

---

# ASPECTS OF MOUNT ATHOS' CONTRIBUTION TO THE MAINTENANCE OF THE TRICONCHIAL PLAN IN ROMANIAN SACRED ARCHITECTURE

**Mihaela Palade\***

*University Bucharest, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Department of Sacred Art,  
Str. Sf. Ecaterina nr. 2, 040155 Bucharest IV, Romania*

(Received 9 July 2007)

---

## **Abstract**

Most history of architecture treatises point out the role played by the katholikon of Mount Athos' Great Lavra (961) in the advent of the triconchial complex type (that is, the type of a circumscribed Greek cross with lateral apses) as well as the fact that this type became the characteristic structure of the Athonite architecture.

During the subsequent centuries, its dissemination had an uncommon history. Within the ecclesial architecture of the Byzantine Empire, it would only appear at Meteora (another monastic centre) while the rest of it preferred the basilical and Greek cross structures, in various combinations. The triconchial plan, though, was constantly present outside the Empire, in areas under the Byzantine sphere of influence, such as Serbia and the Romanian principalities, in either the complex (Athonite) variant or the simple one, also called Moravian (after the Morava Valley, the place holding the most churches of this type).

In the Romanian principalities, this latter architectural type appeared during the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, with two monuments that still stand today: the church of Cozia monastery (in Wallachia, 1387-1388) and The Holy Trinity Church at Siret (northern Moldavia, 14<sup>th</sup> century, to be then perpetuated throughout the centuries, becoming characteristic to Romanian sacred architecture. The works on its beginnings are not unanimous in their conception of the origins of this structural type.

The present essay, however, intends to analyze not the beginnings, but rather the persistence of this architectural pattern, which was to define the Romanian sacred architecture, being present in most of its monuments. And this issue will not be approached from the perspective of the strictly documentary, or archaeological language, but from that of the artistic one.

*Keywords:* artistic forms and language, visual message, warm/cold forms, triconchial structure, insightful monasticism

---

---

\* e-mail: palademih@yahoo.com

## **1. Artistic language and its role in deciphering the visual message**

One might wonder whether, and to what extent, Mount Athos architecture could influence this characteristic of Romanian sacred architecture. A mere analysis of the relationships between the two Orthodox areas leads to an affirmative answer. It is known that the beginnings of Romanian monasticism long predate the beginnings of the Romanian states and the acknowledgement of their metropolitans [1]. The people, therefore, were accustomed to a particular spiritual life. Subsequently, the relations between Mount Athos and the Romanian principalities tightened, the Romanian princes actively supporting this place, so important to the Orthodox spirituality [2]. Under such circumstances, Athonite architectural structures could not remain alien to the Romanian area, but were able to influence the choice, and especially the perpetuation, of a certain structural type [3].

The arguments in support of this conjecture belong to the visual sphere of the artistic language. For a long while, the significance of this type of language was ignored, for various reasons. First, it is difficult to “translate the particular meaning of an artistic language, into a spoken one. In terms of sense, the loss is immeasurable...” [4] Since it is expressed by means of shape and colour, the grammar of artistic language was harder to decipher, although many enjoyed its results. Secondly, it pertains to the connotative language, as opposite to the denotative, scientific one, and as such it is indirect, plurivocal, intuitive, ciphered, ambiguous, but no less original.

From a semiotic and semantic standpoint, art language presupposes that “range of shapes-signs, never limited, fixed or immutable, whose significance becomes infinite...” [5]. Thus, one can talk of the ‘language and vocabulary of the visual dialogue’, which can be ‘read’ like any other text [6]. Most current (Romanian or foreign) works on art psychology, on aesthetics, stick to “the claim, more or less supported with arguments, that art = language and art = communication” [4, p. 16]. Artistic language, like the verbal one, is meant to “express and communicate thoughts and feelings. Distinct from each other, the verbal language and that of forms coincide in that they both resort to equivalents in order to translate the deep reality of our soul” [7].

Therefore, artistic forms are never chosen at random, since it has a sense and “a personal and particular value...” [8], because “the lines (the shapes, the compositions) represent a materialization of our emotional state, that of our brain, of our heart; it represents our psychological limits, our hereditary patrimony, our education, our skeleton... our desires, qualities and astuteness” [9]. Forms “are not suspended within an abstract zone, outside the world and man. They are integral part of the life they stem from, replicating certain spiritual impulses in the spatial realm.” [8, p. 42]

Thus, art works may or may not convey inner states. Referring to the buildings populating his city, Paul Valery remarked that “some are mute, some speak and, finally, some – the rarest ones – sing” [10]. Depending on the vocabulary of architectural forms that constitute churches, some are indeed mute

or they speak too little, even while resounding with liturgical hymns, whereas others chant even in the absence of any human voice.

