
THE CHURCH 'SAINT NICHOLAS' FROM POPĂUȚI

RESTORATION ASPECTS OF THE MURAL DECORATION

Carmen Cecilia Solomonca *

University of Fine Arts 'George Enescu', Preservation- restoration Department, 700451 Iasi,
Romania

(Received 2 May 2006, revised 7 August 2006)

Abstract

Restoration works carried out between 2000-2006 in Saint Nicholas Church of Popauti Monastery permitted the detailed identification of severe damages affecting the mural painting. The painting was seriously affected under the action of the humid climate and of the biodegradation. Beside natural factors, human factor contributed to the degradation of the painting, sometimes with irrecoverable consequences (e.g. re-painting, reparations over the painting and the masonry, different kinds of interventions of the *renew* from 1926-1927).

Keywords: mural painting, human factor, repainting, restoration

1. The foundation and events that marked the monument

The building of the church 'Saint Nicholas' from Popăuți, Botoșani, was ended on the 30th September 1496, by the Moldavian prince Stephen the Great, date mentioned on the carved stone at the entrance of the church [1]. The monument was part of fortification ensemble with the royal court and tower of church (recently restored).

The church 'Saint Nicholas' has the characteristics of the medieval Moldavian style concerning the project, the interior space, the system of architectural construction and the decorative concept [2] (Figure 1). The interior walls (narthex, nave and altar) were totally covered with mural decorations (Figure 2).

The rectangular **narthex** has at the superior part a semispherical vault decorated with star nervures in Gothic style.

The nave – central room, was separated by the narthex with a wall (like the inner architecture of the moment), which was probably eliminated in the XVIIIth century, remaining only an archway. The modification may be due to the century's style. The elimination of the wall changed not only the architectonical

* e-mail: csolomonea@yahoo.com

harmony but also lead to the loss of an important part of the document painting, including the votive tablet. The niches from the nave and the altar were also modified in the same period.



Figure 1. Outside view from south–east.



Figure 2. Cleaning tests of the mural paintings: (a) altar; (b) nave, south wall.

The steeple above the nave has big proportions and it leans by two series of pillars in the Moldavian medieval architecture style.

The altar with an imposing semi calotte keeps in the axe of its apse the only little window in the original form.

The construction of the church was ended at 30th of September 1496, but the moment of inside decoration of the monument it is not precisely know. The art historians suppose that generally the painting was made not a long time from the building of the church [3]. This subject is still open, being linked by the ending of painting restoration work.

The decorative concept of Stephen's the Great period is reflected in the rigorous program concerning each room of the church.

In 1751 the royal church and other properties pass under auspices of the Antiochian Patriarchy, and became monastery under the administration of Greek monks. During this period, the church had suffered many changes, some of them provoking irreparable damages. These changes following the style of the time were inferior to the original painting and architecture.

In 1840 the church was already in a lamentable condition. Since 1863 the monastery was closed and the church became a regular one as the original concept of the great prince.

2. Restoration and conservation interventions performed along the time

The severe state of degradation of the mural decoration is the effect of many factors which influenced the inside equilibrium of the church.

Maybe the most aggressive factors, in association with the natural factors, were the so-called 'restoration' or 'improvement' interventions inside and outside the church. Along the time the monument suffered many aesthetical and functional changes. The Greek monks added a baroque pulpit in the north of the nave and a kafas in the narthex; both provoked the degradations and the lost of part of decorations. Another intervention in the century style is the repaint in 'a secco' technique (pigments with a faint liaison), whose marks are now visible only on little surfaces, because of other interventions at the beginning of XXth century (Figure 3).

