
ANCIENT ROMANIAN ART TREASURES PRESERVED AT THE SUB PIATRĂ HERMITAGE, ALBA COUNTY

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Abstract

The paper presents some of the ancient art assets preserved for centuries at the Sub Piatră hermitage, Sălcium village, Alba County, such as: wood or glass icons, old religious books and liturgical items and furniture.

Our attention was focused on icons, namely on the process of restoration to which they were undergone. The restoration and the study were developed at the 'National Complex Astra Museum, - in the Tempera Painting Restoration Laboratory - Sibiu city, during 2005-2006. The study of the documentary archive, the typological and stylistic details of the icons as well as the techniques or the chromatics used by the painters, real masters of iconography, were a great benefit for our museum and for us as professionals. They also enriched the rather poor information about these icons. The restoration and the study of these assets have double aim: first of all to be recovered and assessed and then they deserve to be placed among the other assets created in Transylvania during the 18th century.

The fact this patrimony was preserved for centuries in a small, hidden place just in the very heart of the mountains prove once again the role played by the Romanian Orthodox Church: guardian of the national values. The special care for keeping and preserving the heritage left us by our predecessors is a holy duty and obligation, both for those working and living in the hermitage Sub Piatră as well for us.

Keywords: Sub Piatră Hermitage, icons, conservation-restoration, cultural heritage values

1. Introduction

In the very heart of the Apuseni Mountains, in Valea Arieșului, 18 km away from the town Câmpeni, lies the village Sub Piatră, Sălcium commune, Alba County. This small but very old settlement is dominated by the church 'Saint Paraschiva'. Situated in the near vicinity of the cave Huda lui Papară and guarded by the two peaks of the Mountain Trascău, Bedeleu and Bulz, the small church fills out in a fortunate manner the picturesque aspect of these places (Figure 1).

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Figure 1. The church of the Sub Piatră hermitage.

Built in 1797, year cut in the oak encadrement of the Western entrance (Figure 2), the present church was raised on the spot of an older church, the Hermitage of the Virgin Mary, which accordingly to the tradition, was destroyed by general Bucov.



Figure 2. The building year cut in the encadrement of the entrance into the narthex.

The interior of the church is humble, neither high, nor large, rather adapted to the human size. The rectangular narthex has a ceiling, the almost square nave is arched in a half-cylindrical manner and the pentagonal apse is covered with a half-cylindrical vault, much retracted at the level of the walls, closed in the East by a tympanum that joins the sides through a low trapezoidal ceiling [1].

2. The wall painting

The interior decoration of the church ‘Cuvioasa Paraschiva’, realized in the middle of the 19th century includes only the painting of the templon and of the altar. The pisaný, situated in front of the royal gates records that “*fruntariul a fost plătit in 1844 de Baic Florea și cu soțul său Lupa*” (the templon was paid for in 1844 by Baic Florea and his wife Lupa - Figure 3), and the inscription on the North wall of the altar says that “*acest sfânt altariu l-a plătit Petru din Ponor și Eufrosina Rac*” (this holy altar was paid for by Petru from Ponor and Eufrosina Rac).



Figure 3. The church of the Sub Piatră Hermitage - inscription on the templon.

The iconographic program is specific for the wood churches in Transylvania. Unlike the templon and the altar, the narthex walls are whitewashed. The samples taken from these areas show the existence of several successive layers of white whitewash and colour paint.

We can assume that the absence of the painting in these rooms has an economical reason - probably the small peasant community didn't have enough funds for an integral decoration of the church.

3. The icons

The heritage of the church 'St. Paraschiva' resides not only in its wall ornament. It is also made up of a valuable collection of icons that form an assembly which is representative for the Transylvanian art in the 17-18th centuries.

The study of these icons during their restoration in the Zone Department of Conservation-Restoration of the National Museum Complex ASTRA Sibiu, between September 2005 and June 2006, allowed the knowing of the handicraft of painters who worked in the area of the Apuseni Mountains.

