

Armenian Catholic Church Furnishings in Transylvania

Abstract

The Armenians that have settled down in Transylvania in the second half of the 17th century, succeeded in building churches in four settlements: in Szamosújvár (Armenopolis, Hayakałak, Gherla), Erzsébetváros (formerly Ebesfalva, Elisabethopolis, Yefisabet'owpolis, Dumbrăveni), Gyergyószentmiklós (Čowrčov, Gheorgheni), and Szépvíz (Sibviz, Frumoasa). As a result of the assimilation process that intensified in the 19th century, as well as due to increased emigration, the prosperous Armenian communities are by now fully dissolved within Hungarian society, and although since the 1990s we can observe a certain “re-armenization” process among persons of Armenian origin, their 300-year-old cultural heritage has become alien to them in so far as they do not understand the Armenian inscriptions that decorate their churches, they are not familiar with the legends of the saints represented on altarpieces, and they do not look after their particularly rich ecclesiastic collections. Because of the disruption in the continuity of tradition, the Armenian Catholic churches in Transylvania can be considered as monuments of an essentially assimilated culture, the typical features of which allow, even demand, that we make them subjects of scientific investigation. These works of art that synthesize various cultures and that are in some cases of higher artistic quality than the Transylvanian average, are an especially interesting terrain for art historical research as well.

Standing in front of the Transylvanian Armenian Catholic churches, observing their furnishings, the same question arises almost in everyone: what makes them Armenian? A few illegible inscriptions, a few foreign saints attract our attention, but other than that we are faced with the well-known solutions of Hungarian Baroque ecclesiastic art. In what sense can we speak about Armenian art in Transylvania? To answer this, we must first clarify what we mean by Armenian art. The works of Armenian painters and craftsmen? Or is it enough if the commissioner is Armenian? Are we looking for the characteristics of Armenian iconography or for specific Armenian saints? Who created the altars, paintings and sculptures found in Armenian churches, and in what are these similar to or different from the Transylvanian Roman Catholic church furnishings? What kind of patterns or models did they follow? How, in what steps and to what extent did latinization take place? These are the questions that I

tried to answer during the examination of Transylvanian Armenian Catholic church furnishings.

Although I discuss in detail the genesis of individual objects and I also try to concentrate on the masters and painters in each case, including the placement of these artworks in the creators' oeuvre, the work itself and its "meaning" are always at the centre of my attention. There are cases when the artwork seems to be significant as a historical monument, at other times it is necessary to clarify the theological and iconographic context, sometimes I highlight the characteristics of a work that is autonomous or abstracted from the cult and the historical significance. Before the analysis of the furnishings, I thought it worthy to elaborate on the construction history of the churches, because the progress or halting of constructions always had a great impact on the time and circumstances of the furnishings' creation, while by presenting briefly the buildings I try to describe the liturgical space, in which the works that are discussed in detail were included. Due to their artistic qualities, certain artworks (as for example the *Deposition from the Cross* altarpiece in Szamosújvár) deserve a more detailed analysis. I also considered it worthwhile to summarize briefly the issue of the use of images and the relationship with them; respectively in one case (that of the Solomon Church in Szamosújvár) I also discussed the murals, as these may be interpreted as the manifestation of Armenian identity that can rarely be expressed in artworks, and thus are closely linked to the main problematic of the thesis. I considered it important to copy and translate the Armenian inscriptions found on buildings and paintings. In the case of inscriptions I copied them by using Armenian characters, while in the case of Armenian names and concepts, I followed the internationally accepted standard.

Art historical scholarship has dealt with the issue of Transylvanian Armenian church furnishings to a relatively small extent. Due to the limitations of scholarly literature, I tried to approach the topic by involving archival sources. My research was greatly facilitated by the creation in 2010 of the Armenian Catholic Collective Archive in Szamosújvár, which includes the entire archival material of the four Transylvanian Armenian parishes, and it offers the ordered material to researchers in appropriate conditions. Although a full church archive is available, yet it is not abundant in usable data. In the case of Szamosújvár and Erzsébetváros, this situation can be explained by the fact that the construction of the churches was administered by the patron of the church, i.e. the town, thus the data related to furnishings has to be searched for in the towns' archives, which are not always available in their current place of preservation, the state archives. While in the case of Szamosújvár the records of the

