
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ILLUMINATION VOTIVE PORTRAIT AND MURAL PORTRAIT IN MOLDAVIAN ART DURING 15th AND 16th CENTURIES

Irina-Andreea Stoleriu *

'G. Enescu' University of Arts, Faculty of Fine Arts, Decorative arts and Design,
189 Sărărie Street, Iași 700451, Romania

(Received 4 June 2010, revised 21 December 2010)

Abstract

In the present study, we are trying to highlight the characteristic features and stylistic evolution in the illumination arts and mural painting, taking as practical example the *votive paintings* that present as donors, the family of Stephen the Great (1457-1504), of the chancellor Ioan Tăutu (1457-1517), and of the Voivode Ieremia Movilă (1595-1606). The period of time connected with the existence of these important figures of Moldavia, marked one of most active historical moments as concerns the artistic and cultural development and emancipation. Among these, the name of Stephen the Great, as ruler of Moldavia, founder of numerous monuments, and ingenious chief of armies in times of great need for the state, reminds to future generations of an uniquely model of understanding and experience of Orthodox belief and completion as concerns the artistic areas devoted almost exclusively to the religious cult.

Keywords: votive painting, mural painting, illumination, medieval art

1. Introduction

The Moldavian territory sets during the 15th and 16th centuries the historical context of the Romanian States as reference point, marked by a certain evolution in the artistic creation and culture, in general. The Moldavian art began to have a more pronounced shape in the ruling period of Stephen the Great who played a key role in defining the autochthon cultural specificity by asserting a rapid development of architecture and painting, embroidery, manuscripts, and objects devoted to the religious cult.

Stephen the Great ensured for Moldavia a territorial autonomy, having such a great importance from a historical, economic, religious and artistic point of view. Due to him, the Moldavian art during these centuries can be considered the climax of creation and spirituality characteristic for this region and that had

*E-mail: andreea_vitelaru@yahoo.com

as origins the Byzantine art. This served as model for the entire art achieved in the 15th century, smoothing greatly the crystallization of an original regional artistic specificity, known now under the name of ‘*Moldavian style*’.

In this context, the mural painting and illumination art developed in a close connection with a mutual influence one over the other by means of new features and styling approached by the Moldavian artists from the 15th and 16th centuries. Time passing led to the loss in a great measure of the names of these artists from the Moldavia of those times. Unlike the mural painting, in the case of illumination manuscripts the names of the important artists were preserved over time.

A short chorological list of the Moldavian calligraphists, known until present times, is also necessary to underline the stylistic development function of the period requirements and influences that came from neighbouring areas. The pioneer in this artistic field is considered to be Gavril Uric (1400-1450) [1], thorough the carefully work of who was achieved the *Gospel* from 1429, written and illustrated at Neamț monastery. He is followed by the Hieromonk Nicodim [2], well known for the *Gospel* wrote in 1473 for the Humor monastery, considered to be “*the first painter who introduced the historical portrait in Romanian writings*” [1, p. 20]. Among other skilful Moldavian miniaturists from Medieval Age that history mentions appeared also the name of “*Teodor Măriesescu, Spiridon, Paladie, Pahomie, Filip, Ghervasie*” [3]. The 17th century superposed itself over a period of stylistic development as concerns illumination art, the Metropolitan Anastasie Crimca [2, p. 23] receiving the role of „*founder of a real illumination, ornament and calligraphy school*” [1, p. 44] in Dragomirna monastery.

2. The votive painting during the reign of Stephen the Great

Since the beginning of this study we must mention a definition of the discussed terms. Vasile Draguț identifies the main meanings described by the terminology of the *votive painting* that is presented as a „*painted, sculpted, engraved, embroidered, etc. image which presents the figures of the donors (founders) of an architectural or art object, applied in the purpose of underlying the devotion action of these persons*” [2, p. 41]. Their significance and importance in the context of Moldavian medieval art are remarkable, the *votive painting* operating by means of their symbolic and stylistic structure similar to epoch symbols, highlighting the physiognomies, fashion and even attitude of the donors. As Vasile Draguț says, because of their major use in the mural painting and not being subject to the same stylistic harshness as the church painting, the *votive paintings* have on one hand the importance of a true historical document, and on the other hand „*a way of affirming the realist tendencies in the Romanian Medieval art*” [2, p. 415].

