
AN INNOVATIVE IMAGE OF THE SAINTS' PLACES IN HEAVEN FOUND IN GOLIA MONASTERY'S ICONOGRAPHICAL PROGRAMME

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Abstract

One of the compositions belonging to the iconographical programme of Golia Monastery is analysed due to its apparent originality contrasting to the opinions of well-known researchers. I present briefly one hypothesis concerning the dating of part of the painting to Ioan Golia's time, due to the intention of verifying the value added by time elapsed from the making of the painting in the choir.

A number of reasons that determined the lack of interest for or the absence of an identification of the chosen composition are mentioned. The elements of the painting are described and identified, to support the correlation made with a scriptural verse. The originality of the painting is verified through the appeal to the indications given in the Painter's manual of Dionysius of Furna, through the search of similarities with other Moldavian or Byzantine compositions and through the content of ideas from patristic homilies. The interpretation of the ideas that are to be found in this composition is related to the holiness as a state of communion in heaven for the chosen ones. Consequently, the elements of the painting are interpreted, while underlining the originality. A connection to the writings of Saint Simon the New Theologian is mentioned. The dependence of originality in post byzantine painting to active, spiritual life is affirmed.

Keywords: Golia, saints, dwelling places, Heaven

1. Introduction

At least one part of the painting from Golia church that belongs to the 16th/17th centuries could be interpreted in a theological debate as a special manifestation in the art of painting churches. I am stating this in contrast with the comments of the well known researcher V. Florea about Romanian art in the transitional époque from medieval to modern, taking as a starting point the painting of the narthex and of the exonarthex [1]. We will see that enlarging the analyses of a composition that is raising the question of the artist's skill can lead to interesting conclusions. But for the right interpretation, we should already

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remember that the Orthodox iconography doesn't reduce the image to a reality of its own, can be in fact destroyed in the case of the face loss [2]. At the same time, as Saint Symeon of Studion stated, we always need the icon in our contemplative life, as Saint Symeon of Studion stated [3].

A few things connected with the place of the chosen painting in a historical context should be mentioned first. I was interested in the hypothesis according to which the lower part of the painting, up to the windows is drawing back to Ioan Golia's time. A closer time to the achievements dating from Stephen the Great's time could possibly lead to original connections from the theological point of view. But for that, one should take fairly into account the working human conditions, the aimed public, the obtained results even meant or not and the intention of the next founder to preserve and continue the valuable previous painting in a similar context. In 1958, C. Turcu supposed already that the painting from the church's exonarthex and the one from the northern and southern narthex could be attributed to Ioan Golia's time. He had noticed among other things, some details connected with the continuity of the iconographical programme. The unusual number of figures (eleven) in the narthex drew the researcher's attention. The old character of the painting was revealed at that time by a recent discovery (for that time) of a painted fragment on the right side of the southern wall (the northern wall being the corresponding one) above the shoulder of the last saint. The fragment represents the hand of a figure subsequently covered by the supporting column of the arch that opens above the choir [4].

In my opinion, however, the eventual controversy or uncertainty regarding the dating or the author of Golia's iconographic programme doesn't question the originality or the importance of the composition that I want to analyze in this article. It could add the value of time elapsed since the painting was made.

2. Discussion

2.1. Analysis of the compositional structure of the painting. Proposed identification

The composition that I refer to and that I want to analyze in this article, though described but still not identified until now, is one from the choir, on the northern wall of the church (Figure 1). In his works, I.D. Ștefănescu had pointed out several characteristics, still, avoiding identification. As for the characters, he made to be observed the beauty of a nude, placed somehow centrally, mentioned some clothing details, without any mention of names. Remarks to the lay-out structure or to the symbolic content were however missing [5]. I.D. Ștefănescu also made a fugitive description of Golia's painting, with a note on the originality of the 19th century iconography for the vision of Jacob [6].

