God's image. The task is different from our iconography that gives an abstract representation of a worshipped face; the task rather was to find, to construct, to create [. . .] such an image that would be invented by a human and at the same time brought from the Sinai. (Rozanov 1994d, pp. 56–57)

3. Resurrected Egypt: Discovering Metaphysical Bodies in Artefacts of Ancient Egypt

While Rozanov was looking for signs of embodied metaphysics in the artefacts of antiquity during his travels in Italy, in later years, he turned his attention to artefacts of Ancient Egypt. However, while Chaadaev was interested in expressions of sublime spirituality in the shape of pyramids, Rozanov was interested in the harmonious synthesis of the spiritual and the physical in Egyptian representational art. In particular, he found evidence of a special veneration of the loving family in Ancient Egyptian artefacts. Strikingly, in his article "Aphrodisian Beauty" ("*Afrodizijskaia krasota*") (1916), placed by him in the collection of his essays under the title *Resurrected Egypt* (*Vozrozhdaishchisya Egipet*), he severely criticises Ancient Greek representations of the female body in the images of Aphrodite. In the general context of his essays on Ancient Egypt, this negative evaluation of Ancient Greek sculpted representations of the ideal of beauty is meant to juxtapose the two cultures of antiquity in matters of the family and procreation. Rozanov claims that these Greek statues are completely devoid of biological reality. For him as a philosopher of life, this art is false, as it represents the body that was not born in a way that bodies are born in real life. Noting that Aphrodite in Greek mythology came out of the sea and was not born "physiologically" (Rozanov 2002a, p. 80), he maintains that sculptural representations of her body similarly have no life in them. These observations based on his subjective visuality further allow him to make generalisations about the lack of importance of the family in Ancient Greek society:

Family in Ancient Greece was pushed into "the back yard", while *hetaira* were placed in the front. And this presents the core of their civilization, the state of things that could not be corrected in transitioning to marble, golden and bronze "sculpting of life". The "lye of life" was passed onto the "lye of art." (Rozanov 2002a, p. 80)

Claiming that everything beautiful is "born" naturally, he makes both an aesthetical and an ontological judgment. He also resorts to the stable Christian characterisation of Ancient Greek sculptural representations of female beauty as "depraved" and even "transgressive" (Rozanov 2002a, p. 81), but then turns the argument upside down. In his argument, this beauty is depraved *not* because it represents physical baseness, but because the Ancient Greek ideal of female beauty does not connect with the physiology of birth. He endows an aesthetic category of beauty with both physical and metaphysical meaning, expecting embodied beauty to express ideas of procreation, fecundity, and emotional warmth.

On the basis of his interpretation of the pagan art of Ancient Greece and Rome, he explains these civilisations' historical collapse and subsequent embracing of Christianity

since, in his opinion, these civilisations did not have the notion of an afterlife. For Rozanov, the first civilization that was involved in the search for immortality was Ancient Egypt, and in the essay “Aphrodisiac Beauty” written in 1917, he turns to the visual representations of women’s bodies and female goddesses in Ancient Egyptian artefacts as well as various drawings representing families. In these artefacts, he finds the culture that celebrates the birth of children, love, family, tender feelings and nurturing attitudes to children by both parents. Strikingly, these are the same themes and categories that he detected in his viewing of sculptures in Rome and conveyed in *Italian Impressions*. In *Italian Impressions*, his goal was to juxtapose Catholic religious art with Russian Orthodox icons and culture, in order to change his Russian readers’ opinions about the relationships within the family and to instil his main idea—that the physical body has metaphysical connections. In this essay, “Aphrodisiac Beauty”, written some 15 years later, he juxtaposes Ancient Egyptian ideas of family with those of the Ancient Greeks, but elaborates on the same concepts and sets out to find visual signs of the metaphysical in the material, to celebrate physical life, to promote the importance of parental love and care and the family. Rozanov’s gaze searches for these main notions of his “philosophy of life” in artefacts and visualises their presence or absence to support his arguments.