In reference to the importance of votive images, we take into account the highlighting of the relationship existing between the illumination manuscripts and mural painting that have as object the portraits of Stephen the Great, chancellor Tăutu and Ieremia Movilă, analyzing at the same time the stylistic evolution of each period separately.

As history recorded, the art of this period developed in close connection with religion, the *votive paintings* that were preserved until present day being painted inside churches or as illustrations of the religious writings. It is known that during Medieval Age and even earlier, the libraries of the churches and cloisters both from East and from West preserved invaluable written, painted and illumination treasures of the past [4]. In Moldavia, among the paintings that are considered to be real historical testimonies there were preserved until present time important portraits of rulers and boyars, as donors and founders, who contributed to formation and development of a specific national heritage since those times. Among these, no doubt the most important is the figure of the Prince Stephen the Great, the most outstanding personality of Moldavia from the 15th century. His reign is considered to be one of the glorious eras of Moldavian arts, being at the same time the moment of crystallization for *Moldavian style* in architecture, moment we have mentioned earlier.

One truthful representation and with a high artistic value of the Moldavian ruler is found in the *Gospel* written for the Humor monastery in 1473 in the Slavonic language, with letters of black ink and gold highlighting. Here, we can feel the taste for precious and the representation modality of the Prince's face, on a decorated background dominated by gold, and also by numerous details concerning clothing. The illumination portrait of Stephen is the oldest image of his that was preserved until present time [5]. The illumination is applied of a parchment support – fact that allowed the ulterior intervention in the right side of the image where probably was found another character that was erased, and that is believed to be the second wife of the Prince, Maria de Mangop [6]. The most plausible version is that at the moment of metal cover application there was an intervention over the illumination, taking into account that at that specific moment the Moldavian Prince was married with his third wife, Maria Voichița [6], the erasing of Maria de Mangop image superposing an updating action over the historical document. The blank space in the right of Stephen's image indicates presently the numerous compositional problems, this being marked by a red lining over which is missing the decoration model of stylized vegetal elements, reinforcing again the idea of subsequent intervention as concerns the image.

Framing the entire image, the above mentioned decoration border, achieved in colours of red with black highlight, chromatically underlines and at the same time limits the interior of the illustration from the rest of the page. At a chromatic level, the background from the upper side of the image is golden – recreating the space specific for divinity, while in the lower part is green, underlying an obvious earthly characteristic, immediately followed below by an area of dark colour that offers compositional stability to the entire image.

The composition is distinguished by two registers, confined both chromatically and as concerns the position of the characters. In the upper part of the illumination is shown the Virgin Mary and Infant Jesus, sited on the throne, in the lower part being shown the Prince kneeled in front of God's throne. The miniaturist shows a good administration of the decorated space using the entire available area, fact underlined by two details that are still kept untouched: the halo of Virgin Mary starts exactly in the superior side of the frame, and in the lower side, Stephen's shoes seems to touch the decorating border.

Jesus is shown on the throne, side by side with Virgin Mary, not in her arms as the canonical images of oriental type uses to do [6]. The Virgin looks at Infant Jesus, pointing at the same time towards Stephen the Great who in his knees presents them the *Gospel*. In his turn, Christ blesses the voivode in acknowledgement of the valuable beneficence of the illumination manuscript, coated in golden silver and decorated with jewels. The Virgin is clothed with a violet *maphorion* [6], under which there can be noticed another outfit of blue colour and with red sleeves, which connects the *himation* having the same colour and the white *chiton* of Infant Jesus.

The proof of the freedom the illumination art enjoys during the Stephen the Great ruling period is given by the fact that the clothing the characters wore was approached differently, the stylized clothes of Virgin Mary and Infant Jesus being of Byzantine origin, while the outfit of the ruler is of occidental type. The outfit of Stephen the Great consists of a short cloak without sleeves of red brocade, having decorating elements embroidered with gold yarn, and under this there can be noticed a frock made of a similar material, but more intensely as value is concerned, marking his waist with a black belt. The ruler wears dark colour trousers and intense red short boots.

