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The Iconostasis in Transylvania.

History, Art and Theology

(approx. 1400-1650)

PHD THESIS SUMMARY

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Often perceived as a "purely Byzantine" element, the iconostasis that we find in the usual forms in contemporary churches, is in fact a post-Byzantine tradition that incorporates an amalgam of Byzantine, post-Byzantine and even Western elements.[1]

It may be too much to talk about a "crisis" of the iconographic program in Orthodox churches, but a better understanding of the evolution of the concept of iconostasis could give to the holy places more beauty, unity and harmony. Such an approach significantly goes beyond the Transylvanian space, as well as the boundaries of a single discipline. The historical context, social developments, religious and cultural interference are mirrored in iconostasis like a face in an icon.

In line with the concerns of contemporary scholars to make known the richness of Byzantine cultural heritage in the Balkans and everywhere else, to highlight the particular developments and national specificities they embodied, this project aims to contribute to the knowledge of religious art in Transylvania in general, and in particular to the knowledge and recovery of a tradition that today seems to be misunderstood. Born both for practical reasons and as a result of the symbolic representation of the sacred space constituted by the Byzantine Church – offering numerous analogies to the Temple of the Old Covenant – the iconostasis is marked in its evolution by the history of Byzantium, by the iconoclasm and "The Triumph of Orthodoxy", by the fervor of the cult determined by the Hesychasm, by the irradiation of Constantinopolitan art in the Christian East, by the fall of Constantinople, by the particular developments of church art in Orthodox countries and, last but not least, by the emergence and spread of erminias (18th century), textbooks of liturgical theology, and more recently by the trends and retrospective views promoted by the new generations of artists.

A summary of the evolution of iconostasis on the territory of our country, based on a systematic field research, is still expected. A first beginning is the work of Dorina

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[1] *Iconostas – a post-Byzantine tradition* is the title of the presentation I gave during the *Iconari in Otopeni* 2015. *See* TIMBUȘ (2015), *passim.*

Pârvulescu, *Iconostasis in Banat,* a study that aims, as the title shows, only the area of Banat and only the period of time between the second half of the 18th century and the third decade of the 19th century. At the curently we have more disparate studies, related to different old icons, their connection to the mural painting, to the activity of different painters and different artistic centers, etc. However, many of these studies, some of which are particularly valuable, can serve as a basis for addressing the proposed topic. This quality is especially present in Corina Nicolescu's studies published in the album *Romanian Icons,* those of Alexandru Efremov from the volume with the same name, as well as the studies of Marius Porumb systematized in his monumental work *Dictionary of Old Painting in Transylvania Sec. XIII-XVIII*, in which over 300 artists are identified and the area in which they worked being also reconstituted for most of them. Or in the studies such as Anca Pop-Bratu, with the *Maramuresian Mural Painting*, Ioana Ene with *Brancoveneşti and Post-Brâncoveneşti Icons of Vâlcea County*, Marina Ileana Sabados with *L'iconostasis de Moldovita: a repère dans l'évolution de l'iconostase moldavian* and *Inscriptions on iconostasis from the 16th century (Moldova)* and so on.

Among the special works dedicated to few iconostases in Transylvania is worth to mention the article *Some new considerations regarding the Brancovenian iconostasis in the chapel of the Theological Institute of Sibiu University* signed by Elena Popescu, which reminds of the earlier works of Nestor Camariano and Nicolae Iorga on the cultural activity of the Greek Trade Company in Sibiu, a company that received the right to build Orthodox Churches in other Transylvanian cities where it operated; then the work of Cornel Tatai-Baltă dedicated to the *Iconostasis of the Greek Catholic Cathedral in Blaj,* an iconostasis quite apart for the Transylvanian landscape from the 18th-century, and others.

Understanding the evolution of the iconostasis in Transylvania requires first of all the clarification of the concept of iconostasis, meaning drawing up a "complete" history of iconostasis in Byzantium, to understand symbolic meanings and then confronting the data resulting from field research, but also to contextualize them towards artistic manifestations in neighboring extra Carpathian territories. An overview of the issues raised by the iconostasis and then their placement in context remain goals that would facilitate a better understanding of the theme in the future , a more creative, traditional, but at the same time modern approach to the iconostasis issue, with the practical purpose of restoring to the interiors of the churches the harmony and beauty specific to Byzantium and, implicitly, of bringing its liturgical function back to the forefront.

The interdisciplinary approach undoubtedly has several advantages, being the only one able to bring new clarifications where, following the specific frameworks of each discipline, the impasse is reached. In this case, we consider that this type of approach imposes itself, by the very nature of the proposed theme, a theme that sums up primarily theological concepts and liturgical spatial practices that then determine the material aspects that history, art history and archaeology are called to decipher. *The disadvantage* lies, in the case of any such approach in which teamwork is not possible, in the inability to encompass to a satisfactory extent the fields that are not specific to the author, such as – in our case – archaeology or architecture, but not only.

Documentary sources for the approached subject are extremely few, indirect (with one exception) and relatively late for the studied time interval.

