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***Image, Donors and Community. The Role of the
Mural Paintings in the Religious Communication
in Medieval Transylvania***

Abstract of the Doctoral Thesis

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Table of Contents

Introduction	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Part I.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 1. The Image and the Space.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1. 1. Preferred Pictorial Programs in the Sanctuary.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1. 2. Preferred Pictorial Programs in the Nave	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1. 3. Preferred Pictorial Programs in the Chapel	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1. 4. Preferred Pictorial Programs in the Exterior Painting.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1. 5. The Parish House	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 2. Image and Liturgy.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2. 1. The Medieval Liturgy.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2. 2. The Relation with the Space. The Functions of the Space.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3. 3. The Decor	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 3: Image and Devotion.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3. 1. Images with Jesus.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3. 2. Images with the Virgin	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3. 3. Other main Intercessors	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Part II.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter. 1 – The Noble Churches. Working with the Clergy.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Capitolul. 2 – Churches in the Free Settlements. The Role of the Clergy.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2. 1. The Urban Community	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2. 2. The Rural Community	Error! Bookmark not defined.

Chapter 3. The Priorities of the Donors. Representation, Remembrance **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

3. 1. Figurative Images **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

3. 2. Marks of Patronage **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Part III – The Community **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Chapter 1. The Visual Narratives in the Nave **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Chapter 2. Devotional Images in the Nave, Chapels and Exterior **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Chapter 3. Patron Saints in the Saxon Churches **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Conclusion **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Appendix 1. The Repertoire of Churches **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Bibliography **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Illustrations **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Keywords: Mural Paintings, Middle Ages, Medieval, Transylvania, Saxons, Image, Donor, Community

Abstract

In the last decades a great number of medieval mural paintings have been brought to light in the Transylvanian churches, some of which are still undergoing restoration works. This thesis aims to identify the functions of the pictorial programs in these churches, by referring to the space in which they are located, to the ritual that takes place in that space and to the piety that is performed in relation to these images.

This approach is much needed since the great majority of the publications in the historiography of Transylvanian medieval mural paintings are scientific articles, most either dedicated to a church or to a specific research topic. Many of these studies focus on three issues, the most common of which is the reconstitution of the programs, the clarifying of the stylistic influences, local and at a European level, and finally identifying the dating of the paintings. Generally, the synthesis works have addressed the mural paintings as one of the many categories discussed, but it was treated superficially, only mentioning the existing programs, the dating and sometimes the stylistic affiliation. Other books are structured in the form of a catalog, in which a certain number of churches are analyzed one after another. Of great value are also the masters and doctoral thesis which are very relevant in the specific topic that they approach. The monographies, on the other hand, are found in a rather limited number, with the authors addressing specific themes. These works are of major importance because the subject is deeply analyzed, from several points of view: historical, socio-cultural, artistic and iconographic.

As previously stated, the historians have mainly identified the images present on the walls of the churches, and they also established the dating and the stylistic affiliation. Only in the last decades they have also been interested in topics related to medieval art, such as the social history of art or the Eucharistic aspect of the paintings. At the same time, more recently a more intense approach has been observed regarding the issue of the artistic patronage in these churches. However, there is still much to research in terms of the relationship between the paintings and the space they occupy, as well as regarding the social context. The present thesis, developed around the image-space relationship, wants to dive deeper into the local religious context, in terms of connection between the images, religious service and the devotions of the medieval people. Although the problem has been discussed on a lesser extent by some historians in the last decades, the present thesis aims to discuss the entirety of the church space

and to analyze the impact of the images onto the medieval people, regardless of whether they are eucharistic images, with the Virgin Mary or the lives of the saints. In the present work, the analysis of the iconographical programs will be carried out according to the surrounding space, while the iconographic analysis and the meaning of the images will be carried out in relation to the context in which they are located, from several points of view.