His idea that the metaphysical beginnings of the body are linked with the mystery of sexuality finds its expression in his interpretation of visual historical artefacts from Ancient Egypt. Additionally, to procreative sexuality, his search for representations of androgynous features and same-sex leanings is also part of his theorising of the mystery of sexuality. In his description of ancient artefacts, he finds proof of both phenomena: he refers to bearded Venuses of antiquity and some drawings on Ancient Egyptian artefacts as proof of this idea. In an essay called “Mystery of four faces” (“*Taina chetyrekh lits*”) (1917), he comments on the stone drawing of a dance dating back to 3000 BC. He copied the drawing from Gaston Maspero’s authoritative book on the art of Ancient Egypt, but in addition to the existing explanation of the drawing he gives his own assertive interpretation.³ Noting that he disagrees with Maspero’s opinion that the depiction of the female body movements represents a dance, he offers an interpretation that reveals Rozanov’s method of visuality as ancillary to his own agenda. In terms of hermeneutics of interpretation of historical art, he turns to Herodotus’s descriptions of festivities in Ancient Egypt and in particular to the annual festival in Bubastis. One detail of the description by Herodotus particularly fascinates Rozanov; it refers to the ritual behaviour performed by groups of women during the festival:

Arriving by boat to a town, they bring the vessel to the shore and some sing and clap in the manner they have performed before, but others shout abusively at the women of this town, and some others dance, while others jump, raise their dresses and uncover themselves [. . .]. (Herodotus, II, pp. 59–60). (Rozanov 2002b, pp. 96–97)

Having italicised those parts of Herodotus’s text that captivate him, Rozanov suggests that the movements are sexually significant. The dance for him is a performed mystery-play that he relates to the cult of Artemis, the goddess associated by him with androgyny. Since the ritual dance is performed by women and, in his view, for female audiences, the combination of visual and textual narratives allows him to jump into a discussion of the mystery of same sex desires and/or asexual leanings. He concludes that the drawing expresses a religious “adoration” of each other among the people of alternative sexual orientation (Rozanov 2002b, p. 98), while the pose with a raised leg suggests exposure and “fetishism” of sexual organs (Rozanov 2002b, p. 98). He notes that this detail is not typical for Ancient Egyptian artefacts, and it represents a phenomenon that stands apart from the mainstream normative sexual orientation of the society. This evaluation of the image as atypical allows him to detect signs of encoded mystery in the drawing.

In a characteristic link to explain contemporary occurrences by examples from historical and mythological past, he observes that contemporary cases of non-normative sexuality similarly manifest the same mystery. In his evaluation of this ancient Egyptian drawing,

he assertively refers to his own book *People of the Moonlight: Metaphysics of Christianity* (1911), dedicated to the study of alternative forms of sexuality (androgyny, bisexuality, hermaphroditism) in a historical perspective. While in *People of the Moonlight* he refers to medical literature on non-normative sexuality, including the at the time influential work by Richard Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, his interest is not in medicalising these cases. Rather, he uses these contemporary sources together with ancient artefacts and historical texts indiscriminately as intertexts to prove the idea of the mysterious nature of sex. In *People of the Moonlight*, he uses figurines of the “bearded Venuses of antiquity” unearthed by archaeologists in Cyprus to support evidence from written sources and cases of contemporary sectarian cults and medical “anomalies” studied in the work of sexologists. In this new essay, “Mystery of four faces” (1917), on ancient Egyptian drawings, his previous writing helps him to conclude that nature is unchangeable, “*natura aeterna*” (Rozanov 2002a, p. 98). By the time he writes on artefacts of Ancient Egypt (1916, 1917), his own stance on the mystery of sexuality has become firmly established. His trans-historical interpretation of historical art objects is in line with his views on the trans-historical nature of metaphysical physicality.

4. Conclusions

Rozanov’s personal friend and art historian Eric Gollerbach maintained that Rozanov’s travels in Italy and visits to the Vatican and the Coliseum did not give him anything “essentially new”, but rather evoked in him “certain motifs, certain moods” (Gollerbach 1922, p. 61). Gollerbach rightly stresses the subjectivity of Rozanov’s gaze, and the point about the role of impression and mood-creation of art is in line with Rozanov’s own comments on the role of art, expressed by him in his early work, *On Understanding* (1886). However, his visual contact with historical artefacts resulted in more than producing an impression or “mood”. I have demonstrated that Rozanov’s visuality correlated with his search for mystery of sexuality and sexualities. This search for a mystery in itself is a characteristic feature of hermeneutics in the interpretation of historical art, as defined by Batschmann (2003, p. 182). What makes Rozanov’s visuality original is the very nature of a mystery that he postulated and attempted to unravel: the mystery of the metaphysical roots of embodied sexualities.

