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ACADEMIA ROMÂNĂ



Mihaela PROCA

Identitate regională  
și specificitate românească  
în pictura din  
Transilvania meridională  
în pragul primei  
modernități



Editura Muzeului Național al Literaturii Române



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ROMÂNEASCĂ ÎN PICTURA DIN TRANSILVANIA  
MERIDIONALĂ ÎN PRAGUL PRIMEI MODERNITĂȚI**



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ÎN PICTURA DIN TRANSILVANIA MERIDIONALĂ  
ÎN PRAGUL PRIMEI MODERNITĂȚI**

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**Titlul proiectului:** „Valorificarea identităților culturale în procesele globale”

**Contract:** POSDRU/89/1.5/S/59758

**Beneficiar:** ACADEMIA ROMÂNĂ

**Parteneri în proiect:** (I) UNIVERSITATEA POLITEHNICA București, Facultatea de Mecanică și Mecatronică; (II) UNIVERSITATEA din Craiova



#### Obiectivele proiectului și domeniile de cercetare:

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**Abstract**

**Regional Identity and Specific Romanian Traits  
in the Painting of Southern Transylvania  
at the Beginning of the Modern Epoch**

The paper is the result of a two years postdoctoral research and consists of four parts.

The first is introductory, treating **post-Byzantine iconography premises in the Balkans**, marked by the Greek Orthodox Church and the stability of the vocabulary formulas until modern times (centuries 18 and 19); toward the end of the interval there is a strong rustic style and simplicity, which led to the characterization of “Balkan painting without nationality”.

Part two summarizes the **defining characteristics of South Transylvanian art**, defined by the “postbrancovan style” from over the Carpathians, during a highly conflictual historical period in terms of events, but prolific and very creative; with the emergence of a new category of founders in the eighteenth century (merchants, priests, captains and shepherds), the figurative language of the postbrancovan art becomes more rustic; the purpose of painted images is more and more intended to illustrate the content of popular religious books in a society still insufficiently familiar with reading.

- In the subchapter **painters of icons and churches and rural centers** the most relevant names are summarized, noting the iconographic pattern and the style, and the importance of the

traditional indications in perpetuating the same compositional models.

Chapter **iconographic programmes** analyzes separately for each space the thematic layout in order to observe common characteristics and specific traits for each of the three areas of southern Transylvania: Sibiu land, Făgăraș land and Burzenland; there is a chronological presentation of churches in order of painting, regardless of the building date, due to the fact that often the painting was done in different steps, by different painters; only after describing the repertory of iconographical programmes can be determined the evolution of programmes, the emergence of newer iconographic variants, simplifying and reducing the themes layout.

- The iconographic program of **the sanctuary** of churches in **Sibiu land** presents on the vault first the theme “Holy Trinity”, by either the neotestamentary variant or the “Coronation of the Virgin”, with the same meaning, according to inscriptions, as interpreted in the rural environment. The theme is accompanied by the Incarnation, the “Madonna with Child”, either on throne, surrounded by archangels, or as orant, with the orant Child in a medallion on her chest (“Blachernitissa”). The next lower register presents “The Apostles Communion”, accompanied by “The Tabernacle”. The prototype of this disposal is the church St. Paraskeva in Rășinari, painted by Grigore Ranite, whose authority has imposed the Wallachian model in the area. The rest of the parietal decoration shows the consecrated themes for this space, the hierarchs and bishops.
- The iconographic programme of the **sanctuary in Făgăraș land** does not change during this time, even if the model is based on the prototype established by the Wallachian painters of the church St. Nicholas in Făgăraș, at the beginning of the 18-th century, and becomes mainly decorative but conservative toward the middle of the 19-th century. Initially, the sanctuary vault illustrated exclusively the Incarnation, in the version “Orant Madonna with orant Child”, and gradually over the last decades of the eighteenth century this theme has been replaced by the “Holy



Trinity” of the New Testament, or the image of God the Father (completing the Trinity by the Holy Spirit and the Infant Child). The second theme remains the Incarnation, mostly as “Madonna with Child” on throne, surrounded by archangels. Until the early nineteenth century persist the figurations of holy prophets, the Apostles Communion, and the Pentecostarion Sundays; only towards the end of the interval other feasts are also introduced.

- In **Burzenland the sanctuary** iconography is very consequent representing the Holy Trinity as God the Father, the Holy Ghost and the Child Jesus hold by the Virgin. The traditional hierarchy is respected in presenting the great feasts, the prophets and the bishops.
- The iconography of **the nave in Sibiu land** keeps several constant traits despite the thematic restriction due to reduced space. First, the decoration of the large cupola stems in that of the tower of the Brancovan epoch. In addition, a supplementary frieze appears the first time at the church in Fântânele (1771), depicted by Stan of Răşinari, illustrating the Passion, and after 1800 it comprises the great feasts (at Jina) or the Passion (at Cristian). Therefore the transverse western vault and the upper register of the northern wall change their themes, providing the opportunity to illustrate more scenes from the Christological cycle. The transverse vaults are reserved for great feasts themes, the Pentecostarion Sundays (on the eastern vault) and the Passion cycle (on the western vaults). The longitudinal walls gradually reduce the number of registers so that the figuration in the lower register is oversized.
- In **Făgăraş land** the large cupola of the **nave** is dedicated at the beginning to liturgical themes that are gradually eliminated, first “The Divine Liturgy”, then the “Hetimasia”, for decorative frizes composed of medallions with portraits of prophets and holy fathers, in the nineteenth century. As in Sibiu land, the Passion cycle appears on the cupola, preceded by the great feasts themes (end of 18-th c., painter Ionaşcu, at Sâmbăta de Sus). The Passion cycle becomes a constant illustration on the cupola for the painters Teodor (at Şercăiţa and Ohaba), his son Sava (at Beclean and

Mândra) and Nicolae Grecu son (at Fofeldea and Voivodenii Mici). On second nave cupola is only once depicted a rare theme, "The Holy Trinity in a Single Body", and later this theme appears in the frieze of holy bishops portraits of (at Țichindeal and Beclean), all of them painted by Nicolae Grecu son. The transverse vaults are decorated, generally with great feasts themes and Pentecostarion Sundays towards the sanctuary and the Passion cycle towards west, complementing the themes of the upper longitudinal and western walls. The number of narrative scenes from the upper register is reduced on the south and north walls, reaching at one single theme in the nineteenth century, therefore the silhouettes in the lower register are oversized to cover a higher area.