Magistrate may be researched in the Kolozsvár Direction of the National Archives of Romania, the documentary material concerning Erzsébetváros was taken first to Brassó and after that to Gyulafehérvár, where it lies hidden within the state archives. However, the records of the magistrate of Szamosújvár provide valuable information, especially about the circumstances of the creation, as well as the masters of the side altars and pulpit of the high church. Concerning the material of Gyergyószentmiklós and Szépvíz, no sources have survived from the period of the churches' construction and furnishing, thus the masters that made the altars and statues, as well as the painters of the altarpieces remain unknown. Concerning the document material of the Collective Archive in Szamosújvár, important information is supplied especially by inventories, descriptions, some *Historia Domus*, and correspondence, respectively I found a number of archival photographs in the photograph archives, with the help of which presently demolished or modified buildings may also be investigated. The photograph archive of the Gyula Forster National Centre for Cultural Heritage Management in Budapest (former Office for Cultural Heritage) also provided rare representations of the altars of the Mechitarist church in Erzsébetváros. The visitation reports found in the Archives of the Archbishopric and General Chapter in Gyulafehérvár may also be seen as particularly valuable sources, as they offer a cross-section of the furnishing, state and religious life of individual churches, they contain detailed or less detailed inventories, the copies of certain significant documents, thus important conclusions can be drawn from the changes between the visitations.

The thesis was developed over nine chapters, each church being dealt within a separate chapter. The churches were discussed in the order of the settlements, first the two most important Armenian settlements, Szamosújvár and Erzsébetváros, followed by Gyergyószentmiklós and Szépvíz. In the case of Erzsébetváros I separately touched upon the Armenian Catholic chapels located in the town, which was accounted for by their high number, and on the other hand by the miraculous icon, Our Lady of the Rosary, found in the chapel of Saint John the Baptist.

After a detailed presentation of my objects of research, in the summary, I raised again the question: in what sense can we speak of Armenian art in Transylvania? Are we looking for the artworks of Armenian painters and masters? As it is shown in the thesis, a relatively small number of persons of Armenian origin may be found within the masters of the furnishings in Transylvanian Armenian churches. The first mention of an Armenian painter is not even

encountered in the documentation of the Armenian churches, but in the inventory from 1738 of the Franciscan church in D s, where a Calvary composition is recorded, which was created by an Armenian painter named Zechariah. Due to the proximity of D s and Szamos jv r we can assume that we are dealing with an Armenian painter from Szamos jv r. Almost a hundred years later we hear about another Armenian painter, G brus Zechariah, who in 1841 painted the mural of the founders of the Solomon Church, and he was also the one who constructed the Rosary altar of the high church from the material of the demolished high altar. It is also possible that the votive images and the painting of Mesrop Mashtots, found in the collection of the Armenian high church in Szamos jv r can be related also to a local, untrained master. The creators of the furnishings in Armenian churches were selected from Transylvanian German, Saxon (Simon Hoffmayer, Franz Neuhauser), Hungarian (Antal Cs r s, J zsef Cs r s, M ty s Veress), and occasionally Romanian (Constantin Pop, Florea Pavel) painters and masters. Also, a certain artistic exigency may be observed among the Armenian commissioners, if it was possible, they employed the best masters. A good example for this is the case of the side altars in Szamos jv r, where, after viewing the sketches of the Transylvanian Saxon painter, the town council decides to turn to the Viennese masters performing a “more decorative work”. The employment of foreign masters was due to their good financial circumstances, their mobility connected to their professions and the wider field of vision that has resulted from the latter. Thus, the paintings of the side altars in Szamos jv r are created in Vienna by J nos Mih ly Hesz, the high altar with a baldachin by Ferenc Uhl from Pest, while the main altarpiece was painted by Diamanti Laccatari, also from Pest.

As I have repeatedly alluded to it in the thesis, it can not be a coincidence that Simon Hoffmayer, Antal Cs r s, and his brother, the painter J zsef Cs r s, worked in the high churches of Szamos jv r and Erzs betv ros, as well as in the Mechitarist church from the latter. This may point to the close relationship between the various Armenian colonies – they recommended each other masters –, but at the same time also to the fact that at that time in Transylvania the number of masters working at a high quality was infinitesimally small. A good example for the idea that the connection between the Armenian centers did not only manifest itself through the recommendations of masters, but also through specific donations is shown by the fact that the 18th century high altar of the church in Sz pvis was donated to the parish by a citizen of Erzs betv ros by the name of Jord n V rt n.

Among the Transylvanian Armenian colonies several links can also be discovered in relation to the veneration of saints, in the cult of the icons and statues and in their relationship with the images.

