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***THE TERRIBLE JUDGMENT OF GOD. LAST JUDGMENT
ICONOGRAPHY IN THE MARAMUREȘ COUNTY
(SEVENTEENTH TO NINETEENTH CENTURIES)***

JOINT PH.D. THESIS

Abstract

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Key words: Last Judgment, Hell, sins, iconography, Post-Byzantine painting, Maramureş County, wooden churches, artistic patronage.

The image of the Last Judgment is characterized by its widespread presence throughout the iconographic imagery of most wooden churches in the Maramureș County, immediately drawing attention for its detailed and wide compositions and the popularity that surrounded it.

In this thesis I propose to analyse the development of the Last Judgment iconography in the Maramureș County, aiming in this way to go beyond the majority of many previous studies, which have largely been limited to the religious painting of the national frontiers. The temporal focus of this study is the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries, the evolution of this iconographic theme being thus analysed within the long duration (*longue durée*). The following research analyses 35 visual representations of this theme, images which were produced for the wooden churches situated in the Romanian and Ruthenian villages of the historical county of Maramureș.

The following study finds its justification in the fact that it proposes a new approach by attempting a detailed and systematic analysis of the subject. In spite of their frequency, the representations of the Last Judgment in the region of Maramureș have not yet been the subject of sustained scholarly research in Romanian, Ukrainian or Hungarian historiographies, and in most cases have only been mentioned in brief descriptions. Some of the Maramureș compositions have never been published or analysed.

This thesis represents an interdisciplinary approach, which applies the methodological instruments of the history of art, history and religious anthropology. The following study has used mainly the iconographic method, analysing the elements of tradition and innovation, the traditional Byzantine and Post-Byzantine motifs contained in the Maramureș iconography of the Last Judgment, and also the influence of Western art. This study has, however, appealed continuously to a comparative perspective with the neighbouring territories of the historical region of Maramureș. The comparison with the sacral art from the whole region of Transcarpathia and from the

territory of Galicia is very important because it fills a gap in Romanian historiography, which has not systematically analysed the influences which came from the geographical areas situated north of Maramureş.

This study also takes into consideration the remodelling seen by the iconographic method in the 90's under the influence of anthropology, semiotics and reception theory.¹ The representations of the Last Judgment are cultural artefacts. In this study I propose to examine the system of production, signification and reception that has led to the creation of these artefacts, and through which these acquire signification.² Placing the research of these compositions in a larger frame (namely the entire production of religious art in the County of Maramureş) has brought into perspective a vast quantity of important information about the perceived artistic influences of the territory. Furthermore, I have dedicated a separate chapter to those elements which belong to the system of production and also to a social history of art, as the social status of the founders and painters, but also the role played by the priests in the production of these images. To achieve this purpose I have carried out a quantitative and qualitative analysis of various archival documents (canonical visitations, conscriptions, circular letters, inventories, and costs estimations), inscriptions and annotations in books.

The study of the system of production of images depicting the Last Judgment found in wooden churches of Maramureş has shown that in this region there were many Romanian landowners and noblemen of the Eastern Rite. This very elite has assumed an important role in the foundation of their village churches, supporting not only the construction of these sacral buildings, but also their decoration. Through the analysis of the inscriptions written on the Last Judgment compositions, it has been pointed out that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were either a unique founder, a noble family or in some cases the painting was commissioned by more noblemen or the

¹ Cassidy Brendan ed., *Iconography at the Crossroads*, Princeton, Princeton University, 1993, p. 11.

² T. G. Ashplant, Gerry Smyth ed., *Explorations in Cultural History*, London, Pluto Press, 2001, p. 6.

entire community of noblemen from the village. Often an important role in the commissioning process had been played by the priests, especially those of noble origin.

Another aspect of this research is the examination of the reception system, through applying the reception theory on the visual material. I propose to analyse not only the functions of the Last Judgment compositions, but also the physical context of these images, as well as their localization and visibility, the disposition and the role of the rooms of the place of worship, and finally the interaction of the public with these representations. Furthermore, I have studied the cultural conventions implied in the production of an artifact – objects, clothing, physiognomic features – through which viewers can recognize and identify different motifs. As for the aspects in which the Last Judgment compositions were regarded and understood by parishioners, I have also analysed the relationship between the scenes depicted and the inscriptions attached to them.

With the exception of the Last Judgment in the church of Giulești, which was a monastery, all the other compositions are located in parish churches belonging to Romanian and Ruthenian villages, which would all have inevitably been seen by large amount of the public. The wall paintings found in Maramureș are situated in the space of the narthex, the only exception being the composition from Giulești, painted on the eastern wall of the portico. The coloured lithographs and the wooden icons of this theme are located either in the narthex or in the nave, on various walls. The comparative study of the iconographic programmes found in the narthex showed that in general, the Last Judgment compositions have been painted beside other eschatological scenes. All these images, as the scholar Anca Pop-Bratu has already mentioned, played the role of emphasising the funerary function of this space.³

The iconographic analysis I have made, points out that the Maramureș compositions remained entrenched in the Byzantine tradition until the end of the