My investigation has demonstrated that there is a certain dialectics in Rozanov’s interpretation of historical artefacts. Visuality plays a central part in this dialectic as it moves from abstract ideas about forms and shapes to visual encounters with concrete objects, such as ecclesiastical costume, sculpture, and drawings. Notably, his gaze selected those shapes that represented the human body and arguably signified aspects of sex and gender. In his early philosophical tract, *On Understanding*, he wrote about the universal impact of art, yet at the same time he briefly noted that aspects of subjective motivation in creativity had not been explored and understood. His hermeneutics of interpretation of artefacts attests to his own subjectivities that can be fully understood in conjunction with his later writing. His analysis of historical objects often references historical, religious, and literary texts, which he uses to substantiate his “understanding”. Myths and legends of classical antiquity as well as the Bible provide eclectic material and evidence for his understanding. In some cases, he uses contemporary historical and medical literature as supplementary sources for unlocking the hidden meaning of artefacts. All these methods are part of the hermeneutics of interpretation of historical art (Batschmann), while a range of Rozanov’s sources extends the domain of “compelling visuality”. His synthetic genre of writing combines scholarly insights with creative writing, references to academic work and anecdotal material or lived experience, and this eclectic combination constitutes the unity of form and content of his texts. This amalgamation of sources used to explain art objects is precisely a marker of his subjectivity as well as characteristics of this new form of writing. In his work, which was a self-proclaimed mission of sex, his methods included not only understanding and interpretation, but also explanation. For him, all forms of historical and

mythological material make up what Batchmann calls the *explanans*—“that which explains something” (Batchmann, p. 197). His synthesising narratives make visuality compelling.

There is, albeit a flat, trajectory in the role visuality played in the development of his philosophy of life through seeing objects of art and observing life. In his essays written during his travels in Italy in 1901, visuality plays both a supportive and, to a degree, a formative role as it helps him to accumulate images and sensed experiences that underpin his inner searching that will later form the core idea of his oeuvre. Visuality in his later writing, devoted to interpreting artefacts of Ancient Egypt, has an intertextual character and not only supports, but is supported by the set of ideas that by then were formulated in his numerous essays and books. By borrowing arguments and data from his own earlier book *People of the Moonlight* to interpret a newly discovered drawing from Ancient Egypt, he reveals a circular course of his interpretative visuality, which in later years was reinforced by a set of his own formerly articulated ideas. Starting from “impressions” during his travels in Italy, articulated visuality becomes a powerful tool in his self-styled mission of sex, as he employs art objects as historical evidence in support of his ideas.

Like cultural evolutionists of his time, Rozanov applied a synchronic and diachronic approach to cultures and artefacts. In his contemporary society he was looking for embodied physical and psychological signs of “survivals” of not only a historical past, but of pre-historical, mythic, and cosmic origins of life and creation. Among these features he viewed sexuality and variations in sexual orientations as proof of links between physical and metaphysical phenomena. Instead of treating “primitive” and pagan cultures as inferior to contemporary western Christian civilization, he attempted to reconstruct those beliefs and views that, in turn, helped him to advocate his “philosophy of life”. As his method of understanding life was based on “visual perception and surprise” (Rozanov 1971, p. 144), he used historical artefacts as objects that revealed the metaphysical in physical embodiments.

From Rozanov’s views on the impact of the artistic creation expressed in his tract *On Understanding* follows that he believed in the power of the artefact to influence the perception of future generations. I propose that as a beholder of these historical artefacts, he not only wanted to decipher their meaning, but also believed that he found a way to connect with them and their creators by overcoming temporal and spatial barriers. He, thus, opened an inter-generational flow of influence because for him it meant to find a link with those historical people who, in his opinion, had knowledge that was lost to later generations. To understand the mystery of historical artefacts for him was identical with understanding the mystery of life.

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Notes

¹ This synthesis was evaluated unequally by his contemporary critics. In a review on *Italian Impressions* in *Novoe vremia*, A. Beliaev stated: “What kind of a sectarian fit of madness is this, in which Tolstoi, Diana of Ephesus, Gogol, Mithras, the Romans, the Greeks, the Slavs, are mixed together?”. However, most critics wrote about Rozanov’s subjectivity as the source of his originality. For a discussion, see Fateev and Nikoliukin (1994, p. 427).

² Notably, attention to unconscious femininity implies also alternative sexual leanings—a variation of sexuality that Rozanov identified in his later writing as yet another manifestation of the mystery of sexuality. See Mondry (2000, 2010).

³ The whole collection *Resurrected Egypt* contains illustrations of artefacts that Rozanov personally copied from various authoritative sources, including G. Maspero, whose three volumes on Ancient Egypt were published in Russian translation between 1892 and 1915. He used these translations of Maspero: Gaston Maspero. *Drevniaia istoriia. Egipet. Assiriia*. St. Petersburg. 1905. Gaston Maspero. *Egipet*. Moscow: Problemy estetiki. 1915.

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