
THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BYZANTINE LEGACY FOR THE ROMANIAN SACRED ART

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Abstract

We currently witness a general pursuit of novelty and modernity, which risks to ignore or destroy a past loaded with artistic testimonies. Throughout the times, the Romanian Principalities benefited from the expressions of a sacred art of Byzantine tradition. This phenomenon lasted until early XIXth century, when realist and naturalist tendencies started to appear, brought about by the new historical era.

Today, it should be acknowledged that the Byzantine artistic legacy is not a mere inventory of items but, due to its dynamic aspect, it is perfectly integrated into the Orthodox cult. Since the latter acts as a preserver of the Byzantine liturgical tradition, then church art, too, should remain a keeper of the same artistic legacy. This is an imperative because the icon bears not only aesthetic or catechetical attributes, but especially cultic or liturgical ones.

It is only by maintaining our artistic identity of Byzantine origin that we can speak of integration into Europe, in ways benefic for both parties.

Keywords: Byzantine Commonwealth, static and dynamic aspects, cultic or liturgical aspects of icons

1. Integration and modernity

Our times display incessant renewal and a thirst for change, while new, different things are frantically demanded and sought for, irrespective of whether this 'difference' brings about a change for the better or its very opposite. What matters is leaving the moment behind, so hurriedly that we barely notice that we haven't fully enjoyed it, and we haven't even come close to exhausting its creative potential.

In such times, when everything develops and changes at light speed, fine arts have also undergone a major change, in the sense of the appearance of ever more trends, most of them short-lived. Artistic styles are born and die overnight, devoured by the rush of those seeking not necessarily for the best possible expression of their creativity, but for bringing the novelty on the creation market, as the sole thing saleable - and thus, profitable.

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Besides, modern times are times of integration - to us, Romanians, of accession to Europe - when viable models are searched for and copied from other regions of our old continent. This is seen as the path to follow if we are to achieve the results of those who are taken as examples and imitated as such. These solutions may sometimes work, but other times they fail precisely because each cultural system has its own specific life, with its own particular expressions, not suitable for borrowed patterns applied mechanically.

The following lines approach an issue of interest for today's Romanian culture: that of discovering and preserving the ecclesiastical art, of Byzantine tradition, within the context of an acute diversification of the specific modes of expression of Occidental art, which tend to influence our perception as well.

2. Romanian Sacred Art during the medieval times

The beginnings of Romanian ecclesiastical art inevitably bore the mark of influences coming from cultural milieu neighbouring it, either territorially or spiritually. For, "irrespective of a people's richness, of its material and spiritual complexity, of its cultural inheritance, the moment of its entering the history is always accompanied by its finding superior models - most frequently, outside its own formation area - within other, adjacent cultural areas, which had until then enjoyed better conditions, very favourable to the creation of certain religious, literary, plastic arts expression modes, and which, upon being taken over and creatively processed, in accordance with its native genius, have actually been incorporated into its evolution." [1]

Naturally, the stylistic and iconographic characteristics of the greatest Christian empire left their imprint on art's development in all Orthodox countries. It is the reason why, since its inception, Romanian Christian art entered the Byzantine sphere of influence.

Thus, especially between the XIVth and XVIIIth centuries - marking the establishment of the first Romanian feudal states, and the first reigns of Fanar princes - Romanian Christian art constantly manifested an aesthetic experience in its own right, if still grafted on the millennium-old Byzantine trunk. All great church founders, be they princes or noblemen, concerned themselves with forming and preserving the artistic tradition which definitively linked Romanian art to that of the *Byzantine Commonwealth*. [2]

In addition we, Romanians, enjoyed religious freedom, which was not the case with the other Orthodox Balkan states. Romanian territories belonged to the area of the so-called 'House of Peace', or 'of the Covenant', that is to the territories retaining their own political, administrative and military structures [3], which prevented the Turks from building mosques here, so that foreign travellers arriving from the Balkans often became aware of passing from the Islam-ruled world to the Christian world of the Romanian principalities due to church bell tolling, forbidden within *dâr al-Islam* (*The House of Islam*). However oppressive the Ottoman rule, especially during XVIIth century, the boundary between *dâr al-Islam* and *dar al-'ahd* was never blurred [3, p. 110].

