

## ROMANIAN RELIGIOUS ART IN THE XV-XVII CENTURIES

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Moldavia's Orthodox options generated natural and direct relations especially with Bulgaria and Serbia – countries with a longer political and cultural history -, with Mount Athos and even with Byzantium.

The use of Slavonic (of medieval Bulgarian expression) both in church and in the cultural realm points to the fact that most of the Byzantine religious literature came down to Moldavia via the South Slavic area. On the other hand, the South Slavic tradition was directly transmitted by scholars and artists who found shelter north of the Danube, following the Turks conquest of the Bulgarian tsardom of Vidin, in 1393, and of the Serbian despotate, in 1456.

Romanian culture in its Slavic form was the result of a complex and extensive synthesis of elements pertaining to the Orthodox traditions of Byzantium, Mount Athos, Bulgaria and Serbia, and of Catholic and Protestant elements received via Ragusa, Venice, Hungary, Bohemia and Poland, blended together in an original unity.

In a period when large areas of the former Byzantine Empire were under Turkish rule, and had a small contribution to the pan-Orthodox and post-Byzantine cultural and artistic life, the Romanian principalities continued the Byzantine-Balkan art in courtly forms.

The votive painting in the church at Pătrăuți (1487), dedicated to the Holy Cross, shows Emperor Constantine; the nartex murals illustrate *the Cavalcade of the Holy Cross*, depicting military saints led by Emperor Constantine and St George, the patron saint of Constantinople and, later, of Moldavia (earlier, in 1474, *the Eulogy of St Constantine* had been copied into Slavonic). The image symbolizes the anti-Ottoman crusade fought by Stephen the Great for the protection of the Christian world.

Moldavian monasteries benefited from the long establishments, where texts were copied upon the commission of Moldavian metropolitans and hegumens.

No medieval Moldavian accomplishment matched religious art and culture in complexity and comprehensiveness. Their range, diversity and sometimes quality surpassed by far any form of secular achievement; they benefited from princely patronage, in certain cases, such as that of Stephen the Great, the right to found an establishment. Religious art, indebted as it was to the Byzantine and Balkan legacy, was characterized by a programmatic conservatism, an enduring feature of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The latter imposed absolute fidelity towards the rules established by Byzantine art in the realms of architecture, wall painting and the decorative arts meant for religious use, thus limiting the access of Western cultural and artistic elements. Moldavian art is a variant of post-Byzantine art in which elements pertaining to Western aesthetic and morphology, and, towards the end of the century, elements of Oriental origin were closely assimilated or subordinated to the Orthodox ones, being often reduced to decorative details and the status of fashionable but short-lived prerequisites.

Painting is intimately connected to church texts, and therefore it is also the most conservative domain of medieval art. Those in charge of framing the iconographic programs were not the master painters, especially not in the case of princely foundations or monastery churches, as monasteries were major cultural centers which had their own libraries and acted as keepers of tradition *par excellence*; rather such programs were the work of hegumens, of learned iconographers.

The Great Festivals and *the Passion* are illustrated in the nave, while the legend of the patron saint of the church and, sometimes, that of the patron saint of the founder are depicted in

the narthex. Programs become more complex with the addition of themes from *the Old Testament*, and are sometimes extended to include *the Menologion* and *the Ecumenical Councils*.

Exterior wall painting appears as an orchestration of iconographic themes presumably conceived by one and the same Macarie. With few exceptions, it comprises themes customarily employed throughout the Orthodox world, such as *the Akathistos Hymn*, *the Last Judgment*, *the Tree of Jesse*; nonetheless, their rendition is indicative of an iconographic as well as stylistic revision (*the Tree of Jesse*), or of an adaptation to Moldavian realities. Thus, *the Siege of Constantinople*, the scene which ends *the Akathistos Hymn* and symbolizes the protection granted by the Mother of God to the Byzantine capital city and, by extension, to Moldavia, and the presence of Turks and Tartars in the scene of *the Last Judgment* convey a local message, related to the anti-Ottoman crusade (Corina Popa, 1999, p. 8-15).

The art and culture of the sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries did not really differ from the art and culture of the Romanian Middle Ages in general, sharing a primarily religious character. The endeavors of commissioners and makers of valuable works of art alike were focused towards a religious end. Besides, the information to have reached us on artistic secular products ranging from monuments to various items of common use is scarce. Illuminated manuscripts dating from this period are no exception: they are codices exclusively meant for use in church, a destination which determined both the content and the form of their decoration and illustration.