From the beginning, several losses from the painting layer, the apparent left-handiness or the stiffness of the Cretan like style could do an injustice to the attempt of analyzing this painting. Black and altered by time and by repaintings,

the picture allows after the processing of the image the identification of the constituent parts, of the repetitions, of the relationships between the characters and the discovery of a deep theological culture. The general structure of the composition is given by the groups of three or two characters arranged in a frieze covering two levels. An architectural background, trees placed on different plans and the sky constitute the supporting décor for the characters. The groups of characters dressed up in different ways are represented sited. From place to place, they are separated by wells. Different graphic clues and the colouring make us think that we see a painted version of our Saviour's words: "In My Father's house are many dwelling places..." (John 14.2).

Besides, the iconographical elements suggest another possible connection: Saints' dwellings in Heaven in relation with the image of the celestial Jerusalem. The desire for the celestial Jerusalem and its temple was interpreted as a heritage of the Christians from the Ancient Testament. Also, the image of the celestial Jerusalem as described in the book of Revelation was seen in connection with three key notions of life: the tree of life, the water of life and the city of life. These metaphors were offering a possible extended coverage, even if there was no explicit presence of the temple, for the representations of multiple trees and sources of water, as the image of celestial Jerusalem present in a certain way at Ezekiel 44 and developed by John in liaison with the coming of Christ [7].

A justified question would be about what elements have suggested the identification of the scene with the mentioned quotation? The initial connection was possible due to the position of the characters, chairs, clothes and setting. Different characters in the painting have drawn the attention from the beginning, being frontally represented from a direct angle or only from the usual three quarters side. They are sitting on different types of chairs, similar altogether to that of God's Mother that is to be found close by, on the eastern wall, in a painting representing the Heaven. The difference is that the saints in the scene we are interested in are mostly represented placed in the front of several houses, different in architecture and colour. The groups of saints aren't in a static position but in a dialogical one. The saints' clothing suggests different groups they are belonging to: Apostles, Hierarchs, Emperors, Martyrs and Hermits. The details of the representations compared to those offered by the descriptions in the Painter's manual or by the traditional iconography of the saints lead us to the identification of the characters. So that, in the upper register (looking from west to east), we can distinguish a first group, that of the Apostles Peter and Paul, a second one of three Apostles where Saint Andrew could be in the middle. In the nearby groups we can recognize the Saints Martyrs, where the first one from the west could be, not by chance, the archdeacon Steven and also the emperors Constantine and Helena, at the end of this first level of the frieze. In the lower level, dedicated we think to the Saints Hierarchs, Hermits and Martyrs, we can identify the well-known three Hierarchs, John Chrysostom, Gregory the Theologian and Basil the Great, Saint Nicholas, Saint Spyridon of Trimythonte, Saint Anthony the Great, Saint Onufrie and maybe Saints Euthyme the Great and Maxim the Confessor.