It is well-known that Transylvania, as well as the other Romanian regions, records a remarkable artistic effervescence in the 17-18th centuries, especially in the field of painting. More and more centres of painters who are specializing in the art of church and icon painting appear. Many of these (formed in centres from Wallachia and Moldavia) create works in the spirit of the schools from the neighbour regions, contributing to the establishing of the brancovenian and postbrancovenian current in Transylvania, a current mainly manifested in the first half of the 18th century [2]. In the art of the second half of the 18th century takes place the intrusion of popular art spirit, with the contribution of the peasant origin of both the painters and the purchasers [3].

The region of the Apuseni Mountains, ancient ground of Romanian culture and history, occupies an important place within the Transylvanian painting of the 18th century. The geographical position of these zone lead to the crystallization of a synthesis art of post- Byzantine tradition, the popular art and elements of Western currents.

The activity of the local artistic centres, as well as the interferences with the neighbouring regions determined the shaping of several zones in the Apuseni area. Among these, the central region of the Valea Arieşului is considered to be the most valuable and original because of the very strong local artistic school [4]. This is the origin zone of the icons in Schitul Sub Piatră. These were not signed, but they have been surely painted in the studios of local painters or of pilgrims on these territories. The only reference to a painter of the age is the autographical note from 1727 on the Cazania lui Varlaam (in Oncăşeşti, in the village Sub Piatră) which mentions the name of the painter Ban Vasile, wall painter of post- Byzantine tradition, who worked in Câmpia Transilvaniei and Valea Arieşului [4, p. 62, p. 119].

In the church of 'St. Paraschiva' are preserved eleven icons from which four are representations of the **Virgin Mary**, three of them of Jesus as **Christ Pantokrator** and **Deisis**, three of **St. Nicholas** and one of the **Holy Trinity**. We will start the presentation of the icons with the imperial icons.

The first of these, the Holy Virgin with the Child, sizes 43x54x3cm (Figure 4) is the Hodegetria type, the Exhortatory or Holy Virgin of Victory and Laudation. It contains the oldest representation of the Virgin Mary attributed by the Orthodox Church tradition to the St. Evangelist Lucas.



Figure 4. Icon on wood ‘Virgin and Child’ – before and after restoration;
restorer: Gabriela Măxinean, coordinator: Olimpia Coman-Sipeanu.



Figure 5. ‘Christ Pantokrator’, icon on wood - before and after restoration;
restorer: Constantin Scarlatescu, coordinator: Olimpia Coman-Sipeanu.

The Holy Virgin holds the Child in Her right arm and points toward Him with the right arm raised in front of Her chest. She wears a blue tunic with golden elbow sleeves, grey skull cap and red maphorion. Baby Jesus blesses with the right, while holding a convolute rotulus. He wears a white chiton with green folds, decorated with red flowers and red-ochre himation. The Holy Mother's face doesn't touch the Child's. The frame and the auras are embossed into the wood. Besides the inscriptions with red letters which indicate the abbreviated names of characters, the icon contains the donation inscription in the lower part, on the frame: "Această icoană au plă..t. Căcia Ion cu soțu său Nedea și mama sa Mărie" (This icon was paid for [incomplete inscription] by Căcia Ion and his wife Nedea and his mother Mărie).

The **Christ Pantokrator** is the other imperial icon, 41.5x 30 cm. (Figure 5) and it represents the bust of Jesus Christ clothed in the traditional red tunic and the blue himation. He is blessing with his right hand and in the left hand holds the Gospel book which is leaning on his breast. It is open and a quotation can be read. The icon also contains the abbreviation of the Saviour's name, the inscription on the cruciform halo and an inscription on the frame referring to the donation.

On the South wall of the nave there is an icon with a similar subject to **Christ Pantokrator** with sizes very much resembling 44x50.5x4cm. There is an inscription with the name of the donor. The icon portrays the bust of Jesus. The painter realized an extraordinary portrait: the face, the long hair, the moustache, the beard and the very large eyes full of compassion and peace radiate the same hieratic beauty.