Sixteenth-century Four Gospels Books continued to be embellished with miniatures of the evangelists in the manner established in the fifteenth century, with the intrinsic artistic value of the images varied from one miniature painter to another.

From the Moldavian sixteenth-century manuscripts, nine Four Gospels Books are preserved abroad: one of 1504 at the State Museum in Cetinje, Serbia; a 1529 one in the museum of the Rila Monastery in Bulgaria; two, of 1551 and 1594, in the library of Patriarchate in Jerusalem; a 1575 one in the Central Library of the Ukrainian Academy in Kiev; one of 1598 at the Sinai Monastery; one of 1599 at the National Library in Athens; one of 1599 at the St Sava Monastery near Jerusalem; finally, one of 1609 is preserved at the Koutloumousiou Monastery on Mount Athos.

Apart from illustrations, manuscripts were also embellished with various other ornaments. Frontispieces to the Gospels decorated with *interlaces* consisting of interwoven circles and x-shapes, sometimes creating a square pattern, are typical of Moldavian manuscripts. The first such decorations, future models of the genre, are again to be found in the work of Gavril Uric, namely in *The Homilies of St Gregory of Nazianzos*, a manuscript which he copied in 1424 in the *scriptorium* of the Neamț Monastery.

The remarkable stylistic unity of manuscript decoration stretches over two hundred years as it covers the entire sixteenth century. Further more, the decoration in Moldavian manuscripts was also perpetuated in manuscripts produced in the other two Romanian principalities.

The manuscripts are either decorated exclusively with frontispieces and ornate polychrome initials consisting of *interlaces*, as is the case with the 1512 *Four Gospels Book of Teoctist*, *The Four Gospels Book from the Golia Monastery*, dating from the first half of the sixteenth century, *The Liturgy Book from the Slatina Monastery* of the same century, or they are containing miniatures as well; the 1502 *Four Gospels Book of Stephen the Great*, the 1555 *Four Gospels Book of Grigorie Fierție* and *The Four Gospels Book of Ieremia Movilă*, written before 1607, the year it received its binding, belong to the second category.

The production of medieval manuscript does not revolve exclusively around the art of miniature painting. The covers they received involved the work of silversmiths. Most of the codices executed during the period are or at least were initially bound in gilded silver bindings. These depicted religious themes and sometimes comprised donors inscriptions and hallmarks.

The most often copied religious text was the *Four Gospels Book*. According to tradition, the front cover of such a book depicts the front cover of such a book depicts *the Resurrection* in the form of *the Descent into Limbo*; in some cases it also comprised the symbols of the four

evangelists. The back cover related to the patron saint/feast of the church for which the book is meant. Techniques employed in the execution of book bindings usually included *repoussé*, chiseling and gilding. Precious and semiprecious stones were sometimes set to enhance the value of the bindings. Other types of books were bound between simpler covers made of cold-pressed leather decorated with various patterns and religious scenes.

The themes depicted on book covers and book bindings are borrowed from the Byzantine-Slavic iconography. At the beginning, the silversmiths were presumably of Transylvanian origin; later they were replaced by local Moldavian masters.

As in the case of miniature painting, the earliest Moldavian book binding, which established the iconography for the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, is linked to a manuscript executed by Gavril Uric, dating from 1436. The binding was probably produced towards the middle of the fifteenth century, in a Transylvanian workshop.

Sixteenth-century book bindings followed the earlier tradition established during the reign of Stephen the Great without copying it to the letter. One such example is the binding of *The Four Gospels Book of Teoctist*. The representation of *the Resurrection* on its front cover is more dynamic than earlier ones, as figures seem to enjoy a higher freedom of movement. The *Four Gospels Book*, bound in 1555, equally exemplified the continuation of traditional representation formulas with certain variations of the iconographic details, such as the inclusion of two angels fighting the master of Hell in *the Descent into Limbo*.

As in the case of manuscripts, it will be possible to draw a more comprehensive conclusion about book bindings only when all sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century Moldavian book bindings now in libraries abroad are published. Literature mentions several such book bindings whose iconography reveals renewals and additions which gradually appeared during the sixteenth century. The back cover of a 1543 *Four Gospels Book* paid for by the sons of Prince Petru Rareș, Ștefan and Constantin, and preserved at the Holy Sepulcher, depicts new scenes: in the upper register – *The Mother of God with the Infant Jesus Enthroned between Archangels*, and in the lower one – *Sts Demetrius, George and Zenobius*, each depicted in a niche. The iconography of the *Four Gospels Book* offered in 1570 by the painters guild to a church in Suceava (now a Lvov) is even more interesting. The cover of this manuscript depicts, next to *the Resurrection* scene, the image of St Luke identified by the inscription ‘evangelist and painter’. The saint is represented, according to tradition, painting the icon of *The Virgin and Child*.