The thesis is structured in three main parts: First, the argument starts with the religious approach, namely with the meaning of the images in the church, the place they occupy, as well as the messages transmitted by the images. The aim is also to clarify the relationship between the images and the clergy, as well as the way they interacted during the services. It was observed that in the sanctuary the images of the Passion of Jesus are often chosen to decorate the northern wall of the choir, thus being closely related to the sacramental niche or the tabernacle that kept the sacrament after the celebration of the liturgy. Iconic figures of saints are mostly decorating the apse in between the windows, as well the south wall of the choir, where narrative images from the lives of the saints are also often chosen. The vault is usually decorated with the figures of the Holy Fathers of the Catholic Church, the symbols of the evangelists and iconic images of the Virgin Martyrs, while the inside the triumphal arch is often decorated with the *Parable of the 10 virgins*. As opposed to the sanctuary, in the nave, there are no longer any preferences regarding the place of decoration, but the frequent approach to the theme of the Last Judgment is noticed, an image that was intended to warn the faithful about the fate of their souls if they stray from the word of God. Also, the popularity of narrative cycles from the lives of the saints, especially the Legend of Ladislav and the life of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, which stimulated the viewers to the act of *imitatio* due to the virtues these saints possessed, is also noted. The situation of the chapels has been discussed in the literature, and thus it is not new that themes with eschatological content predominate, which were strongly linked to the funerary destination of the space, while the paintings placed on the exterior walls of the churches, currently few, highlight the image of Saint Christopher as the protector of the entire community. Therefore, we can consider that although restoration works are currently undergoing in the churches, for now we can state that there were some preferences regarding the theme and the location of certain images: The Passion of Jesus in the sanctuary, linked to the liturgy that took place at the altar table, the *Last Judgment* was often present in the nave, being close to the faithful with its clear and direct message, in the chapels images with eschatological significance and on the outside of the walls Saint Christopher protected the whole community.

The relationship between the image and the liturgy, the most important service that took place in the church space, is also discussed. The images that most effectively illustrate the liturgical act are the Passion episodes, especially the *Crucifixion* scene. However, the image of *Vir Dolorum* is a point of major interest because it signals the real presence of Jesus in the church, through the sacrament, being also among the more frequently images of Jesus found in this area. Also, unlike the space of the sanctuary, the images in the nave generally do not contain references to the liturgical act, but instead have more of a didactic role, recalling the events of the Passion.

Regarding the devotional side of images, different types of devotional images are discussed, intended to generate deep emotions from the viewers and thus invite the faithful to become deeply involved with the characters depicted. Images thus engage the human sensibility, and the image of Jesus dead in the ultimate sacrifice for humanity is one of the most powerful for the medieval people.

The second part of the thesis is dedicated to the donor, where I tried to identify the degree of his involvement in the iconographic program. In the first chapter, the churches whose patrons were noble families were discussed, where it was noted that there were some situations in which the patron could have intervened in the creation of the pictorial program, such as the churches in Mălâncrav, Dârlos and Şmig, but most of the time his intervention is not perceived. The free settlements are also discussed, where the involvement of a donor is even more unlikely, but also here there are situations in which personalities from the urban elite represent themselves in the paintings, such as the situation in Sibiu or Sighisoara. In village churches, this phenomenon is almost non-existent, the only exception being the figure of a priest from Alţâna, although we have no guarantee that he also represents the donor of the painting. Finally, the third chapter discusses the representation of the patrons, who generally chose to be depicted in prayer either in the scene of the *Crucifixion* or alongside the saints with whom they resonated the most (for example, the Mayor Michael Polner from Sighisoara with Maria Magdalena and the parish priest Petrus Plebanus in front of the patron saint of the church in Cîsnădie, Saint Walpurga). In other situations, the donor is present either through inscriptions or through a coat of arms, the purpose of each being to preserve his memory, as well as to benefit from salvation, through this act of donation to the church.