³ Anca Pop-Bratu, *Pictura murală maramureșeană*, București, Ed. Meridiane, 1982, p. 18.

nineteenth century. They are composed not only of the main iconographic elements of the “classical” Byzantine composition, but also of motifs belonging to the late Byzantine and Post-Byzantine art, especially those typical of Russian and Ruthenian representations. The earliest images from Maramureș, which date back to the seventeenth century, contain more numerous motifs belonging to the Byzantine composition; this is an aspect which proves a more important attachment to the tradition of Byzantine painting. Except for a small number of iconographical motifs of Western influence, for more than a century and a half after the Union with the Roman Church, there is a noticeable attachment to the Eastern artistic traditions seen in the compositions of Maramureș. However, along with representations of the Last Judgment depicted through the new technique of lithography, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, there was a break in the Byzantine tradition; during this period the influence of Catholic art was considerable, the respective lithographs being characterized by Western iconography.

The long cultural connections between the county of Maramureș and the northern and western regions of Transcarpathia determined the development of an artistic production which displays certain common features. This aspect can also be noticed in the eschatological representations: the Carpathian Rus’ iconography of the Last Judgment, as was named by John-Paul Himka,⁴ has exerted a great influence on the Maramureș compositions. The process of southward expansion of Carpathian iconography of the Last Judgment manifested itself either in the presence of some Carpathian works in the region of Maramureș or by the activity of some itinerant painters from the region of Galicia, or other counties belonging to the Mukachevo “eparchy”.

The painters of Maramureș have sometimes shown proof of genuine originality in the way they express common elements of different geographical areas through

⁴ John-Paul Himka, *Last Judgment Iconography*, Toronto-Buffalo-London, 2009, pp. 8-10.

painting, offering a personal and unprecedented interpretation. In Maramureş the images of the tollbooths and the personification of death, both iconographic elements which came from the Carpathian Rus' region, underwent a compelling and previously unseen development. I have reached the conclusion that sometimes the county of Maramureş played the role of an intermediary region, through which certain iconographical motifs, as in the case of the visual representation of death, came in the neighbouring Transylvanian counties. Furthermore, besides the different development of some of the iconographical motifs, which saw an autochthonous evolution in Maramureş, these compositions are characterized by various innovations, typical only for this geographical area, as the Works of mercy, Joachim and Anna, Queen of the Earth, the Prophet and bones, the depiction as inhabitants of Hell of certain county officials, the image of the sinners who did not fast and of those women which are guilty of sewing on Tuesdays and Fridays.

In this thesis I have carried out a multifaceted analysis, focussing not only on religious ideas and practices, but also on various secular aspects and elements of everyday life, as well as conflicts between parishioners and social and ethnic relationships. Considering that in the eighteenth century the communities of Eastern rite from the county of Maramureş were passed under the jurisdiction of the bishops of Mukachevo, one of the directions of my research was the investigation analysis of compositions of Last Judgment from the point of view of the confessional paradigm.

One of the objectives of this approach is to analyse the ways in which the eschatological representations have been used as a channel for the affirmation of confessional identity. It has been noted that generally there are no iconographic differences between early representations, from the seventeenth century – created for the Orthodox communities – and the later ones, dating after the Union with the Church of Rome. One might also observe the numerous similarities between the images in

Maramureș and the representations of the Land of Lăpuș, a region that remained in its large majority Orthodox.

Seeing as the doctrine of Eternal Punishment is based on the idea of sin, the images of Hell make for a valuable source, able to provide ethical and moral values communicated by the Church through visual speech. The representations of Hell in Maramureș can therefore offer important information about the dissemination of and the hierarchy of sin, hence the perception on various sins, manifested throughout these three centuries. The quantitative analysis of the sins depicted in the scenes of Hell of the Maramureș compositions, highlights an impressive diversity, including no fewer than 47 figures of various damned. The most frequent depictions of sinners are of those who are guilty of sexual sins and those who sleep on Sundays.

One of the most important features of iconography of the Last Judgment in Maramureș is the large amount of space taken up by the depictions of Hell. The majority of the wall paintings, which date back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, display the image of Heaven much smaller than the comparatively large representations of the Hell. The large depictions of the Hell, the impressive diversity of the sinners and sometimes the violent punishment inflicted on the damned, demonstrate the emphasis of the moralizing and disciplinary functions which characterize the images of the Last Judgment in Maramureș.

The presence of some features, like the attention given to physical torture, the interest in sexual sins, the depiction of numerous members of the village communities and the inclusion of some local aspects, such as conflicts between parishioners, are the result of the social and cultural context of these images. The new-found proximity between part of the religious paintings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and folk art is due to the rural origins of some of the painters and the distancing from the artistic influences linked to the Byzantine traditions. Thanks to largely manifested

popular beliefs, the Last Judgment has been granted a more realistic approach during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, closer to the tastes of the rural community.

The iconography of the Last Judgment in the Maramureş County reflects in general the development process of the sacral art of a region situated on the border of more cultural artistic spheres, the compositions from this region being a special case which integrates different traditions and influences.