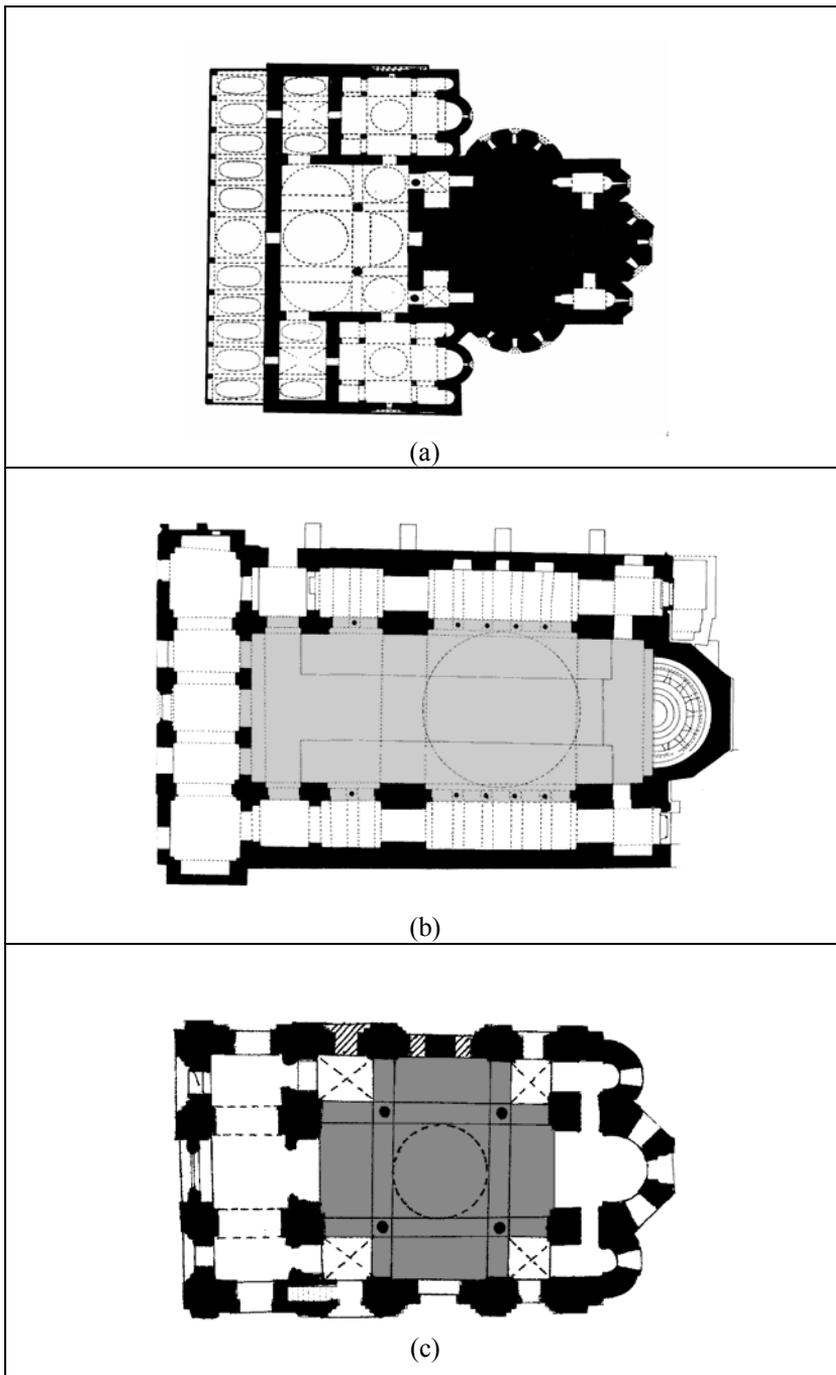
Unfortunately, acknowledging the existence of this type of visual language solves the problem only partially. The studies approaching, in the spirit of a thorough analysis, aspects related to the “genesis and use of plastic expression, both from the standpoint of the artistic language creation, and from that of the way it is perceived, coded and decoded” are extremely scarce [4, p. 16]. The fact is all the more regrettable since, without an appropriate artistic language, the necessary information cannot be fully conveyed or received.

As far as architectural forms are concerned, the studies published so far are even scarcer. This is due to the fact that architecture operates, indeed, with volumes, surfaces or lines, but mostly with spaces, making the architectural language much more complex than the pictorial or sculptural one. Paradoxically, the architectural space is, physically, a ‘void’ having a certain configuration and in whose absence the architectural message could not possibly be conveyed. From the morphological point of view, “the language of architecture does not form words by means of letters... but it represents them through symbols, as the old Egyptian manuscripts. Every symbol is a word, every word is a symbol” [11].

## **2. The triconchial structure and its importance in the symbolism of Orthodox churches**

With the sacred architecture, the language is even more nuanced, since here it expresses more than mere inner states, but actually the experiences generated by the dialogue with the Divine. Moreover, if art aims at “imprinting certain feelings onto us, rather than simply expressing them...” [12], the liturgical space will all the more seek to imprint onto us the awareness of our belonging to the Orthodox spirituality, with all its consequences. Therefore, in selecting and combining the elements of the language characteristic to sacred architecture, the message it had to convey has always been taken into account.

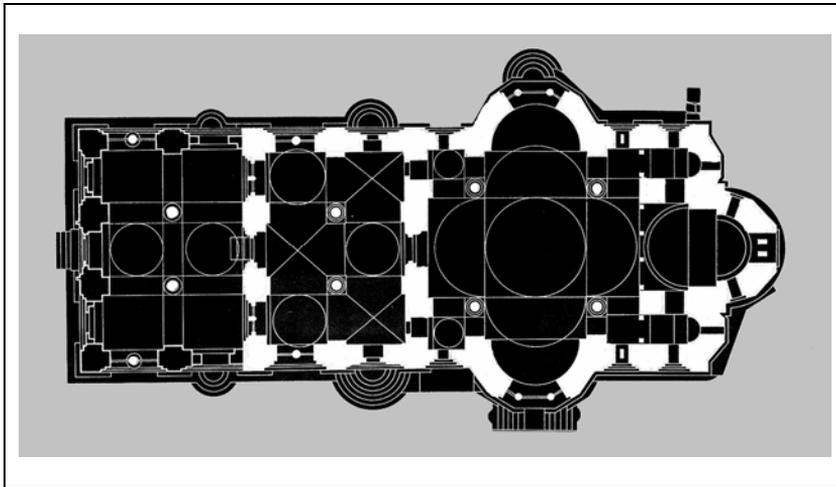
As early as the beginnings of Christianity, there existed concerns for the significance of the church as a place of worship and its symbolism [13-17]. They established certain design norms, so that all churches share a common denominator. At the time when the Great Lavra was being built at Mount Athos (Figure 1a), the Byzantine architecture already had two established types, the basilical one with its variants (St. Irene – *Hagia Irene*, Constantinople, 570, Figure 1b), and the circumscribed Greek cross one (*Panagia ton Chalkéon*, Thessaloniki, 1028, Figure 1c). The central type had been given up for functional reasons, being used only in the first centuries with baptisteriums. Both met the request that the church be a symbol of Noah's ark (a longish shape), a place of the Sacrifice (thus cross-shaped), a place for coming together and collectedness, icon of the Holy Virgin (a centred, unified space).