Both in the imperial icons as well as in this icon we meet the same technique of typology used in painting the faces: the face is painted in a frontal position and the face is oval shaped, slightly sharpened towards the chin, large eyes. The expression reflected by eyes is realized intensifying the shadows on the eyelids up to the eyebrows; the dark rings of the eyes are graphically marked. The long nose, the chin and the upper lip are beautifully painted.

The icons also are very much resembling in terms of using the technique of shadowing the faces. There is used shaded ochre, gradually from brown-reddish for shadows to ochre-pink for the bright parts. Another resembling feature, extremely visible is the way the clothes are folded and decorated. The way they are done proves that a master painted the icons. The folds of the vestments are realized using the same colour but different shades, brighter or darker. The dominant colours are cinnabar red and Prussian blue and they are beautifully harmonized on the golden background of the icons. The way the faces are designed, the placing them in the whole design and the large coloured areas are similar. In all the three cases the composition is elegant and gently delimited from the relief frame. The composition is shared by two stripes red and gold and the donation inscription can be observed. The inscriptions are in Cyrillic language and they both resemble in content, size and colour of letters.



Figure 6. ‘Virgin and Child’ and ‘Christ Pantokrator’ - icons on wood, the collection of the Archiepiscopate of Alba-Iulia city.



Figure 7. ‘Deisis’, icon on wood - before and after restoration; restorer: Cristina Hoarcă, coordinator: Olimpia Coman-Sipeanu.

During the process of restoration we made research scientific investigations (biological, physical, chemical) and we concluded there are certain and positive similitudes, in terms of the used materials and techniques of painting. Thus the support material on which the icons are made has much in common from a morphological point of view (they are icons painted after the wood was carved and the frame is a prolongation of the carved wood, the halos are brought into relief, the icons are made of a wood plank tangential cut and consolidated with a semi-buried traverse). The sizes are quite similar and the materials used for them are also identical or very much resembling: wood of fir for the two icons with the Christ Pantokrator and wood of spruce fir for the Virgin and Child.

The primer contains the same material (plaster mixed up with animal gelatine) and the cover of colour contains the same pigments (white lead, cinnabar, ochre, red and brown, green-greyish, ultramarine blue, black coal). The thin gold cover applied over the cover with bolus and varnish that contains colophony resin and oil.

The comparative analysis was based on arguments (typological, stylistic, graphological and technical) and the conclusion is that the same artist painted the three icons.

By extension we credit also to this anonymous painter the two icons belonging to the templon of the old church from Sălciua de Jos village and which disappeared. Nowadays the two icons the **Virgin and Child** and the **Christ Pantokrator** are sheltered in the collection of the Archiepiscopate - Alba Iulia city. (Figure 6)

Although Ioana Cristache-Panait has no arguments she credits Stan Zugravu from Sălciua de Jos village, as painter of the icon Virgin and Child [1, p. 124]. It's interesting that she has none opinion with regards to the author of the icons from Sub Piatră hermitage, which she dates at the end of the 18th century. Although all these icons are very much resembling, she has no comment.

Marius Porumb, professional in Transylvanian arts and art historian, has directed our search for the author of these icons towards the artistic centre in Rășinari village. In his opinion these icons have specific features for this centre.

The **Deisis** 56x85x4cm (Figure 7) is one of the most valorous icons existing in the church from Sub Piatră hermitage. Ioana Cristache-Panait also gives us details about the icon such as "the halo and the stucco décor made in the very spirit of Brâncoveanu style" [1, p. 124].

The icon illustrates the intermediary prayers and it represents Jesus Christ holding the Gospel and blessing. On the right side he has the Virgin Mary and on the left side St. John the Baptist and both are praying for people.



Figure 8. ‘Saint Nicholas’, icon on wood - before and after restoration;
restorer: Olimpia Coman-Sipeanu.



Figure 9. ‘Virgin and Child’, icon on wood - before and after restoration;
restorer: Mirel Bucur.