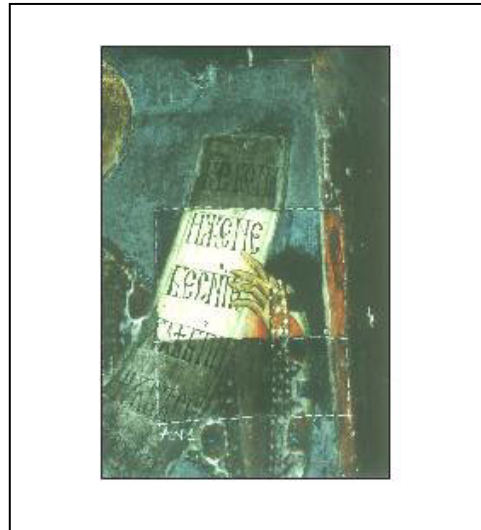


Figure 3. Altar, detail, cleaning test. The original painting covered with repainted portions 'a secco' and biologically attacked.

This type of repaints is also meet on the some zones with repair mortars, which covered gaps of the original painting.

The repainting made by the Greek monks doesn't change the original compositions of the scenes but has covered the original medieval image (Figure 4). In the century's style, the repainting proves the tendency for restricted scale of tones without the refinement of the line or of the colour. The image change doesn't mean a good quality of repainting [4].

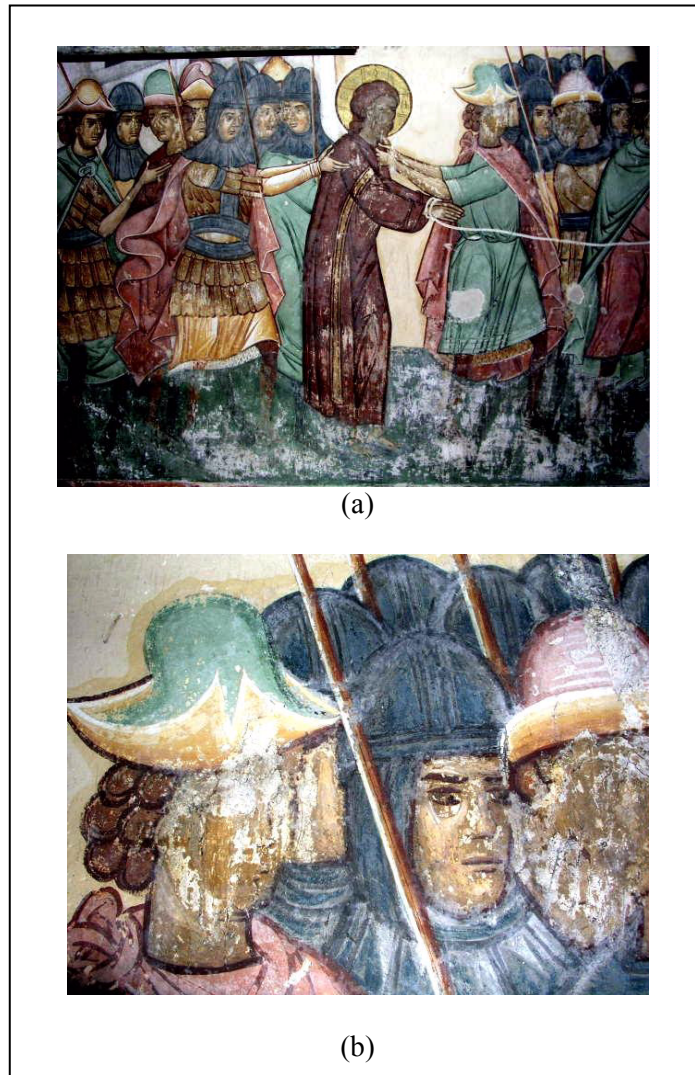


Figure 4. (a) Scene with repainted portions - The judgement at Anna and Caiafa (nave, south wall); (b) detail with repainted portraits.

The portion with gaps from intonaco was completed with some plasters without giving importance of their resistance or aspect. Those interventions from different periods, on the monument, were motivated by two possible reasons:

- due to functional utilitarian needs;
- from aesthetically reasons dictated by the artistic and stylistic tendencies of that period.



Figure 5. Details with stone and cement plating from the 1906-1908 restoration (the south facade). Humidity effects.