The portrait of Stephen the Great is highlighted by the crown decorated with jewels that resemble in its aspect the metal cover of the object gifted by the prince. The golden details create a harmonious chromatic interplay, unifying the painting by means of fine relievos. The golden crown helps the transition between the golden area from the upper side and the vegetal stylized details of the pricey outfit, while the book given as a gift, portrayed also with numerous golden ornaments, helps the transition to the character that was in the right side of the painting, showing the miniaturist abilities both as concerns the composition structure and also the chromatics.

The face of the voivode is treated in a realist manner; the artist studied very attentively the characteristic details of his physiognomy in order for these to be preserved unchanged over time and not deteriorated by idealization.

The importance and influence of this first illumination historical portrait is also visible in mural *votive paintings* subsequently achieved at the 'Holy Cross' Church from Pătrăuți and the 'Saint George' Church from Voroneț.



Figure 1. Pătrăuți votive painting: (a) Stephen's the Great family, (b) detail.

In the *votive painting* from Voroneț, made after 26th of July 1496 [7] (date of death of Alexandru, son of Stephen), not similar to the one in Patrauti, the order of the character sequence is not the same. In the right side is portrayed Jesus sited on the throne, on his side Saint George has the role of intercessor, and in front of Him is found the voivode, followed by his daughter Maria, then his wife, Maria Voichița and his son, Bogdan. In contrast with the *votive painting* from Pătrăuți, Bogdan doesn't receive the same hierarchical importance in the painting, being placed the last in the characters' hierarchy, and also his physical resemblance with the prince is not so great.

The artist treats in a distinct manner both the faces and also the apparel of the prince family, different from Jesus and of the intercessor saint. The clothes resemble the ones from Pătrăuți, both from a decorating point of view, and from a chromatic point of view. These startles by means of rich ornamentation, good taste and chromatic harmony including shades of ochre, gold and red, over which the painter applied vegetal details, carefully stylized that offer the apparel a special visual richness.

The 'Holy Cross' Church from Pătrăuți is the smallest sanctuary of the Stephen the Great as founder, erected in year 1487 [5]. Now found in a process of restoration, the *votive painting* in the church from Pătrăuți is considered to be one of the most important presentations of the prince family, among the ones still preserved in the Moldavian sanctuaries (Figure 1). The votive image is extended on the area of the south and west walls of the nave, where there are described the founder and his family. As concerns the dating of the interior painting, there were numerous opinions, and finally was established that the *votive painting* was most probably repainted (*the votive painting* from Pătrăuți has deteriorations of the plastering coating, these allowing to be seen another painting under the present one) after the death of Alexandru (July 1496), but before death of Ana, on 23rd of November 1499 [7]. This new making of the *votive painting* seems to be connected with the successor to the throne, not anymore represented by Alexandru, but by Bogdan, as it is underlined in the present painting of the church. In contrast with the painting in the illumination

from 1473, in this image is presented the Prince, Stephen the Great, Bogdan, Maria, Maria Voichița and Ana. On the western wall there are presented the intercessor, Saint Constantine the Great, near Jesus, who is portrayed on the throne. The scene forms a unitary whole, despite the placement on two different walls, compositionally united by a series of elements carefully correlated, as the replica of the church representing one of the major interest focuses of the painting and gestures of the characters indicating the maximum intensity focus of the *painting*.

As concerning the physiognomy, the portraits from this painting seem more rounded than the ones found in the *Gospel*, the resemblance between characters being intentionally accentuated, especially in the portraits of the prince and Bogdan, reinforcing the idea of succession. The apparels of the donors are of Byzantine origin, in contrast with the clothing of the Prince from the illumination from Humor that was of occidental inspiration.

Between the *Gospel* from 1473 and the *votive paintings* during the ruler's life can be identified both similarities and also numerous differences. The most striking resemblance is connected with the prince physiognomy, the above mentioned illustration serving as subsequent model [5] in the mural painting. Other similarities are connected with the object given as gift that becomes in all *votive paintings* the major interest focus. One of the similarities concerns also the subsequent intervention over the votive images. In case of the *Gospel* written for the Humor monastery, the intervention consists from the erasing of the assumed portrait of Lady Maria de Mangop, and in Pătrăuți the changes appeared once with the succession of Bogdan to throne, after the death of Alexandru.