The figure of the Saviour is impressive and he is clothed with antique vestments: red tunic, yellow clavus and blue mantle. The colours of the vestments are beautifully highlighted on the golden support of the icon that is inlaid with geometrical motifs. The inscriptions written with white colour on vestments are the names of the painted persons. The carnation is realized through successive covers with colour from brown-greenish to ochre-pink. The folds of vestments are realized through successive covering with colour, black and white, from dark to light hue. The frame is cut out from the wood in relief and has curved the twisted rope motif.

The surface colour coverings are worn out and thus the icon seems to be much older. This is the reason for what we consider this icon painted earlier than the others, probably in the 16th or 17th centuries.

Among the other icons preserved by church is the Saint Nicholas, 49x73x4cm (Figure 8) and the Virgin and Child, 43x55x2cm (Figure 9). Ioana Cristache-Panait credits (with limitations) these icons to Gheorghe, painter from Cetatea de Baltă [1, p. 124].

The special physical features of the characters, the floral decoration of halos, the ornamentation of vestments, the very refined drawing and the technique used by artist are obviously speaking about a very talented and gifted painter.

The material support is made of a single plank strengthen with two thin traverses, the frame is in relief and it is painted, the background is covered with thin silver coverings and the green colour in halos is lacquer colour.

The common stylistic and technical traces of the two icons make us confident to credit them to the same artist. This opinion is not shared by other art historians, such as Marius Porumb.

Another icon, Virgin and Child', 53x70x3cm, (Figure10) represents the Virgin Hodegetria. The impressive figure of the Virgin is highlighted on the golden background that is adorned with beautiful ornaments in relief. She is wearing a blue mantle with borders and sleeves decorated with geometrical motif in red-green on golden background as well as a vivid red maphorion trimmed with a similar border. Jesus the Child is blessing with his right hand and in his left hand he is holding a 'rotulet' (a closed scroll). He is wearing a green tunic with stylized white floral ornaments and a yellow himation with black and red folds. The halos are in relief the same the frame of the icon that is curved with the twisted rope motif.

This icon is repainted too. Under the worn our colour covering there is another icon older. The artist who repainted the icon used means of expression that reminds us about the tradition of Romanian post-Byzantine painting. The existence of a previous painting, the technique used in making the support as well as the fragility of the icon are motifs to assert that this icon together with Deisis are the oldest icons in Sub Piatră hermitage.



Figure 10. ‘Virgin and Child’, icon on wood – before and after restoration;
restorer: Olimpia Coman-Sipeanu.



Figure 11. ‘Virgin and Child’, icon on wood – before and after restoration;
restorer: Geanina Ionescu-Curcă.



Figure 12. ‘Saint Nicholas’, icon on wood - before and after restoration;
restorer: Olimpia Coman-Sipeanu.



Figure 13. ‘Saint Nicholas’, icon on wood - before and after restoration;
restorer: Olimpia Coman-Sipeanu.

A small sized icon, 28.4x23.8x3cm, represents the Virgin Eleoussa (Figure 11). In the Orthodox traditional iconography the Virgin Eleoussa or Our Lady of Mercy is a representation of the Virgin and Child, whose faces are touching in a sublime gesture.

The inscriptions that are written in Slavonic language are the shortened names of the persons and they explain the icon subject: 'The Virgin. Our Lady of Mercy'. The face is painted fine using the procedure of the 'melted colours'. The icon is realized on lime wood strengthen with two traverses, embedded into the upper and the lower part of the frame, a specific Russian technique. The way of painting the icon, the inscriptions in Slavonic language and the technique used in making the support are reasons to include this icon in the category of Lipovanian icons.

The icon **Saint Nicholas**, 48x73x2cm, (Figure 12) represents Saint Nicholas bust, with the right hand blessing and in the left hand he is holding the Gospel book closed. The head is over dimensioned and surrounded by a golden halo in relief, ornamented with vegetal motifs in relief. Side by side are Jesus who is giving him the Gospel book and the Mother of the God who is giving a blue canonical scarf. The green background of the icon is decorated with rows of red commas. The yellow frame is sided by two red stripes. The carnation is realized with the technique of stretching the colour.