Therefore the entire medieval history of Romanian Christian art bears witness to the perpetuation of the characteristically Byzantine aesthetic tradition. Saint Nicholas Church at Curtea de Arges, the church of Cozia Monastery or the Holy Trinity Church in Siret (Moldavia) are the earliest pieces of evidence in this sense.

What ensued was the creation of Romanians' own artistic way, within which "one of its basic coordinates, the Byzantine one, now completely assimilated, is retained by the artists' consciousness, like the revered remembrance of an exemplary past" [4].

The year 1453 did not mean a break with the past, in other words with the Byzantine tradition, and the conditions in Wallachia and Moldavia favoured the perpetuation of an artistic legacy left by Byzantium to the respective countries long before its end.

There followed the reigns of the great church founders, such as Radu the Great (the church at Dealu Monastery - Targoviste, 1501) and Neagoe Basarab (the bishopric church at Curtea de Arges, 1517) - in Wallachia - and Steven the Great, with his countless churches (Humor, Voronet, Putna, Suceava, etc.), Petru Rares (Moldovita), Alexandru Lapusneanu - in Moldavia. The Byzantine church building tradition continued during the ensuing times, often marked by a competition (beneficial for Romanian art) between the rulers of the two principalities, such as that between Matei Basarab (1632-1654) and Vasile Lupu (1634-1653).

The epoch of native Romanian princes ended with the brilliant Brancoveanu art, fully developed under Șerban Cantacuzino (1678-1688) and Constantin Brâncoveanu (1688-1714), art whose characteristic style came to epitomize the architecture, painting and sculpture of the respective period as well as of the following ones. Significantly, the great enterprise of the Fanar prince Nicolae Mavrocordat, Văcărești Monastery (1724), respected the stylistic principles of Brancoveanu art.

Thus, for a long while, until early XVIIIth century, Romanian sacred art demonstrated both its strong commitment to Byzantine pictorial tradition, and its ability to adapt itself to local conditions and, most importantly, to creatively renew tradition, to develop its own, easily recognizable style.

Unfortunately, beginning with the XVIIth-XVIIIth centuries, a trend alien to the traditional spirit became increasingly visible, being brought about by the Russian painters of the Moscow school, a painting school that had long before assimilated Occidental elements - first in the Moldavian painting, and later on in Wallachia. In the XVIIIth century, "religious bonds, and especially the political propaganda under the guise of faith and mediated by the Church, increasingly imposed on the weakened Moldavian school the various artistic formulas employed in Russia and systematically imported until late XIXth century through a great number of icons, and sometimes by craftsmen coming from all over the Orthodox empire" [5].

In addition, for various reasons, starting with the XIXth century, Romanian Christian art began to be under increasing Occidental influence, which resulted in its losing the Orthodox spiritual imprint. This wave of renewal which swept over the Romanian principalities, proved beneficial from the political, administrative or social point of view, but not so from the artistic one.

The major change occurred especially at mid-XIXth century, when the painters educated in the Occidental schools spirit - Gheorghe Tattarescu, N. Stoenescu, Constantin Lecca, Mișu Popp, later joined by Nicolae Grigorescu - adorned with their religious paintings countless churches, either restored or newly built: Antim Monastery, St. Spiridon the New, Negustori Church, St. Ecaterina, St. Elijah (Ilie) Rahova, Ghighiu Monastery, the Church of Bistrița - Vâlcea Monastery, St. Gheorghe - Pitești or Căldărușani, Zamfira, but especially, Agapia Monastery.

Their incontestable talent, most notably Grigorescu's, transformed the respective churches into museums where the eye delights in compositional and chromatic harmony, but where the soul can no longer find the Orthodox spirit, lost on the way at the crossroads between the Eastern, Orthodox life and the Occidental, Catholic one.

Their example was followed by other artists as well, which led to a radical alteration of Romanian religious painting, both in its iconographic programme, and, especially, in its style acquiring a markedly realistic character.