**Figure 1.** Plans of: (a) The Great Lavra Katholikon (Mount Athos, 961); (b) St. Irene – *Hagia Irene* (Constantinople, 570); (c) *Panagia ton Chalkéon* (Thessaloniki, 1028).

While a flat surface is neutral, as far as the spatial suggestion is concerned, a convex one repels, drives away, whereas a concave one, due to its curvature, is already a receptacle, a shelter, ready to hold, which immediately arouses 'a feeling of space' in the aesthete. Of all architectural structures, "the receptacle shape is the one to suggest acceptance, just like the amphitheatre, the semicircular stadium (cavea), the sanctuaries' apses, all the circular areas or those surmounted by domes like the Pantheon of Rome". [18, 19]

There was, however, a need for an architectural type that would respond to the principles peculiar to the respective monastic community, given the fact that each people or cultural-spiritual group express themselves by means of particular aesthetic forms. There is a kind of "spiritual ethnography established among the best defined 'races', spiritual families made up on the grounds of mysterious bonds, which always recur independently of time and place. Perhaps each style and each stage of a style, perhaps each technique addresses a certain human nature, a certain spiritual family" [8, p. 44].

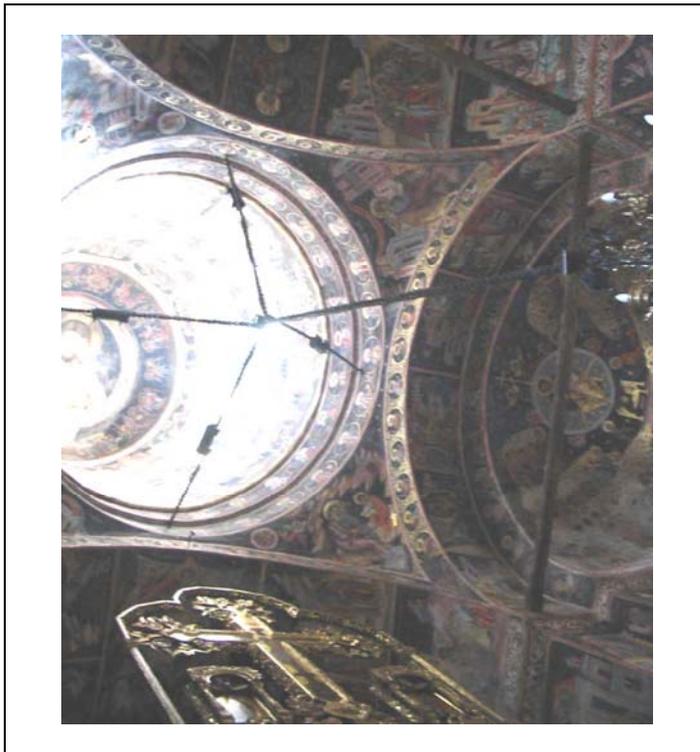


**Figure 2.** Plan of: the Katholikon of Chilandar Monastery  
(Mount Athos, late 12<sup>th</sup> century).

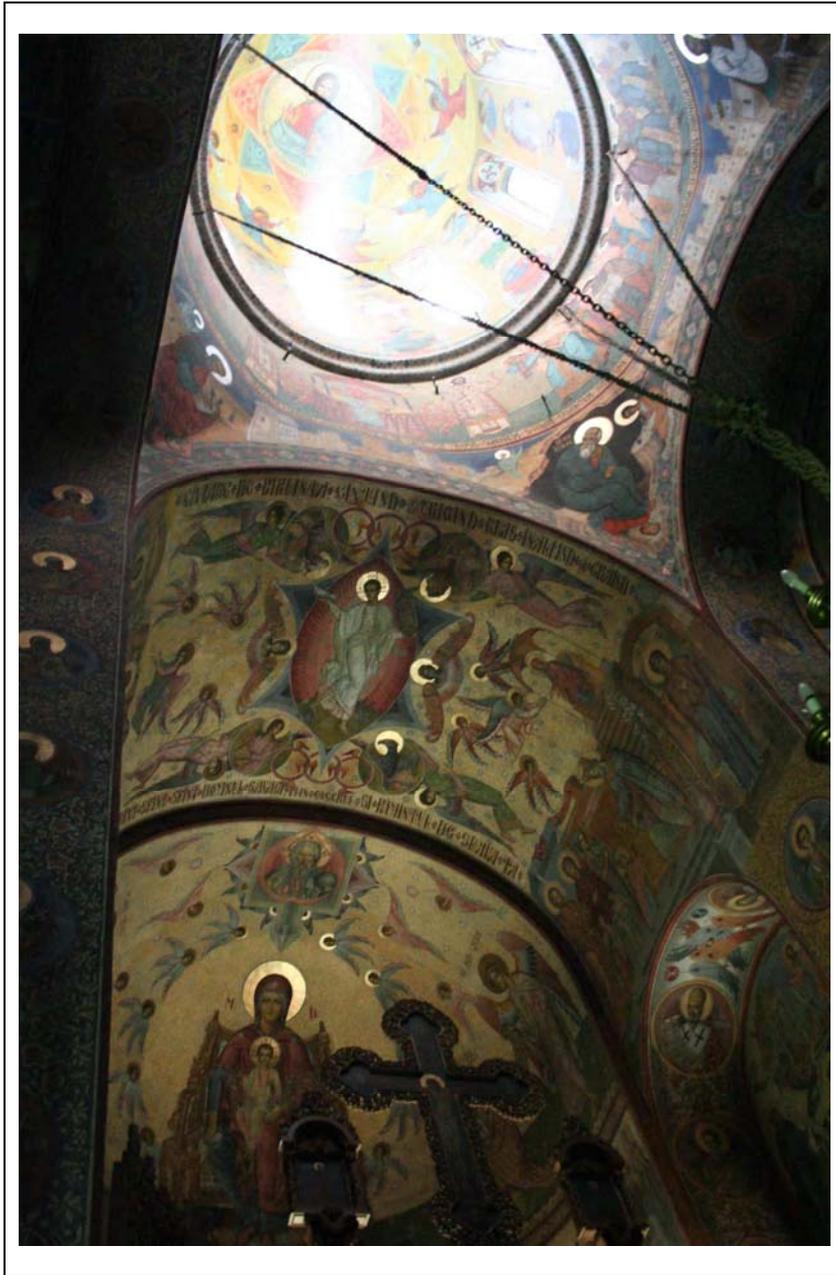
So was born the triconchial structure, with lateral apses – in Mount Athos' case, the Greek cross with lateral apses (Figure 2). The triconchial structure is not synonymous with the trefoiled one, although they are often mistaken for one another. The trefoiled plan prescribes joining the apses directly, in their eastern side, while in the triconchial plan the apses are not joined directly but through the square or rectangle which defines the nave, and whose corners are projected. Unfortunately, most art treatises account for the presence of apses exclusively by the necessity of having two spaces to hold the stalls, or the monks' 'choirs' – ideal for the antiphonic chants, specific to the Orthodox cult [20, 21]. In such a context, exclusively 'musical' or liturgical, the interpretations given to the triconchial structure often neglected the deep significance of the number three,

the fact that the Orthodox spirituality, which had begun to be established at Athos, had a markedly mystical character, announcing as early as the 9-10<sup>th</sup> centuries the hesychast movement which was to flourish three centuries later. Therefore, to the Athonite monks, the 'Trinitarian' space was one of perpetual reminding of the love among the Trinity Persons, being a spiritual necessity rather than a functional one.

Besides, the triconchial plan corresponded to a way of life and a psychology specific to monasticism. When persecutions against the Christians ceased, the martyrs' 'baptism of blood' gave way to monks' 'baptism of asceticism' [22]. They took upon themselves the state of crucifixion before the passions, or of perpetual sacrifice, and the shape of their worship place had to remind of this, which led to the choice of the cross-shaped type, as a permanent enactment of the Sacrifice on the Golgotha. On the other hand, monks withdraw from the world but are not against it, on the contrary it is always present in their prayers. Orthodox spirituality excludes the dry, sullen asceticism, deprived of any sympathy for one's neighbour. This is why the cross has rounded arms, its circular shape having multiple senses.