- In **Burzenland the nave** iconography differs from Făgăraș and Sibiu land due to the architectural configuration, the longitudinal half cylinder being painted with medallions on the vault and two registers with narrative panels on the north and south walls. The mural favorite topics for decoration are the great feasts and the Passion cycle, the latter presented around the nave, with emphasis on the themes of judgments and punishments until the Resurrection. Whereas in most cases the interior is unique for the nave and narthex (eventually segmented by a balcony in wood), in the western part may appear isolated hagiographic themes and scenes from the Old Testament, but scenes inspired by the Akathistos Hymn or not canonical gospels on Virgin life are lacking.
- **The narthex** has in **Sibiu land** a fairly consistent iconography, focusing on scenes from Virgin life. The cupola is often decorated with the theme "Orant Madonna with Child" version Blachernitissa, surrounded by a detailed illustration of the Akathistos Hymn. The innovating narrative themes on the narthex cupola are introduced by the painter Stan of Rășinari, later adopted by Ioan of Poplaca and Vasile Muntean, illustrating either the Akathistos Hymn or the Passion cycle. Other specific topics of the narthex as the ecumenical councils or the sacraments can be considered a direct influence of the painter Grigore Ranite, who worked in Rășinari. The eschatological themes specific to the narthex during the Brancovan epoch are rare, scenes inspired by

Apocalypse and The Last Judgment being depicted only in two cases (at Săliște and Sibiel). The themes of the longitudinal walls are reduced to conventional figurations of martyrs, in an oversized lower register that covers the entire surface.

- In **Făgăraș land the narthex** vault – whether it is a cupola or a half cylinder – illustrates the main theme of Incarnation, in two variants: Blachernitissa or Hodeghetria, especially towards the end of the interval, at the painters Grecu from Săsăuși. The pendants can be illustrated with four Sundays of the Pentecostarion too, although the favorite themes are the four holy musicians who composed the Maria hymns. Otherwise, the narthex iconography is primarily inspired by the great feasts and the Akathistos Hymn. Isolated may appear themes inspired by the Genesis, the Last Judgment, or Old Testament legends such as that of Joseph.
- In **Burzenland the narthex** iconography is no longer inspired by the life of the Virgin or eschatological themes, as in the surrounding areas. The Pentecostarion Sundays are illustrated mainly by appearances of Jesus after the Resurrection and miracles, understood as a complement of the Christological cycle illustrated in the nave. Other themes presented in the narthex, inspired of parables, hagiography or Old Testament legends are isolated and randomly selected according to the moralizing content intelligible to the whole village community.
- The iconography of **porches in Sibiu land** illustrate mainly two major eschatological themes, the Last Judgment and the Apocalypse, supplemented eventually by cycles containing obviously moralizing character inspired by apocryphal legends.
- The **porches** painted programmes in **Făgăraș land** cover the post-Brancovan specific themes, illustrating in almost all cases the Last Judgment. The compositional variants of Wallachia models are represented in this area too, new variants are pertaining to the narrative details and picturesque descriptions of the different punishments in hell.
- The **porches in Burzenland** illustrate mainly the Last Judgment, with equal sharing of the surface between heaven and hell.

Sometimes several adjacent wall panels depicted Jesus miracles or scenes of martyrdom of the most popular saints in rural areas and sequences inspired by the legends of the Old Testament prophets.

- The **exterior painting** of churches in **Sibiu land**, reported before that of Wallachia, has a thematic arrangement unframed in a subsequent program but was determined by village donors whose names are often mentioned. It is about upper frizes and panels in the middle and lower register, illustrated with great feasts.
- In **Făgăraș land** the **exterior painting** is reduced to several panels on the south wall or a frize under the cornice. The themes are related to the great feasts and the image of the most popular saints, as in the surrounding areas, only later appearing the themes of the Last Judgment.
- The **exterior painting** of churches in **Burzenland** disposed either as isolated panels or in continuous frizes, represents additional themes to the interior programme. The arrangement of scenes alternates great feasts with hagiographic themes or parables, only towards the end of the interval being depicted scenes inspired by the last Judgment or Apocalypse.

In **conclusion** (the last chapter), the iconographic programmes repertory of churches in southern Transylvania emphasizes the liturgical motivation mostly in the sanctuary and on the nave and narthex vaults, the other surfaces being depicted with narrative themes intelligible to the village community. The coherence and stability of the thematic programmes of the mural painting are a constant in the whole space of Orthodoxy, both in the Balkans and Russia. The **regional identity** is one of all orthodox Balkan countries, politically suppressed but continuing to assert obstinately their belonging to the national culture and spirituality, against adverse times. The national **specific traits**, including **Romanian**, must be understood in this context. Western iconographic themes taken up by acculturation are detected almost simultaneously in Greek and Russian territories, along with the Transylvanian, without any propagation path being yet clear.

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