Material sources. In the case of wall in Transylvania, they still raise many issues, such as dating. Many are still waiting to be included in archaeological research campaigns or restoration programs. Large-scale surprises, which would force the rewriting of significant parts of the history of the places, can still occur, as happened in the case of the old church from Râmeț Monastery– without being exhausted – and as is expected in the case of the churches in Cicău and Galda de Jos, where restoration is still ongoing. Natural cataclysms, historical vicissitudes, repairs and renewals, or simply the inadequate framing of old valuable monuments have endangered their existence or even led to their disappearance. In a few happy cases, survival depended on last-minute reports, such as Nicolae Iorga's memory in connection with the church in Galda de Jos[2] (Alba County) or that of Ioana Cristache Panait regarding the church in Sănduleşti[3] (Cluj County).

For wooden churches and mobile heritage*,* the main problem derives from the perishable material of which they are made, which has meant that only a small number of those dating back to the 17th century to survive to this day, in most cases also affected by restorations and repainting and, not lastly, by intentional destruction and alienation.

The working method was mainly based on the case study. The information is divided into chapters, depending on the types of sources. There are discussed wall churches that preserve wall screens or that in the past have had such a dividing wall, attested either by archaeological research or by documentary mentions, and wooden churches and pieces of mobile heritage from Transylvania, dating to the 17th century inclusively. The case studies

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[2] MARCHIS (2020), p. 60.

[3] CRISTACHE PANAIT; DAIA (1974), p. 88.

include essential data about each monument and its iconostasis, with reference to the chronological classification or at least an estimate of it, the type of plan, the architecture and the painted decoration, the function, the group of churches in which it falls and, where is possible to make such assessments, the influences felt from the cultural areas outside Transylvania. The references continue with the iconographic program of the iconostasis and the necessary comments that highlight its particular aspects and allow, at the end of the work, through analysis and comparison, the establishment of an evolutionary process, a typology, the area of spread and local trends or influences beyond the Carpathians.

In the case of our approach, one of the most important ways of documenting was field research, through which we could make direct observations related to the state of conservation of iconostasis, the number of preserved components, technical and stylistic details for dating and assignment, etc.

In this sense, I have undertaken field research on religious monuments in the Metropolinate of Cluj, Maramureș and Salaj, – Cluj, Bistrița-Năsăud, Maramureș and Sălaj counties, carried out in 2011 - 2015, while also fulfilling the position of manager-custodian and museographer of the Museum Collection of Nicula Monastery, during which I took numerous steps to enrich the cultural heritage; I have also undertaken other researches in the collections of cult objects of the Orthodox Archdiocese of Vad, Feleac and Cluj, the Orthodox Archdiocese of Alba Iulia, the Archdiocese of Arad, the Orthodox Protopopiate Bistrița, the National Museum Complex "Astra" Sibiu, the National Art Museum (Bucharest), the Museum of the Romanian Peasant (Bucharest), the Art Museum in Cluj-Napoca, the Ethnographic Museum of Transylvania (Cluj-Napoca), the National Museum of History of Transylvania (Cluj-Napoca), the National Museum of the Union in Alba Iulia and others; as well as in the collections of some museums of local interest (Sibiel, Gherla Municipality Museum, Grăniceresc Museum in Năsăud, Iclod, Rășinari, Pipaș Museum in Sighet, etc.) and in private collections (Szöcs – Fagaras collection, Aurel Bodiu collection – Cluj-Napoca, etc.). Documentary trips, from 2005 to the present, in the country and abroad, to Italy, France, Belgium, England, Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, Greece and Mount Athos have also made a significant contribution.

The appeal to the bibliography of monuments included in the case studies and to the specialized literature from various related research fields completed and confirmed the hypothesis-premises from which this study started, namely the age of existence and the perpetuation in time of a type of altar screen at the old Romanian churches of Transylvania, a type that has its origins in the Byzantine temple and is organically linked to the Eastern

cult. The corroboration and analysis of the results obtained from the research led to the following conclusions:

- The specific form of Transylvanian iconostasis in the 14th - 17th centuries was the *wall iconostasis, respectively the wall-iconostasis with two symmetrical entrances.* It is found in the entire living area of the Romanian population in Transylvania and had as prototype the wall iconostasis of the church of Râmeț Monastery.

- The extension of the wall iconostasis with two symmetrical entrances can be traced in the architecture of wooden churches. The predominant type of altar screen to the wooden churches in Transylvania – starting from the 16th - 17th centuries – was the wall-iconostasis with two symmetrical entrances. In Sălaj County, this feature is almost exclusive and it remains prevalent throughout the 18th century.

- The iconographic program of the Transylvanian iconostasis is generally carried out on three registers: a lower register equivalent to the Royal Icons, a median register Deisis with the Apostles, and in the tympanum the Ascension or the Crucifixion. The programs present a noticeable organic unit from the oldest known ensemble – Galda de Jos, 14th - 15th centuries – to the 19th century, the differences between the three archaic decorative programs (Râmeț, Galda de Jos, Cicău) and those of the modern era consisting in replacing the Ascension scene with the Crucifixion and the sporadic addition, from the middle of the 18th century, of a fourth row of icons, illustrating the Great Feasts or figures of Prophets.