Among differences we firstly mention the composition structure, the location on one or two walls, the presence or absence of some characters in the paintings – fact leading to problems in dating these paintings, and differences of stylistic order, respectively.

As a result, the epoch of Stephen the Great played a fundamental role in the development of Moldavian art, architecture and culture. From his time, there were preserved until our days some of his numerous votive images, a few subject to subsequent interventions, others being presently restored and presenting particularities specific for the Moldavian Medieval thinking.

3. The votive painting of the chancellor Ioan Tăutu

Changing the discussion, we will approach another type of *votive painting*, contemporary to the epoch of Stephen the Great, but belonging to the chancellor Ioan Tăutu. From the 15th century there were preserved only two votive images that portray this character in his role as founder: one mural painting found in the 'Saint Nicholas' Church from Bălinești, made possible in year 1493 [2, p. 72], and a illumination work from a *Psalter*, made in year 1498 and presently preserved at the Ethnography Museum from Ujigorod, Ukraine [6].

At the ‘*Saint Nicholas*’ Church from Bălinești we do not find an anonymous painting, the author of this fresco work being Hieromonk Gavril, who has a signature in Slavonic language found in year 1955 by Sorin Ulea, and this is still visible on the surface of the painting [8].

The *votive painting* can be easily perceived thanks to the recent restoration process of the interior fresco. The above mentioned image is found on the western wall of the nave, in the same location as the other *votive paintings*, and the donors are portrayed together with their families, intercessor in this painting being Saint Nicholas represented behind Logothete Tăutu. In the right side of the picture is portrayed Jesus on the throne, surrounded by angels, the area being chromatically differentiated by use in great quantity of gold, for halos, apparel, throne and ornaments. In the left side of the image there are presented the boyar family members and the replica of the church marks as in other *votive paintings* a symbolic object, which retains the importance of the meeting with Christ. In this painting, the church replica seems over-dimensioned in comparison to the *votive paintings* from Voroneț or Pătrăuți, being close to the dimension of one of the boyar’s children presented in this image (Figure 2).

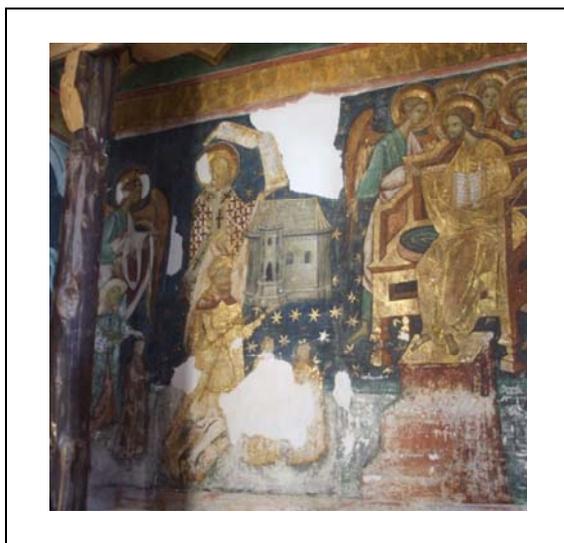


Figure 2. Bălinești. *Votive painting*: Family of chancellor Ioan Tăutu

The halos are treated in a different manner in comparison to Stephen’s sanctuaries, the artist using some reliefs, geometrical and floral shapes that surround and highlight the characters’ features. As in the case of illumination, drawing plays a very important role, because it is shaping and at the same time highlighting the clothing, the portraits and the church replica.

For a more relevant image of the *votive painting* of the chancellor, we will present another illustration, this time an illumination from a *Psalter* from the 15th century. In this, there are described three characters, on the right side appears Jesus portrayed on the throne, and in the left side is chancellor Tăutu, and behind

him can be identified King David, the author of the *Psalms*. The family is not present in this image, in contrast to the *votive painting* from Bălinești, probably the reduced area determined the artist to represent only the three fundamental characters of the image.