**Figure 3.** The Katholikon of Hurezi Monastery (Vâlcea, 1690-1697) - view of the nave.



**Figure 4.** The Katholikon of Dealu Monastery (Dâmbovița, 1501) - view of the nave.

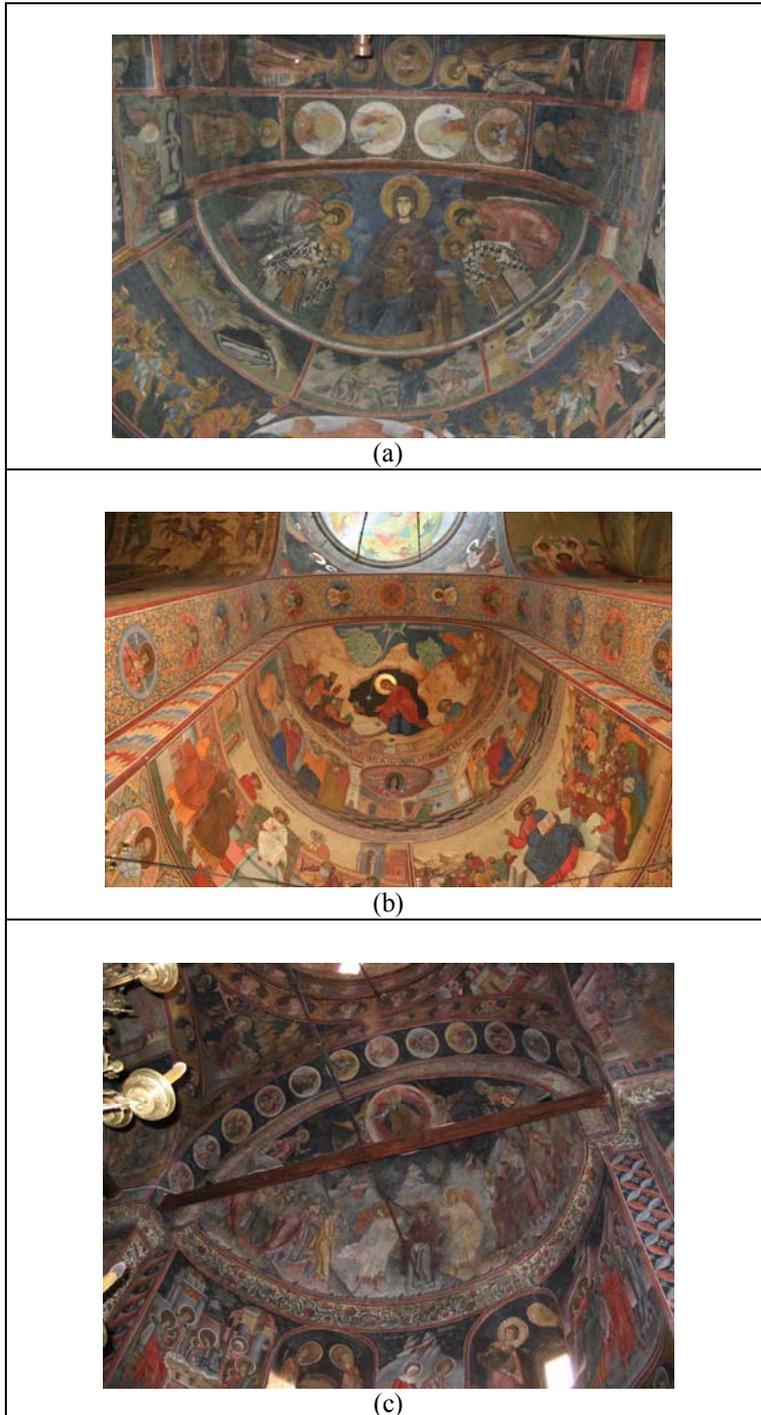
As “an enveloping shape, resembling a closed circuit, the circle is a symbol of protection, a protection granted within its limits. Hence the magical use of the circle as a defence belt around towns, around temples, graves...” [23] In the view of Saints Maxim the Confessor and Dionysius Areopagita, the entire created world is a vast circle whose centre is God Himself, so it exists the conception of a *circular Universe*. For these reasons, the circular shape was chosen to mark the cross arms, as the immediate effect at the level of visual perception is “the sense of concentration, of gathering around a pole marked (or suggested), which the circle gives, or as the case