Besides the specifically Armenian saints like Saint Gregory the Illuminator, Saint Hripsime, Saint Mesrop Mashtots, the Catholicos Saint Nerses the Great and King Abgar, we often find saints, which are included in the canon of the Roman Catholic Church or of universal Christianity, but have particular significance for the Armenians. These include Saints Bartholomew and Thaddeus, venerated as the converting apostles of the Armenian Church, Saint Jacob of Nisibis, who discovered the remains of Noah's Ark, Saint John the Baptist and Saint Stephen Protomartyr. Although the two latter saints are surrounded by special respect also in the Roman Catholic Church, their presence in the Armenian churches of Transylvania can rather be interpreted as elements brought from the ancient Armenian Apostolic Church, as already since the Middle Ages they have played a key role in the Armenians' saints cult. Nothing proves this better than the fact that following Saint Gregory the Illuminator, most medieval Armenian churches have been dedicated to Saint John the Baptist and Saint Stephen Protomartyr. The fact that we encounter his representation in every Armenian Catholic church points to the highlighted role of Saint Gregory the Illuminator; moreover, the Armenians have raised altars in this saint's honor in a number of Transylvanian Roman Catholic churches. So far, 13 altarpiece representations of the saint are known, but also several sculptures, stained glass windows, banners and murals depict the missionary apostle of the Armenians. His cult lives on almost unbroken among the Armenians in Transylvania, up to the present they commemorate him within great festivities. However, the function of this worship has changed over the centuries, in some periods being intensified, in others faded, while in the second half of the 19th century, with the birth of the Armenian identity and ideology and the rediscovery of Armenian roots, he became the embodiment of Armenian identity. The spread of Saint Gregory the Illuminator's iconography, certain parallels and models may help in the discovery of the Armenians' network of relations in Transylvanian.

The most important saint of the Armenians was the Virgin Mary, whose increased veneration is indicated by the large number of sacred images and statues in the Transylvanian Armenian churches. The Solomon Church in Szamosújvár was dedicated to the Annunciation, while the Armenian Catholic Church in Gyergyószentmiklós was raised in the honor of the Nativity of Mary. Among the surprisingly high number of images connected to the Virgin, besides the glorious Mary depictions preferred in the Baroque period (such as the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, the Coronation of the Virgin), images closer to popular religiosity, i.e. the more intimate, familial representations (Our Lady of the Rosary, the teaching of Mary, the Holy Family), and copies of popular icons (the Madonna of Mariazell) also appear.

In connection to the veneration of icons and statues we must point out that in the early periods the cult of the miraculous images brought from the Polish territories was still flourishing among the Armenians established in Transylvania, primarily the veneration of the Madonna of Częstochowa. An interesting admixture to this issue, that already before they had any churches, in 1708 Oxendio Virziresco placed on the high altar of the Jesuit church in Brassó the copy of the famous miraculous painting of the Galician Armenians, a representation of Virgin Mary of the Hodigitria type in the Saint Nicholas Church of Kamieniec Podolski. In the inventories of the Solomon Church another Galician Armenian miraculous image appears, the copy of the Matka Boska Łysiecka. However, during the 18th century these are increasingly replaced by the icons venerated in the Carpathian Basin. Relatively early on, already in the first wooden church of Szamosújvár, we encounter the copy of the statue in Mariazell. The cult of the statue from Upper Austria witnessed an exceptional flourishing in the 18th century among the Transylvanian Armenians; a dressed and crowned copy of it stood on every altar of the Solomon Church, and we can also meet the representation in the old church of Erzsébetváros and in the niches of the Armenian houses. In addition, the Madonna of Mariazell of the high church in Erzsébetváros was also endowed with miraculous powers. However, besides the popular devotional images, the population of Szamosújvár and Erzsébetváros had also their own icons, and interestingly, both miraculous images portrayed Our Lady of the Rosary. The veneration of Our Lady of the Rosary is a good example for the way in which in Transylvania the increased veneration of the Virgin present in the Armenian Apostolic Church meets, within the Catholic communities of Armenian Rite, the cult of the Virgin, practiced by the Hungarian Roman Catholic Church. The cult, present in both religions, ensured an opportunity for the freshly united Armenians to accept in an easier way the Catholic doctrines and to get integrated in the religious tradition of the Carpathian Basin. There is no better evidence for this success than the fact that an accentuated Catholic image type and devotional practice was able to penetrate to the deepest layers the Armenian folk religiosity.