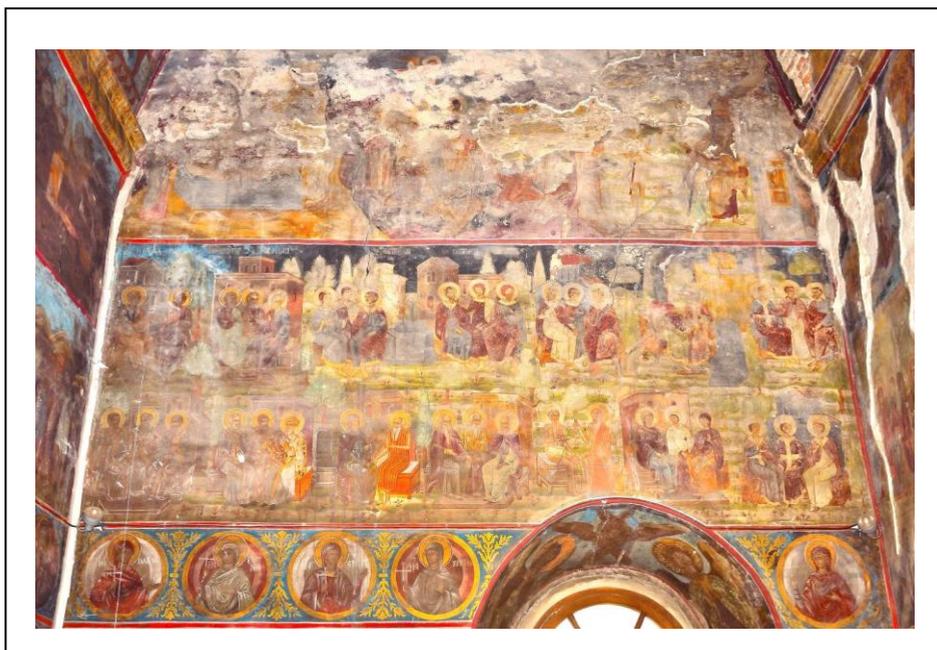


Figure 1. Saints and their dwellings in Heaven, Golia Monastery, north wall of the choir.

2.2. Research questions and hypotheses, connexions

It is also important not to isolate this group composition from the church's background of the painting dating from the medieval Moldavia for a number of reasons. First of all, to verify the local conditions according to which this painting could be a part of a process of following and redefining tradition. Secondly, in order to easier understand and appreciate the original character of this painting that was addressing to a certain public. Thirdly, to check the possible originality or special place occupied by the presentation of the saints in Heaven at Golia Monastery in the traditional Byzantine painting, as the expression of an inner experience and thinking that follow the patristic tradition.

Are we justified to say that the author(s) of the painting has (have) innovated? Resorting at first to the indications of Dionysius of Furna Painter's manual, whose directions, we can suppose were the expression of the existing tradition, we see that the representation is not supported by any description. That is why I consider that what is surely innovating in this picture is the fact that it doesn't follow and it is not reduced to an exact narrative rendering to which several elements might been added to suggest the symbolical character of the scene. In other words, this specific painting contrasts with the statements made by the historiographers Ana Dobjanski and Victor Simion about the art of ecclesiastical painting during Vasile Lupu's time and its tendency to laicization by stressing the narrative absent from the models offered by the Painter's manual, but taken from the particularities of everyday life [8].

Moreover, we can notice the singular presence of John 14.2 quotation in form and content in the Holy Scripture or patristic writings. We can rather associate that quotation with dogmatic or spiritual content as we can observe in the patristic commentaries. I say that because it doesn't describe facts that have already happened, but it merely drops a hint to them indirectly, as an advice to understand a faithful life in the acts.

The present stage of our researches meant to identify similar representations, led me to establish as almost certain the originality of the painting in Romanian medieval or Byzantine space. The single connection that can inevitably come in mind is that of the Synaxarion, on the basis of the multitude of represented saints. But in this case, we are already taking into consideration other literary or spiritual resources or completely different rules of composition and rhythms in representation. Consequentially, I am not taking into account the frequent interpretation of some pictures' presence in the iconographical programme of the churches following the beginning and the solving of the hesychastic problem, as an expression of the influences and preoccupations regarding the spiritual current.

2.3. Understanding the spiritual reality stated in the painting through existing eastern spiritual writings

So, it is absolutely necessary to make a profound study of the subject for a correct spiritual and iconographical explanation. In order to get to that aim, it seems very important to emphasize the existing connections in eastern spiritual writings. I will try to avoid any kind of exaggeration or slipping in the interpretation, caused by the partial knowledge of the subject, taking as a support the patristic writings relating to the Saviour's words. So, I will be able at the end of this study to point out the facts, the innovating knowledge that comes out from this representation. Resorting to the holiness theology will help, while enlarging the biblical message, to appreciate in what degree the painting remains far from any addition contrary to the Christian dogma and iconographical tradition.

The frequency of this line (John 14.2) in the Gospel writings (that is to say its singular presence in John's gospel) seems to restrict and to make difficult our search, right from the beginning. I found John Chrysostom, Isaac the Hermit and Saint Isaac the Syrian referring to this quotation. The three authors unveil different issues. The line was explained in the biblical context by Saint John Chrysostom and seen as an expression of consolation addressed to the Apostles by the Saviour before his suffering. Jesus Christ averts the danger regarding his first statements about the future in order not to be understood as promises addressed only to Peter. He answers the sadness that could have disturbed the other Apostles by this consolation [9].