may be fragments of a circle (circle arcs or sectors, as well as other curves). A circle will always direct the gaze towards its interior, attracting it like a magnet” [24] (Figure 3 and 4).

Moreover, the semicircular shape of the apses strengthens the feeling aroused in the worshippers by the church dome, namely that they have God as their Father, and the church as their mother [25]. According to St. Cyprian of Carthage, “for one to have God as one's father, one needs first to have the Church as one's mother”. [*De catholicae ecclesiae unitate*, cap. 6] and [*Letters*, 74, 7]

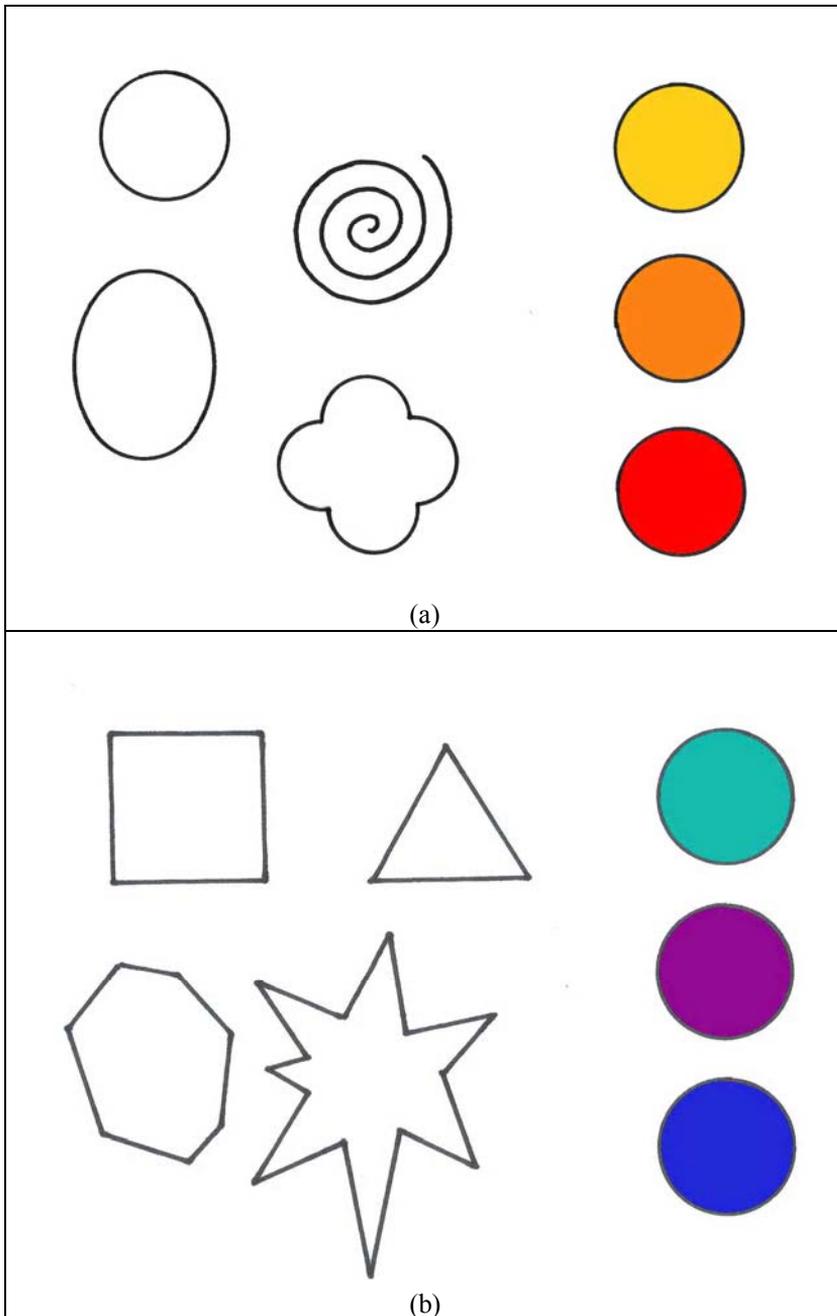
God bends lovingly over us, and this intensifies our feeling of gathering around the centre and closer to each other [26]. In this sense, the characteristic of the Eastern ecclesial space consists in the *concave shapes*, in their various manifestations (Figure 5).