Thus, some of today's Romanian churches find themselves in a paradoxical situation: the lectures, chants and overall the religious service retain the Orthodox ways along the lines of Byzantine tradition, while the painting and, sometimes, the architecture denote the Occidental inspiration. In most cases, nothing can be done to change this state of facts, but upon building a new church, those in charge of it should be aware of the motivation for an option in agreement with the Orthodox spirituality.

In this sense, one could raise the issue of the Byzantine artistic legacy - which can be its relevance now, over five centuries after Byzantium's disappearance from the scene of history?

3. Static and dynamic aspects of the Byzantine legacy

According to certain historians, the year 1453 was the year when all Byzantine forms ceased to be passed down. It is considered that “the Byzantine civilization faithfully kept its own tradition, but was unable to create new social forms and a new ideal. Its spiritual and social life was modelled on the state, at the same time state and Church, according to the Byzantine formula, and when this one collapsed, no foundation was left for a new social endeavour” [6].

On the one hand, one could assert that “with the fall of Constantinople collapsed not only a military power, but also a splendid cultural centre... To Byzantine art, the fall of Constantinople was *an irreparable, deadly blow* (italics mine), after which it was never able to recover” [7]. Or, that “the tragedy was total. On 29 May 1453, *a civilization was irrevocably destroyed*. It left a

glorious cultural and artistic legacy” [8].

However, Byzantium succeeded in passing down an important legacy, having multiple modes of expression. Steven Runciman seems to be speaking on behalf of many, when he asserts “*the artistic field* is the one in which Byzantium left the world the most enduring and wonderful legacy” [8, p. 270]. This one could be considered from two aspects: a static one, which ceased to exist at the middle of the second millennium, and a dynamic one still manifest in the present.

The **static** aspect comprises all testimonies, especially the artistic ones, that Byzantium left behind it, even in remote territories, where it intervened either directly - through the craftsmen it sent there - or indirectly. It inevitably acquired a museum-like character, resembling a ‘catalogue’ of Byzantine artistic items of all kinds and sizes, scattered from Armenian plateaux to the plains of France.

From this standpoint, one could say that precisely the Orthodox areas were slightly disadvantaged, as the wars and earthquakes that struck these regions constantly ruined the treasure of Byzantine monuments. Countless churches and monasteries have endured, however, in Bulgaria and Serbia, the former Romanian principalities, Russia and Armenia, as telling testimonies of the artistic presence of the Byzantine spirit in this area [9].

However, such legacy, also present in the museums elsewhere, within the Occidental or non-Christian world, is actually nothing but an inventory of art objects and monuments, which generally fails to convey the essential message to its inheritors - a reason why I consider it has a static character.

But there is also a **dynamic** side of the Byzantine legacy, a consequence of the fact that the true testament, through which Byzantium is still alive, is the very life of the Orthodoxy - the one able to lead to the preservation and perpetuation of a certain type of artistic expression.

We must specify that what Mohamed II the Conqueror destroyed was a particular kind of civilization, modelled on the State and Church which had existed within a particular area and under particular political, geographical, cultural, social and (most importantly) religious circumstances. However, Byzantium lived on - admittedly in different ways.

This is why the idea of Byzantium's survival requires qualification. For, as Dan Zamfirescu remarked [10], one of the limitations of N. Iorga's conception in this respect [11] consists in the fact that ‘Byzantium after Byzantium’ reminds of those offshoots of willows already cut down, which feed for a while on the sap still remaining in the old trunk and then wither and die just like the mother-tree they depend on. But we must understand that Byzantium is still alive, in a sense, through the Orthodox Church, that is through what actually marked the Empire's life throughout its existence.

For this reason, what Nicolae Iorga understood by ‘Byzantium after Byzantium’ means a lot more than the survival of the empire through certain political, administrative or cultural forms. In this sense, the relations between the Romanian states and Byzantium during the medieval period comprised

structures of social-political, military and juridical nature, as well as the ecclesiastic-monastic, cultural and artistic establishments [12]. While the Ottoman rule was expanding over the Balkans, the presence of Romanian states north of Danube allowed maintaining a political tradition. Beside the manifestations of Byzantine culture in Slavonic form present here, it constituted the most appropriate expression of a stage in the historical evolution. "When the archaic character of relations prescribed by the Byzantine tradition became obvious, it was only then that they were replaced by new ideas whose action accelerated the modernization process. On the other hand... those who ensured the survival of the Byzantine tradition, the Romanians, saw this as a means for keeping their political identity. This was the reason for its historical efficacy." [13] But, of all these, only those of religious-artistic nature have endured and have been preserved in viable forms to this day.