The icon is the painting of a simple village painter and it hides a very direct and sincere 'language', a naïve talent. The disproportion of the body doesn't disturb at all, on the contrary it confers a particular expression. The way the vestments, the background were painted proves a very gifted artist in using the decoration, the colours and the technique of synthesis. These are specific characteristics of the folk/village painter who created in time remarkable icons. The icon Saint Nicholas is the best example in this respect and it also illustrates the penetration into the painting of the 18th century of the lay features and the development further on of the folk painting.

The second icon **Saint Nicholas**, 37x52.3x3.5cm (Figure 13) also belongs to the so called folk icon painting. But it is totally different from the previous one. The head is extremely small sized in comparison with the huge body. The sturdiness of the drawing, the too vivid colours, and the lack of knowledge in terms of body proportions are some specific features of the art practiced by local painters insufficient instructed.

Besides the icons on wood preserved in the church 'The Pious Paraschiva' there is also an icon on glass that hasn't any signature, as almost all these works. The icon represents the **Saint Triptich**, 63x52.5x1.5cm. The icon is realized in tempera on glass and is framed by a profiled/outlined frame made of fir tree wood.

Instead of the typical, traditional Byzantine subject inspired by the Old Testament - The Dinner in Mamvri - The Holy Trinity represented by God - The Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit is the main subject. This subject is taken over from the Western iconography and it is the result of the many contacts the Transylvanian artists had with the Western art, chiefly after the Unification in

1701 of a part of the Orthodox Church from Transylvania with the Catholic Church. From the Catholic Church is borrowed the dogma of Filioque.

God the Father is represented as an old man with white hair, sitting on the left of the composition and blessing His Son – Jesus Christ. He is sitting on the other side with a big sanctification cross. Both are holding the cruciform globe. Between them, above their heads appears The Holy Spirit painted as a dove circumscribed inside a rhombus that is placed over a square. The characters are painted in the upper part of the icon on a golden background and in the lower one they are sitting on white clouds, outlined with black and shadowed with grey colour. The three sides of the composition are framed by a red border with the twisted rope motif.

The present icon from a technical, typological and stylistic point of view belongs to the category of Iernuțeni icons. Some reasons stand for this statement: the big sizes, the golden background, the characters' typology, the twisted rope motif, specific for Nicula centre. With this icon it is painted in a totally unspecific chromatics for this centre.

4. The liturgical furniture

The patrimony of the monastery holds several valorous items of liturgical furniture, among which a special mention deserve a beautiful piece of liturgical furniture ('proscomidar') and two wood polychrome candlesticks.

The painting of the 'proscomidar' represents the Jesus' 'scarf' that has many stylistic similitudes with the templon's painting. It is one of the reasons what for we credit this painting to the same master.

5. Religious books

Speaking about the rarities held for centuries in the patrimony of Sub Piatra hermitage we can not miss to remind about the many religious books, many of them rare or unique on national level.

A simple inventory of the few books still preserved here, because many of them were burnt during the religious persecutions, discovers books printed in our forefathers' language, bought with lots of money and brought through the great efforts of the faithful.

Are worth to be mentioned the first Book of Psalms 'Noul Anastasimatar prefăcut după noua sistema muzicală' (The Anastasimatar newly composed following the new musical system), printed in Bucharest 1820; the 'Little Hymn Book (Oktoechos)', 1866; 'Kiriadromion or moral speeches kept every Sunday of the year', printed in Buzău, 1859, a book donated by the Romanian Prince Dimitrie Ghica.

The religious books preserved in this very old monastery, in Apuseni Mountains are evidence for the permanent links between the Romanians from here with the other Orthodox Romanians. The value of these books is much

increased due to the many inscriptions with historical, social or religious importance.

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