In the illumination from the *Psalter* there can be read an inscription written in Slavonic language in the lower side of the image, which mentions the name of a chancellor Ioan, probably Tăutu [6]. Comparing the two *votive portraits* from *Gospel* and *Psalter*, we notice that both donors are represented kneeling before Jesus. This time, the miniaturist artist was inspired by the fresco from Bălinești and not vice versa, as we have seen in the *votive paintings* of Stephen the Great. The resemblances between these two images of chancellor Ioan Tăutu are obvious, the artist who made the illumination taking over the posture and portrait of the character, and also the apparel specific to that epoch.

4. Votive painting of Prince Ieremia Movilă

The last period which we consider in this study is that of the Ieremia Movilă ruling period (1595-1606), and the *votive paintings* of this character from Sucevița (Figure 3) and from the *Gospel* written in year 1607 at Dragomirna cloister [9]. Beside these representations there was also preserved the *Grave Covering of Ieremia Movilă*, now present at Sucevița monastery, monument that can be resembled with that of Lady Maria de Mangop, preserved at Putna monastery [10].

During the rule of Ieremia Movilă appeared a new kind of stylistic approach that marked the transition from Moldavian art to modern art. The stylistic differences can be explained also by the change in the attitude of the ruler, Ieremia Movilă originating from boyars [11].



Figure 3. Votive painting from Sucevița cloister (detail)

The church of Sucevița cloister was founded by the Metropolitan Gheorghe Movilă, and its decoration with fresco represented the action of faith of the ruler Ieremia Movilă. It is known that the mural painting was finished in 1601 [12], being performed by the painter Ion and his brother, Sofronie [2, p. 410]. Concerning this, there can be observed an obvious stylistic evolution by means of compositional framing, distinctive chromatics and refinement of details that bring this as close as possible to an illumination. Similar to the 15th century, the following century preserved the relationship between illumination and monumental painting, this fact becoming more accentuated in the painting found at Sucevița, where the artist treats the religious scenes as distinct episodes, carefully limited by coloured borders, resembling to the illumination illustrations.

The votive painting of the ruler and his family is extended, being painted on two walls, found in the west and south side. This image presents the ten members of the family, meaning the Prince, Ieremia Movilă, his mother, wife and children, followed in the right side by Virgin Mary, Jesus and an angel, and preceded in the left side of the *votive painting* by the Saints Emperors, Constantine and Helen.

In the *votive painting*, the composition is focused generally on the ascending and descending diagonals that are presented on both walls. Looking from left to right, the image from the southern wall presents the five children of the ruler and their mother, Elisabeta Movilă. On the western wall is presented the mother of the ruler, Maria, that connects the next image, recreating the ruling couple of mother-son, also present in the next image presenting the Saint Emperors, Constantine and Helen. At compositional level, there can be visualized a descending imaginary axis in the left upper side of the image towards the elder daughter of the ruler, Chiajna (named in the *votive painting* with the name Irina [11, p. 156]) and his successor to the throne, Constantine, presented before Ieremia Movilă.

An essential axis, that grounds and at the same time underlines the importance of the *votive painting* intercrosses the hands of the Movilă family members and the church replica, reaching towards the hand of Jesus. This line highlights in a symbolic plan the fact that all members of Movilă family contributed to the erection of the sanctuary from Sucevita.

The drawing is more realistic than the one made in the paintings from Pătrăuți or Voroneț, where characters are idealized. The artist manages to bring balance to the composition from a chromatic point of view, alternating by means of character apparel the interplay between red-ochre and at the same time highlighting the figures with help of the dark blue background.

The other art work subject to the present analysis, the *Gospel* from year 1607, commissioned by the ruler Ieremia Movilă [9, p. 70], is one of the illustrative works for this period of time while it represents a peculiar artefact through his obvious intention for character stylization in the sense of spiritualization. For serving this purpose, the miniaturist manifested a special

predilection for a certain type of description, which combines obvious features of picturality and decorativeness.

The painting is made by an anonymous artist on a parchment support in the Slavonic language. The background is illuminated due to the white background that highlights the characters and writing, leaving the impression of irradiating light according to the principles of Byzantine aesthetics.