The last part of the thesis discusses the local community, such as the impact that the religious images had on the faithful. The visual narratives in the nave mostly had a didactic

purpose, to familiarize the common people with the Christian teaching, but at the same time they also had the role of emotionally impacting the faithful, thus provoking the viewer to empathize with the event rendered, which most of the time was the Passion of Jesus or cycles with the lives and martyrdoms of the saints. Likewise, the devotional images in the nave, outside the church and in the chapels had a strong impact on people, being much closer to the faithful compared to the images in the sanctuary. Thus, as I mentioned in the first chapter, in the nave one may notice the frequent choice of the Last Judgment, which was an image with a strong emotional impact, encouraging meditation on death and the destination of the souls after the final judgment. In this context, the images of the Virgin as an intercessor came to the aid of the faithful because they found comfort in the presence of Mary who guarantees protection in the face of divine wrath. The same themes are also found in the chapels, while in the images outside the churches they are found to a much-diminished extent due to their rarity. The last chapter of this research tried to address the issue of the patron saints of the churches, concluding that the Virgin was the most frequent dedication of the churches, often illustrated in the pictorial program but not always highlighted compared to the other characters; the same can be said about other churches dedicated to different saints.

The geographical framework of the present research is a narrow one, summing up to the churches in the counties and saxon seats of southern Transylvania since this is an area where an intense artistic activity can be found during the late Middle Ages. Many of the churches discussed in this study are found in the Valea Târnavelor area, a prosperous area during the late medieval times. Also, important pictorial ensembles are preserved in the churches of the great Transylvanian Saxon cities, such as: Sibiu, Mediaş, Braşov, Sebeş, Cisnădie, Cluj and Bistriţa. These are economic, political and social centers constituted a favorable environment for the assimilation and spread of foreign artistic influences in the local Transylvanian landscape, thanks to the itinerant craftsmen coming from the west, but also to the flourishing activity of the guilds.

Around 50 churches are discussed, located either on free royal land (*Fundus Regius*), or on the noble counties. This choice is motivated both by personal reasons (having lived in Sibiu for most of my life and thus being familiar with the local German communities) and also by reasons of the time limit of the present research. Even so, medieval southern Transylvania has an overwhelmingly large number of wall-painting monuments. Therefore, the spatial limits of the study are the noble churches (such as Mălâncrav, Dârlos, Alma or Şmig) and those of the

free saxon communities (in a much larger number, such as the urban churches or the villages of Homorod, Richiș, Drăușeni, Rupea, Ighișu Nou and Hărman).

Moreover, the chronological framework is a generous one, the study starting with the first traces of paintings preserved in Transylvania, dated around 1300 from Homorod and Cricău, to the most recent wall paintings dated in the years preceding the Lutheran Reformation, adopted in Transylvania in 1544, as is the case with the paintings from Cetatea de Baltă or Richiș, dated in the first decades of the 16th century.

As I mentioned before, the systematic restoration works from the recent decades has brought to the surface an enormous amount of artistic material. The present research has exactly these paintings as its main source, focusing primarily on the discussion of images and visual narratives. This was possible in situations where their state of preservation allowed the analysis, because there are quite a few programs that still preserve fragments of paintings; unfortunately, the layer is much too damaged and only reveals a few clues about the general theme of the image (such as the paintings of Cisnădie and Homorod, for example). Despite this fact, the impact of the new discoveries is major because in this way the extent of this phenomenon of decorating the sacred space with murals in the Transylvanian space can be noticed. The present thesis aims to highlight and discuss these churches whose restorations brought material new.

The methodology used in this paper is the traditional iconographic analysis, inspired by Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky, because the research aims to overcome the formal-iconographic barrier and aims to address the social aspects of medieval art. The thesis succeeds in operating a paradigm shift in the approach to murals that will no longer be analyzed only formally and morphologically, but also from the perspective of the cultural history of religion. The image will be read from an iconographic and iconological point of view, in accordance with the context in which it is found, namely the religious but also the social one, both from the perspective of the patron and from that of the believer who came to attend the service.

The finality of this research consists in overcoming the comfortable zone of the formal art history, the work thus having the aim of motivating future historians to enter even more into the daily life of the medieval people (in this case the Transylvanian Saxons) through the prism of religious images that were at the basis of the mentality of the entire Middle Ages.

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