In fact, the issue of Byzantium's role in the formation, evolution and the very life of Romanian art amplifies like a stage on which events occur, at a slower or quicker pace, clearly or indistinctly, in a succession climaxing with the definition of the artistic universe characteristic for our people [14]. The fact that Byzantium took precedence over other aesthetic models cannot be accounted for by motivations of political or administrative nature, but by those of religious nature. And concerning the Romanian-Byzantine artistic relations, we must stress the fact that it was especially after the demise of the Byzantine Empire that Romanian art gathered momentum, demonstrating its true creative power.

Admittedly, influences came from other sources as well, but we ought to mention the role played by Byzantine or 'Byzantine-tradition' art in perpetuating the artistic legacy we have received. Nicolae Iorga never dwelt on this aspect, for reasons difficult to account for, which cannot downplay or deny the existence of this type of artistic legacy. In his work *Byzantium after Byzantium*, for instance, the artistic legacy is not mentioned, probably because it did not constitute one of the institutions through which Byzantium survived. In another work, *La survivance byzantine dans les pays roumains*, published in Bucharest in 1913, he also dwells only on the 'survival' in the political and cultural field, without mentioning architecture and arts in any way [15].

4. The Cultic attribute of the icon

On discussing the Byzantine 'phenomenon', it is not stated that art received spiritual, material, and moral support not only from its beneficiaries or commissioners, but it had been born and had developed within the Christian Orthodox cult, be it public or private, and therefore it could only find true fulfilment in liturgical service.

Generally, commentaries on the attributes of iconographic art only mention the aesthetic and didactic ones - art embellishes the space containing it and is, at the same time, 'The Bible of the illiterates' - „*What the Scriptures are to the educated man, the icon is for the ignorant.*" [Saint Gregory the Great, Book XI, Epist. XII, PL 77, 1128a-1130b]. Most often, it is ignored that the art

of the icon is integrated into the Christian Orthodox cult, having both a *cultic*, *latreutic* role as well as a *grace-bearing* one. Religious service takes place in the presence of icons, which cannot be missing from worshippers' houses or life, where they emanate that liturgical atmosphere which ought to imprint itself on our lives. It was precisely this mission that determined the option for a particular iconography and pictorial style.

Consequently, to say that Byzantine art ceased to exist after the fall of Constantinople would be to say that following that moment, any manifestation of the divine service or of the Orthodox religious sense also stopped. It is true that a particular social-cultural context, which had generated the so-called Byzantine art, disappeared from the stage of history but, as the Orthodox Church continued to exist, its artistic modes of expression inevitably lived on, faithful to the tradition to the extent in which they remained faithful to the Orthodox spirituality.

Thus the Byzantine legacy may be either an extremely rich museum inventory, or a living form of the spiritual life permanently generating artistic life. Manuscripts may burn, walls may collapse, gold may be melted down or processed, - in brief, all assets may be stolen or destroyed. Church founders realized this passing character of any material richness. (A legend tells how Prince Lazăr, wanting to build Ravanica, thought that gold and pearls were the most appropriate adornments; but Miloš Obilić read to him from The Book of Kings how the Turks, on conquering the kingdom, made canons out of the lead roofs of churches and jewellery out of the precious stones. Therefore Lazăr decided to choose as building materials stone and marble, which will last till the Judgement Day.)

Indeed, the Turks may have taken kingdoms, gold, holy relics, icons, but the walls nevertheless endured and they “saved the soul of the nation” [16]. One could say that church walls did indeed save souls, when one is aware that within them, the Church continued to be built out of ‘living stones’, the Church that no one and nothing can defeat. Christians are urged to approach Jesus Christ, “the living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: ‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and he who believes in Him will not be put to shame’” (I Peter 2.4-6).