In this illumination, we are the witnesses of a different approach in presenting characters, one that is more graphic, in which the line plays a very important role. The artist uses gold in rich quantities as symbol of wealth and glamour specific to that epoch, decorating the apparel of the donor's family and certain vegetal details of the background. The clothing is stylized in a graphic manner by the use of black outline line, details and portraying. The very simple drawing uses the lines for drawing essential features of anatomy, treated almost exclusively by means of lines, and the rendering and decoration modality for the clothing of Byzantine inspiration remind us clearly of the apparel of Stephen the Great from the *votive painting* from Voroneț monastery. The chromatics is limited to gold, black and shades of red, greatly using the transparency of the support.

From a compositional point of view, the artist uses the height oscillations, not taking into account the importance or the characters hierarchy. The prince holds at the level of his chest a red book representing his beneficence, and each member of the family hold in their hands one cross and a red wimple, bringing balance in the chromatic composition.

5. Conclusions

After presenting these few examples, considered to be representative for the artistic styles they represent and for the art of the period they came from, we think we are able to draw a conclusion concerning the artistic tendencies that dominated the painting style in the votive paintings as part of the two branches brought in this discussion.

A first conclusion would be that the art of the 15th and 16th centuries in area of illumination and mural paintings evolved from a stylistic point of view, being influenced by Byzantine and occidental elements, and last, but not least by the local specificity that left its mark over the art works by means of a profound feature of originality. The influences and inspiration sources were various, the mural painters and miniaturists borrowing elements from each other and subsequently filtering them in a personal manner.

Secondly, the kindred spirit of these two basic areas of Medieval art, mural painting and illumination, was an imminent one in the case of *votive painting*, fact proved repeatedly by artefacts coming from different areas and different periods of time, that possess elements of a common original vein, as it happens in case of the *votive painting* from Bălinești, and the one from the *Psalter* in the 15th century. Such resemblances appear even more often in the representing modality of the portrait of Prince Stephen the Great, his image from

the *Gospel* written for the Humor monastery serving as a prototype for subsequent achievements of this type.

In essence, the two artistic areas discussed here have had a special contribution in achieving some important historical documents, reconstructing the image of great personalities of the times in which they were achieved. In the context of Moldavian Medieval art, the votive paintings played a major role in reinforcing an example offered to future generations, in the spirit of preserving this artistic and implicitly symbolic tradition through the primary significance of the founding action. Both in mural painting and in illumination, the votive paintings radiographed the image of those times, representing the most obvious proof of Moldavian spirituality.

References

- [1] G. Popescu – Vâlcea, *Miniaturi românești*, Meridiane, București, 1998, 10.
- [2] V. Draguț, *Dicționar enciclopedic de artă medievală românească*, T. Sinigalia (ed.), Vreamea, București, 2000, 306.
- [3] C. Paradais, *Comori ale spiritualității românești la Putna*, Editura Mitropoliei Moldovei și Sucevei, Iași, 1988, 345.
- [4] I. Rusu and G. Petraru, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **1(1)** (2005) 4.
- [5] T. Voinescu, *Portretele lui Ștefan cel Mare în arta epocii sale*, in *Cultura moldovenească în timpul lui Ștefan cel Mare*, M. Berza (ed.), Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, București, 1964, 278.
- [6] T. Sinigalia, *Revue Roumaine d'histoire de l'art*, **27** (1990) 13.
- [7] M.A. Musicescu, *Considerații asupra picturii din altarul și naosul Voronețului*, in *Cultura moldovenească în timpul lui Ștefan cel Mare*, M. Berza (ed.), Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, București, 1964, 368.
- [8] S. Ulea, *Gavril ieromonahul, autorul frescelor de la Bălinești*, in *Cultura moldovenească în timpul lui Ștefan cel Mare*, M. Berza (ed.), Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, București, 1964, 419.
- [9] G. Popescu–Vâlcea, *Miniatura românească*, Meridiane, București, 1981, 95.
- [10] R. Theodorescu, *Itinerarii medievale*, Meridiane, București, 1979, 160.
- [11] M.A. Musicescu and M. Berza, *Mănăstirea Sucevița*, Academia Republicii Populare Române, București, 1958, 160.
- [12] S. Ullea, *Datarea ansamblului de pictură de la Sucevița*, 2nd edn., Butușani, AXA, 2006, 7.