Whereas the colophon of most manuscripts records the name of the copyist and miniature painter who executed them, the names of the silversmiths who produced book bindings begin to be mentioned only towards the end of the sixteenth century. Such is the case of Ioachim, a silversmith from Suceava who, in 1599, bound a *Four Gospels Book* that was to be given to a church in Hotin. Another silversmith from Suceava was master Gligorie Moesiu who, in 1607, executed the binding of the beautiful *Four Gospels Book of Ieremia Movilă*. Moesiu hallmarked both covers, putting his master mark next to *the Baptism of Christ* on the back cover; the rendition of such iconographic details as the tree and the axe on the banks of the Jordan river closely follows the words in the Gospel of Matthew: ‘The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire’ (Liana Tugearu, 1999, p. 98-104).

Romanian museums and monasteries preserve one of the richest treasures of medieval embroidery in Southeastern Europe, a region where the Byzantine cultural and artistic legacy had an overwhelming influence.

Traditional Byzantine embroidery reached settlements in the Lower Danube region as early as the eleventh century. Centuries later and even after the fall of the Byzantine Empire, local masters drew their inspiration from such pieces and created new forms, perpetuating an art of major significance for the Balkan area and the Romanian principalities.

Next to architecture and painting, Romanian medieval embroidery contributed greatly to the cultural achievements of Southeastern Europe and the Christian Near East. Drawing on representative Byzantine models, embroidery, took over elements pertaining to iconography, decoration and

technique. It also assimilated certain influences from the Italian Renaissance, thereby creating a novel synthesis, particularly evident in some of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century masterpieces.

Embroideries typical of the Byzantine and post-Byzantine compositional tradition feature a well-defined structure and an architectural organization of space. They bring together traditions which go way back in time. Classical Greek art is manifest in the anatomically correct construction of the well drawn figures, in the style of the folds, evocative of the expressivity of Classical sculpture, in the eurhythmic stances and movements. The propensity towards hieratic postures and luxurious materials originated in the East, while the Church made it clear that inspiration had to be derived from canonical and liturgical sources and imposed the symbolism.

Whereas in the early days of the sixteenth century *epitaph* maintained, broadly speaking, the iconographic layout of the previous century such as displayed by the Neamț *epitaphios*, later pieces show changes in that the iconographic composition is becoming ampler; the number of figures is larger and the scene becomes crowded. The 1516 *epitaphios* from the Voroneț Monasterz, the 1556 one from the Slatina Monasterz and the 1592 one from the Sucevița are illustrative for this development throughout the sixteenth century.

The two curtains (*dveras*) featuring *the Transfiguration* which were given by Lăpușneanu to his foundation at Slatina occupy a special place in the development of Romanian embroidery. The 1561 piece draws on the model of the curtain Bogdan the Blind offered to the Putna Monastery in 1510. It is a synthesis of all the novelties manifest in sixteenth-century embroidery, and a good example of both its pictorial and decorative qualities. The large size of the two suggests that they were no longer genuine iconostasis curtains, being probably used only on special occasions related to the monastery's feast.

The seventeenth century is also known as the 'post-classical' period in Romanian medieval embroidery. It is marked by the coexistence of two trends, namely the continuation of the iconographic tradition of the previous centuries and the emergence of new elements touching especially on technique. The realistic approach of certain formal portraits sets a note apart.

The two funerary portraits depicting Ieremia Movilă (1606) and Simion Movilă (1609) are notable examples in what concerns the development of Romanian embroidery in that they synthesize the post-Byzantine splendor, perceivable in countless superb court ceremonies, with the elegance and pomp of Western-type baroque, known via Polish sources. Executed at the turn of the century, the two pieces exemplify aesthetic solutions which perpetuate the tradition while appropriating new models which were to open the way for the embroideries created during the age of Vasile Lupu (1634-1653).

Throughout the sixteenth century, embroidery played a leading part in the artistic output of the time, as testified by the large number of pieces to have come down to us. Though still maintaining the spiritual quality of the iconographic themes and the symbolic elements employed during the previous centuries, by the middle of the sixteenth century embroidery began to develop towards elaborate, particularly decorative compositions, which, in the age of the Movilă dynasty, came to enjoy a ceremonial status (Anca Lăzărescu, 1999, p. 136-145).

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