Besides, such a structure belongs to the *closed forms*, which are to those made up of “linear details whose spatial layout tends towards the centre, towards the interior, or whose structural sense or that of movement turns onto itself, is a centripetal one” [5, p. 131]. The closed shape is one that concentrates itself, which does not disperse but focuses attention on a point of interest usually situated in its centre of gravity. For instance, within a circle appear centripetal-centrifugal and concave-convex tensions, while the central tension may manifest itself in the form of a continuous curved vector, “the multitude of concentric circles which a circle's structure may suggest can turn into a concentric spiral, whose lower limit merges into the circle centre, and whose upper limit superimposes on the circle's circumference” [24, p. 121].

With a closed composition “the balance of the main forces, tensions is achieved inside the composed space, they generally having centripetal senses, of classic stability” [24, p. 64]. Such a composition is the one specific to the triconchial structure, with which the very shapes suggest interiority, concentration as an antidote to dissipation, the focusing of attention onto the ‘church core’. All these constitute ways of spiritual life characteristic to hesychasm, where Jesus' prayer calls Him by its incessant repetition. And Jesus, the One invoked, is “the inward liturgy and the Kingdom within the pacified soul. The Name fills the man like a Temple, turns man into a place of divine dwelling, it christifies him” [27].



**Figure 5.** (a) Sfântul Nicolae domnesc Church (Curtea de Argeș) - view of the altar apse; (b) The Katholikon of Dealu Monastery (Dâmbovița) - view of the nave apse; (c) The church of Surpatele Monastery - inside view of the nave.



**Figure 6.** (a) Warm forms and colours, (b) Cold forms and colours.

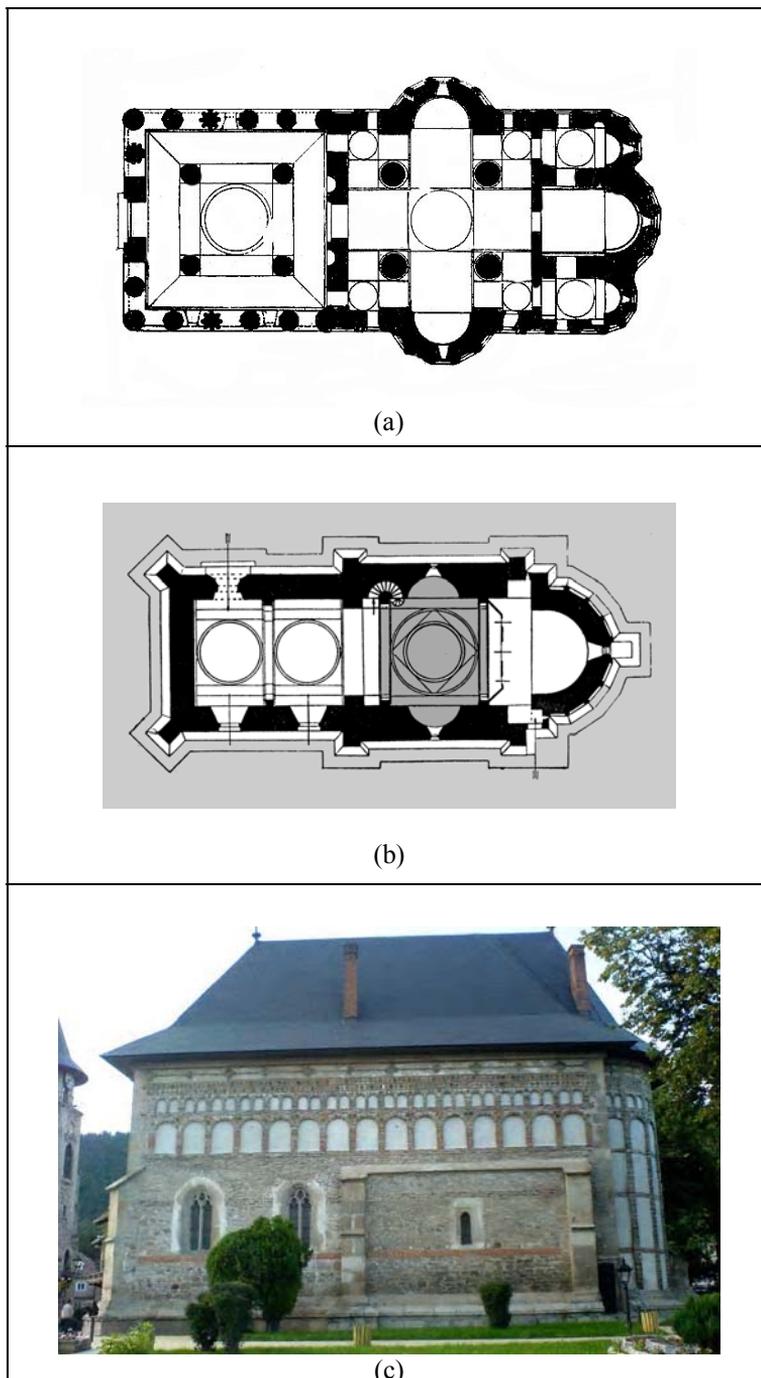
On the other hand, one could draw an analogy with the chromatic range of warm colours (red, orange) versus cold colours (blue, violet) - the former endowed with a welcoming quality, seeming to draw the space nearer, while the others push it away. Similarly, we can define *warm* and *cold shapes* (Figure 6), the former belonging to the family of curved shapes and the latter to the rectangular, angular ones. In this sense, the concave shapes of the architecture here presented fall into the warm category, as shapes which bring the Christians closer to each others and to God at the same time.