- A series of indirect testimonies offered by the Byzantine iconographic programs from the old stone churches from Strei, Sântămărie-Orlea, Densuș, Ribița, etc., by the lapidary typical provisions from the first Transylvanian Liturgies, by the presence of wooden beams associated with the altar screen, or at least the traces of their places of fixation, suggests the presence in the past, in the Transylvanian churches, of altar screen systems similar to those in the regions under the influence of Byzantine art (either directly or through areas of interference of Byzantine and Western art).

- The rarity of icons on wooden panels until the middle of the17th century can be explained by the fact that mural painting, respectively the fresco icon, was the place of worship in churches, as evidenced by the representations of Peșteana and Galda de Jos, but also those of Strei, Densuș, Ribita, etc., where the presence of Byzantine proschinitarians is as conclusive as possible.

- The first iconostases themselves in Transylvania, in a formula close to the usual one today, appear only in the middle of the 17th century and constitute imported pieces.

• In a first phase, major iconographic influences came from the south of the Danube, from the Italian-Dalmatian territory, for which we have no correspondence in Moldova and Wallachia, then from the Serbian territory. From the middle of the17th century until the first decades of the 18th century, the irradiation of the Ruthenian art in the southeast of the Polish-Lithuanian Kingdom was decisive.

• A new perspective is needed to approach the altar screening systems in the old Romanian churches in Transylvania. For historians, the premise of the existence in the past of an archaic masonry iconostasis with two symmetrical entrances or of another system of closing the altar associated with the wooden beam at the base of the arched apse arch opening is necessary, and for theologians it is necessary to reconsider the history of the iconostasis before the 18th century and the related theological systems, in accordance with the realities highlighted by field research.

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The conclusions resulting from this study do not exclude the national character of Romanian art in Transylvania, but it does not deny one of the specific features of church art which, in general, tends to assume a universal character. It is natural that in a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional space, located in an area of interference of civilizations, there are syntheses, sometimes surprising, which, as V. Vătășianu observes in connection with the monuments from Hațeg County, cannot be easily framed in one current or another[4] and which, nevertheless, bear witness to a past that still has much to say[5] and is therefore still waiting to be brought to light. We say the same thing about the wall iconostasis with two entrances, along with its iconography. We cannot overlook the conclusion of Elena Dana Prioteasa regarding the medieval Romanian painting in Transylvania, which is in accordance with the results of our study, that it was intended for Orthodox worship, the stylistic and thematic mixture of Byzantine and Western elements, being more difficult to discern, requiring "a multitude of other sources and reports on the artistic phenomenon in more remote areas".[6] We followed a similar approach, using, as far as possible, all types of sources, more or less direct, that I could disposed of.

Finally, we hope that this research will be a useful contribution to the knowledge of Transylvanian church art and will provide, to some extent, a basis and some clear guidelines

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[4] VĂTĂȘIANU (1930), p. 181.

[5] VĂTĂȘIANU (1959), p. 258.

[6] PRIOTEASA (2016), p. 12.

for future research directions on iconostasis. Thus, for the future, we point out some of the remaining goals:

▪ Continuation of archaeological investigations of the old Romanian wall churches, in order to *establish the degree and area of spread of the iconostasis with two symmetrical entrances to other monuments in Hațeg County, but also to monuments in Alba, Brașov, Sibiu and especially Cluj Counties.*

▪ Completion of restoration operations at the churches of Galda de Jos and Cicău, because it depends on them to gain additional knowledge about the *Orthodox iconographic program and its adaptation to the characteristics of the local wall iconostases* (representation of the Ascension in tympanum), but also *membership to a compact group of Romanian wall churches of Eastern rite,* concentrated west of Mureş River, on the eastern slopes of the Western Carpathians.

▪ Establishing *the relationship between the wall screen with two entrances and the table in the nave*, similar to the altar table, archaeologically attested at a series of old monuments and perpetuated in the architecture of wooden churches, as well as *identifying its liturgical function.*

▪ Determining the extent to which there is a relationship between the *wall screens with two symmetrical entrances specific to Romanian churches and the altar screen in* small Catholic (Romanesque) parish churches in Transylvania (including here, in the case of the former, the liturgical custom assumed by the presence of stone tables placed in nave and narthex).

▪ In connection with *the transfer of the masonry screens with two symmetrical entrances in the architecture of wooden churches*, it depends on the large-scale restoration of wooden churches in the Hațeg County, where clues of this kind are preserved to a number of almost as large monuments as in Sălaj County – a fact due, in most cases, to the major changes that the monuments have undergone in the last two centuries, due to their remaining in use and adaptations to current cultic requirements.

Regarding the icons on wooden panel, the completion of the field research, in order to highlight the numerous Ruthenian imports, together with the scientific restoration of the heritage preserved in collections and museums, will certainly bring more clarifications *regarding artistic imports,* but also about the local "schools" of iconography from the 16th - 17th centuries.