It is true that the marks imprinted by the Byzantine civilization upon the spirituality and formation of the peoples within its sphere of influence, even after the fall of the empire - that is, precisely the **dynamic** aspect of the Byzantine legacy - represents a controversial, difficult-to-grasp issue. In this sense, one could say that what the Byzantium left behind is more than a mere ‘survival’ or a mechanical imitation of models. Concerning the Romanian-Byzantine artistic relations, Maria-Ana Musicescu proposed three stages prior to the XVth century, when the Byzantine presence in this territory is certain. As for the period subsequent to the demise of the empire, two stages have been proposed: *the Byzantine legacy* during the classical period of Romanian art (XV-XVIth

centuries) and *the Byzantine survival* during the last centuries of Romanian medieval art (XVII-XVIIIth) [14].

However, such Byzantine legacy lives not necessarily in the speciality books or in world's museums, but above all, *in the Orthodox cult*, thus being permanently present in our lives. From this standpoint, most of the Byzantine art in the museums is not 'dead'. A knight's armour or sword remain museum pieces, unable to integrate into the course of history again, while an icon, a chalice, a clerical vestment or any other cult object may leave the museum at any moment, in order to participate in Church's life, in the divine service.

Unfortunately, the cult status of the Byzantium vestiges or of the states within its sphere of influence is often ignored. This is why the importance of preserving this legacy has been understood differently in religious and non-religious circles.

5. The icon turned into religious painting

Throughout the times, the attitudes concerning art monuments have ranged from protective, condescending respect to sheer indifference or, even worse, to the desire to adapt to present-day conditions at all costs. However, monument renewal, when misunderstood, has tragic and often irredeemable consequences. Generally, alteration of monuments denotes "an acute lack of general education concerning the meaning of monuments, their role in society, the necessity of respecting them and treating them with all material care possible, and with moral force" [17].

With a view to preventing such aesthetic degradation of monuments, all those interested in keeping past values expressed more or less point-blank opinions [18, 19]. For instance, Iosif Naniescu (1875-1902), Metropolitan of Moldavia, did not agree at all with the painting of Gheorghe Tattarescu or Nicolae Grigorescu: "the manner of church-painting is not to be invented by any of the artists we have here in our country: neither by Mr. Mirea, whom I do not know, nor by Mr. Grigorescu, whose works I have seen, or by Mr. Tattarescu, who painted the Iasi Metropolitan Church. The church-painting manner is to be copied obeying tradition" [20]. In defence of his opinions, the Moldavian Metropolitan brought the argument of shepherds' duty to watch over the good health of their sheep, at all times and in all respects: "we, the bishops, have the holy duty to give the Christians, in order to be worshipped, the images of saints as they were acknowledged, established and consecrated by the tradition of our Holy Church, many centuries before us, and not familiar faces who inhabit the town of Constanța and who may please some ... You may grant or refuse our requests for loans or expense reimbursement, but to say that you like this or that painting and thus we have to accept it, or that this or that thing has to be done your way, and not as it ought to be done, just because you pay for it, we, the members of the Holy Synod, or I for one, shall never accept things if they do not comply with the canons of our Holy Church." [20]

And a letter sent by the abbot of Agafton Monastery to the Minister Al. Lapedatu in 1934, mentions: “our tradition of good Romanians and Christians makes us, obliges us to keep just as scrupulously what the past has left to us and what used to shield, in days of old, our culture and faith. For we are not defending a private good of ours, but a holy national patrimony. Our monasteries are works that pertain to our Romanian specificity. Their loss would mean no less than losing relics that belong only to our Romanian land; it would mean losing an endowment that is only alive within our soul and being.” [21]

Not to respect genuine Christian art, to destroy in a matter of hours its vestiges that have withstood centuries, is more than acute lack of education. It is, in fact, an incomplete religious stand, manifest only on verbal level, ruling out the visual one, without taking into consideration the fact that the Revelation is expressed not only through words, but also through acts and icons.