### 3. The persistence of triconchial structure in Romanian architecture

A mere analysis of Romanian ecclesial architecture, up to early 18<sup>th</sup> century, thus covering the reigns of native princes, shows that the triconchial was the architectural type specific to churches founded by both landowners and princes - of either monumental or modest proportions. It is even present in Transylvania, admittedly seldom, with the Prislop church attributed to St. Nicodim, of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Notably its taking over even in the case of wooden churches (whose construction system does not easily allow nave apses) and its persistence during the 19<sup>th</sup> century [28]. The lecture of the monuments' catalogue by Nicolae Ghika-Budești and Gheorghe Balș [29-35] makes this abundantly clear (Table1).

**Table 1.** The churches founded in Wallachia and Moldavia between 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, of the single-naved, triconchial structure with apses included in the depth of walls.

The Romanian principalities	The historical period	The single-naved type	Structure in which two apses are marked only in the depth of the nave's walls	The triconchial type
Wallachia	14-15 <sup>th</sup> centuries	36,36 %	9,09 %	54,54 %
	16 <sup>th</sup> century	-	-	100 %
	17 <sup>th</sup> century	37,20 %	-	62,80 %
	18 <sup>th</sup> century	37,64 %	-	62,36 %
Moldavia	14-15 <sup>th</sup> centuries	27,27 %	18,18 %	54,54 %
	16 <sup>th</sup> century	15 %	20 %	65 %
	17-18 <sup>th</sup> centuries	13,59 %	33,98 %	52,42 %



**Figure 7.** (a) Plan of the Church of Snagov Monastery; Church Sfântul Ioan (Piatra Neamț, 1497-1498) - plan (b) and view (c).

Yet by comparing the architecture of Mount Athos to that of the Romanian principalities, one can only find a single Athonite monument, the church of Snagov monastery, early 16<sup>th</sup> century (Figure 7a), and the triconchial type specific to Romanian architecture is the simple, Moravian one, and not the complex variant characteristic to Athos – a fact that could raise doubts as to the existence of any influence coming from this monastic area. Moreover, certain churches, especially Moldavian ones, display a peculiar structure, in that two apses are marked only in the depth of the nave's walls, they being either visible or not visible from the outside (Sfântul Ioan Pietra Neamț, 1497-1498, Figure 7b and 7c).

At the first sight, this architectural type seems to have little in common to the Athonite one, but we should bear in mind that we are dealing with two variants of the same family of shapes, just as in iconography we can have variants of the same iconographic type (for instance the Crucifixion scene where in the simple variant appear only the Saviour, His Mother and Saint John the Evangelist while the complex variant may show the myrrh-bearing women, the centurion, the soldiers, the thieves, the angels, the people). Actually, Byzantium formed in Eastern Europe “local dialects rather than separate languages,” [36] therefore the Byzantine art has always had diversity within unity. This explains why, from the standpoint of spatial layout, the Athonite and the Moldavian types are variants of the same architectural family of shapes, the one displaying three apses, three circular spaces.

On the other hand, one could raise the issue of the monuments that were not meant as monasteries but that still adopted this type. Let us remember, though, that there is a universal vocation for an ‘inward monasticism’ to which all Christians are called to respond, and which makes no distinction between commandments and the religious vows – since everyone is called to obedience, voluntary poverty, and chastity of body and soul [22, p. 334].

Not surprisingly, then, was the triconchial type chosen in order to respond to the aspirations of Christian people at large, be they laymen or monks. This type of ecclesial space, peculiar to the monastic environment, came to be also characteristic to the architecture of churches in the Romanian principalities, as the ideal concrete expression of the inner states born out of the communion with God. Its adoption in a sacred place such as Mount Athos could only be a further argument in favour of this choice.

#### **4. Final considerations**

Art has been and must remain “a symbolic way of expression, and where there is no symbol and, therefore, no expression, there is no art. Not to assert this, as forcefully as one possibly can, is to betray a sacred conviction” [37]. Therefore, the vocabulary of artistic forms is not chosen at random, but it has to express the experiences and aspirations of a religion, of a people or of a community. In this sense, we had to “come a long way before we realized that art is not produced in an empty space, that no artist is independent of forerunners

or models, that the artist, no less than the scientist or the philosopher, belongs to a particular tradition and works in an organized field” [38]. Unfortunately, “the psychology of artistic style is still to be written” [38].

As far as our topic is concerned, a few aspects can be highlighted. First, the fact that Mount Athos' ecclesial architecture chose as its representative type the triconchial in its complex variant, a type which was to be subsequently encountered only in the monastic world ( Meteora), Serbia and the Romanian principalities. The monastic centre at Athos kept permanently in touch with the peoples belonging to that *Byzantine Commonwealth* [39], its relationship with the Romanian principalities being a special one, especially after the Balkans and Byzantium fell under the Turkish rule. In Romanian sacred architecture, the dominant type is the triconchial, in its simple variant. And while its advent is a matter of debate, its persistence over time is indisputable, one of the possible reasons being that its architectural forms responded to a monastic vocation.