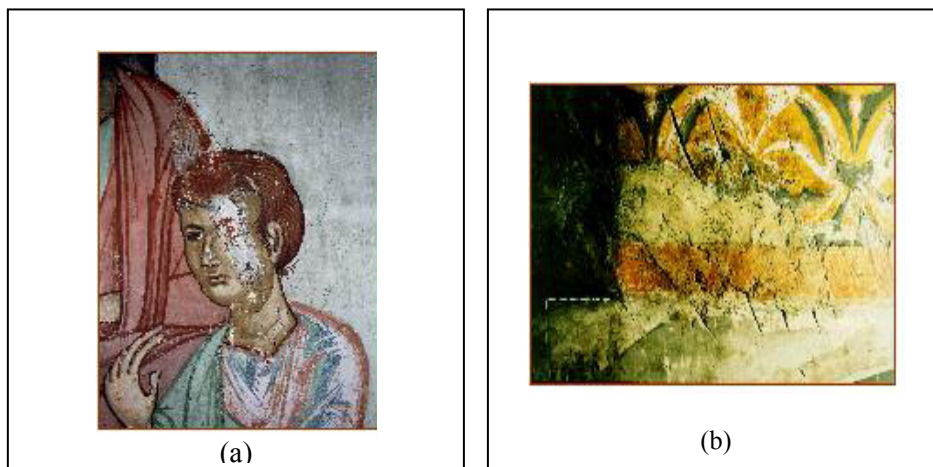


Figure 6. Details with local repaint 'affresco' from 1926-1927: (a) altar - The last supper; (b) nave, floral golden elements. The intervention is applied on repaint vestige from XVIII-XIXth century.

On 15th of June 1897, the officials closed the church because it arrived in a critically state of preservation. The church and the tower have been declared historical monuments and it was decided their restorations starting with 1899.

In 1908 the restorations of church was ended by the architect Constantin Băicoianu, radically changing the aspect of the monument by plating the original masonry into a new parament with strict geometrical forms [5].

Concurrently, the level of the inside and exterior pavement was artificially raised with 30–50 cm. This radical action on the architecture produced the modification of humidity parameters. So the degradations were aggressive on the masonry and the paintings (Figure 5). Another intervention that contributed to the change of mural decoration aspect was made between 1926-1927, by diverse works under the coordination of Commission of Historical Monuments [6, 7].

The present researches proved that those interventions very diverse as methodology don't follow the association with the materials and the original style. The renovation works from that period had to improve the images of the old paintings by completion of small gaps (portraits, hands) with repaints in 'affresco' technique (on wet base) and oil technique (Figure 6) [8]. Some repaint interventions were also performed on the parts affected by vandalism (the oldest are probable from the XVIth century) as incisions, cuts and scratches.

3. Final remarks

From the XVIII–XIXth centuries interventions derives divers repair mortars: friable mortars with big addition of inert materials, vegetable fibber and animal hair. Half hard mortars brutish and hard with addition of cement resulted from the XXth century repairs.

During the restoration interventions it was find out that the presence of the dense organic materials over the original pictorial stratum was enough to start this powerful biologic attack extended all over the church, favoured by the inside climate and by the inadequate use of the church.

The present restoration was necessary as an urgent intervention for stabilization of the mural painting and at the same time with the recovery of the original unity of the image from XVth century.

References

- [1] G. Bals, *Buletinul Comisiei Monumentelor Istorice*, **18** (1925) 46.
- [2] M. Berza, *The Moldavian culture in the time of Stephan the Great*, Romanian Academy, Bucharest, 1964.
- [3] S. Ulea, *Art in Moldavia, from the middle of XV century to the end of the XVI century*, in *The history of arts in Romania*, vol. 1, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1968, 358.
- [4] P. Henry, *The north Moldavian monument - from the origins to the end of the XVI century*, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1984, 206.
- [5] C.Brandi, *Introduction*, in *Restoration theory*, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1996.
- [6] A.H. Simionescu, *Revista Moldovei*, **6-7** (1927) 42.

- [7] I. Opris, *The National Comision of Monuments*, Enciclopedica, Bucharest, 1994, 61.
- [8] I. Istudor, *Revista Monumentelor Istorice*, **1** (2001-2003) 76.