Fortunately, over the recent years, it appeared a movement aimed to highlight the artistic works pertaining to the complex Byzantine legacy. Many dioceses of our country, and especially within those of Moldavia and Bucovina, the old worship places, were allowed to function mostly as art museums during the communist regime. After 1990, several such establishments have been restored to life, regaining their original status of monasteries or sketes [22].

6. The Byzantine legacy and our integration into Europe

Of late, there have been more and more discussions on our need to accede to Europe. But unless we reach spiritual maturity, a mechanical take-over of principles alien to Orthodoxy could do us much harm. On the other hand, not to contribute to enriching the European cultural patrimony cannot benefit any of the parties. We must not forget for a moment that “where Greece, Rome and ancient Christianity expanded, the real Europe was born - not the geographic, but the spiritual Europe. And all values created within this privileged area belong to *the common patrimony of European culture*. We cannot imagine an European culture reduced only to its Occidental forms. Culturally, as well as spiritually, Europe is completed with everything that the Carpathian-Balkan area has created and perpetuated... Miraculously, the seed of Rome was not lost after Aurelianus left Dacia - although this withdrawal meant a catastrophe to the inhabitants of this rich province. But can Europe afford this *second withdrawal from nowadays Dacia*? As part of Europe, physically and spiritually, can we be again sacrificed, without this sacrifice endangering Europe's very existence and spiritual integrity? On History's answer to this question depend not only our survival as a nation, but the survival of the Occident as well.” [23]

In this sense are noteworthy the remarks of a political analyst, referring to the Romanians whose spirit is Greek-Byzantine, in spite of their speaking a Romanic language. In 1927 he considered that, while the Byzantine element in Russia had been long extinct or irrelevant, “the Romanian church is *alive*. It is only there that the Greek-Orthodox church has not come to a standstill. And thus, provided the necessary religious feeling is there, it is only in Romania that

the Byzantine element might experience a renewal within the sphere of faith... Thus, the European mission of the Romanian nation, if any, should certainly be that of bringing the Byzantine spirit back to life. And, undoubtedly, this country, this people can have a great future.” [24]

At the beginning of this Christian millennium, we ought to understand why the entire development of Romanian medieval art consistently keeps the Byzantine spiritual line, with all the diverse ways of adapting it to the particular circumstances of every period or creative personality. And this, not because of any automatic assumption, or of any habit of perpetuating traditional models, but motivated by the awareness of employing the most appropriate artistic means to serve the Orthodox cult.

This attitude has not excluded influences coming from other spiritualities - Catholic or Muslim - but these ones have always been assimilated and subordinated to the ultimate goal. Ecumenism does not suppose, and cannot be an excuse for promoting an art of Renaissance manner and totally alien to the Orthodox spirit. If in the XIXth century, the bias towards the Occidental world meant moving away from the Oriental, Ottoman one, today's European circumstances are different.

It should not be ignored that “to us, Romanians, Byzantium is our Antiquity... The history of Romanian art cannot be studied without thorough knowledge of the Byzantine art. Therefore, we must be familiar with the Byzantine spirit” [25]. However, it is not only Byzantium that needs rediscovery, but also a particular lifestyle, which used to constitute the essence of Byzantine synthesis. We ought to rediscover that ontological unity between spiritual and artistic perfection, to rediscover the true dimension of the sacred art, knowing how to distinguish it from its ‘younger siblings’, Christian or religious art. We ought to rediscover the bridge linking Theology and Art, who is not totally destroyed, but has disappeared in the souls of many, due to the ‘earthquake’ generated by the Renaissance.

The source whence sacred art constantly receives its form is immutable, the same in eternity: the Orthodox dogma. But respecting tradition does not imply copying. Art is not to be copied, but renewed, and this cannot be achieved, paradoxically, otherwise than obeying tradition. Any type of art that does not originate in Christian life is but a worthless replica, whose makers do not know true spiritual experience.

When ecclesiastical art does not also mean life in Christ, it can be deemed just a copy, sometimes extremely valuable aesthetically, but unable to renew one spiritually, that is lacking the capacity of fully fulfilling its mission. Byzantium's true heirs ought to understand the message of its art in its entirety and intensify their efforts for the rediscovery of the significance of sacred art, now known as *Byzantine art*, the real legacy of a great Christian empire.

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