One cannot explain the spread of an artistic pattern, by it being automatically taken over and imitated, but by the conviction that it responds to some deep aspirations, that it can convey and maintain a certain inner state. Thus, the ecclesial structure of the triconchial has succeeded in conveying, by means of elements of architectural language, the condition of perpetual sacrifice, of bearing of the Cross which does not crush but comforts – characteristic to both monk and layman - and to unite, in a syntax of a single artistic language, geographically distant areas such as Mount Athos and the Romanian principalities.

## References

- [1] T. Simeirea, *Monastic Life in Wallachia Prior to 1379*, Biserica Ortodoxa Romana, 7-8 (1962) 673.
- [2] T. Bodogae, *Romanian Aid to Mount Athos Monasteries*, Paralela 45, Pitești, 2003.
- [3] G. Baș, *Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice*, 4 (1913) 35.
- [4] D. Mihăilescu, *The Language of Colours and Shapes*, Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, Bucharest, 1980, 23.
- [5] I. Șușală and O. Bărbulescu, *Dictionary of Art*, Sigma, Bucharest, 1993, 167.
- [6] N. Knobler, *Visual Dialogue – an Introduction to Art Appreciation*, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1983.
- [7] R. Berger, *Discovering the Painting*, vol. 1, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1975, 166.
- [8] H. Focillon, *Life of Forms*, Romanian translation by Laura Irodoiu Aslan, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1977, 25.
- [9] C. Ailinței, *Introduction to the Grammar of Visual Language*, Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1982, 5.
- [10] R. Avermaete, *On Taste and Colour*, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1971, 27.
- [11] P.A. Michelis, *La forme en architecture: imitation et abstraction*, in *signe, image, symbole*, La Connaissance, Bruxelles, 1968, 217.
- [12] H. Bergson, *Essay on the immediate data of conscience*, Institutul European, Iași, 1998, 39.
- [13] St. Dionysius Areopagita, *Collected Works*, Romanian translation by D. Stăniloae, Paideia, Bucharest, 1996.

- [14] St. Maxim the Confessor, *Mystagogia – Cosmos and Soul, Images of the Church*, PG, 91, col. 658-718, Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 2000.
- [15] St. Herman of Constantinople, *Church History or The Holy Liturgy Explained, Foreword*, The Metropolitan Revue of Oltenia, **9-10** (1974) 824.
- [16] *The Address of Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem*, PG, 87, col. 3981-4002, III, The Metropolitan Revue of Oltenia, **5-6** (1964) 351.
- [17] St. Simon Archbishop of Thessaloniki, *Treatise on All the Dogmas of Our Orthodox Faith According to the True Principles Set by Our Lord Jesus Christ and His Followers*, Romanian translation by T. Teodorescu, Arhchdiocese of Suceava and Rădăuți, Suceava, 2002, 155.
- [18] P. Michelis, *Esthetique de l'art bizantin*, Flammarion, Paris, 1959, 109.
- [19] M. Palade, *On a possible architectural hermeneutics – church layout in the Orthodox area*, Sophia, Bucharest, 2004, 145.
- [20] P. Mylonas, *L'architecture du Mont Athos*, in *Le Millenaire du Mont Athos (963-1963)*, vol. II, Editions du Chevetogne, Chevetogne, 1964, 235.
- [21] R. Theodorescu, Byzantium, Balkans, Occident at the Beginnings of Romanian Medieval Culture, Ed. Academiei, Bucuresti, 1974, 294.
- [22] P. Evdokimov, *Le monachisme interiorise*, in *Le Millenaire du Mont Athos (963-1963)*, vol. I, Editions du Chevetogne, Chevetogne, 1964, 332.
- [23] J. Chevalier and A. Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, vol. I, Artemis, Bucharest, 1995, 299.
- [24] Z. Dumitrescu, *Geometrical structures, plastic structures*, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1984, 122.
- [25] I.G. Coman, *Patrology*, vol. II, Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1985, 134.
- [26] D. Zamfirescu, *Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and their historical existence*, Roza Vânturilor, Bucharest, 1992, 313.
- [27] P. Evdokimov, *The Knowledge of God in the Oriental Tradition*, Christiana, Bucharest, 1995, 72.
- [28] A. Bauer, *Comments on Romanian wooden trefoiled monuments on the superior valley of Mureș*, in *Art History Studies*, Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1982, 233.
- [29] N. Ghika-Budești, *Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice*, **53-54** (1927).
- [30] N. Ghika-Budești, *Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice*, **63-66** (1931).
- [31] N. Ghika-Budești, *Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice*, **71-74** (1933).
- [32] N. Ghika-Budești, *Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice*, **87-90** (1936).
- [33] G. Baș, *Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice* **43-46** (1925).
- [34] G. Baș, *Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice*, **55-58** (1928).
- [35] G. Baș, *Moldavian Churches and Monasteries of the 17-18<sup>th</sup> Century*, Institute of Graphic Arts 'E. Marvan', Bucharest, 1933.
- [36] A. Grabar, *The Cambridge Medieval History. The Eastern Roman Empire (717-1453)*, vol. IV, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1927, 348.
- [37] H. Read, *The Origins of Form in Art*, Univers, Bucharest, 1971, 211.
- [38] E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1973, 68.
- [39] D. Obolenski, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, Corint, Bucharest, 2002.