Saint Isaac the Syrian sees in Christ's words different stages of those dwelling in Heaven, not as different places but as different gifts/callings. He uses the metaphor of the Sun which everyone enjoys according to his own

understanding and that of the candlestick which throws light in a different way to each of the inhabitants of a house, none of them being able to see the others' measures of greatness so as not to be upset. The saint adds that our Saviour doesn't mention an intermediate state to that of the sinners and of the just ones [10].

As for Isaac the Hermit, he considers the verse as an impulse to find and win Martha and Mary in our inner self. Repentance, the well meant struggle against laziness and oversight, the diligence will be seen on the occasion of Lazarus' liberation, understood as a liberation of mind from the many strains of its own will [11].

2.4. Understanding the spiritual reality stated in the painting through its placement inside the iconographical programme and its iconographical details

The complete understanding of the spiritual reality stated in this painting is on the other hand given by its placement inside the iconographical programme. We cannot wonder why we find this composition here. Its position in the church's exonarthex, in the immediate proximity of the 17th century compositional variants, some of which presenting 19th century modifications, of what it is considered to be characteristic to this part of the church (for the example the Last Judgement), doesn't seem accidental. The whole composition looks like a crowning of the Creation (Figure 2a) painted on the western wall or like a state of things valid up to the Judgement Day (Figure 2b) present on the eastern wall. At the same time, it is placed under an almost impossible to be recognized scene, because of the severe degradation of the painting, representing the Descent into hell.

This placement of the Saints' dwellings in Heaven under the Descent into hell underlines even more the importance of looking at the entire iconographical programme. In this way, the earlier connection with the celestial Jerusalem becomes even more meaningful, as Christ, entered Jerusalem descending from Jericho and remakes the same way that the people of God made. Through his Resurrection, Christ has truly entered Jerusalem, his reign, a reign of life [12] which He has opened to his followers. Not incidentally, I think, we can find Christ' explanations for the path to take, in the same chapter with the quotation that gave me the title of the analysed composition.

I also believe that the ideas that are to be found in this composition should be related to those about the holiness as a state in Heaven of the chosen ones. What defines holiness as a state of things? Does it suppose isolation through personal communion or even depersonalization because of the confusion of one with the community of persons? Possible answers about our conditions as persons or about the reciprocity in knowledge are to be found in this painted representation of Saints in heaven. According to my understanding, the representation follows the revelation, making clear the fact, as in the indicated verse, that there are many ways of reaching holiness, but the moment when the

divine reward is received, the divine communion is not a singular one. And this is to be seen in the perpetuation of the dialogical state as an image of communion.



Figure 2. (a) Man's creation by God with angels praising the Lord, Golia Monastery, western wall of the choir; (b) Last Judgment, Golia Monastery, eastern wall of the choir.

The Saints are represented, as already said, according to the category they belong to. So we can already understand that, in spite of the fact that the persons always remain distinctive, as part of the dialogue with God, they are given not only knowledge of the divine, but also knowledge of each other in a certain way. The personal relationship is that from within a community. Whereas the fact that the saints are sometimes sharing the same bench or sitting on different chairs speaks at the same time about assuming a way corresponding to a certain category and about keeping a distinctive character. Even the chairs themselves, usually reserved to certain representations, state the dignity of the calling and service done by each saint. Just the fact that groups of characters are shown out of the houses can be understood as an affirmation of a forever opening towards communication.

The equality in the dialogue, as a reflection of love, can be understood in the way the saints are placed. Each time painted in groups of two or three, with details recalling the category of representation, the saints, men and women are facing one another. The preconceived idea regarding the patterns used in iconographical representation could make us think about somewhat closed circles of dialogue. But we have the surprise to see sideways characters that are looking towards those from the neighbouring groups. Surely, is not about turning their back to the others, but about bringing some others in the dialogue. Consequently, the human, objective knowledge as that in a mirror, in which the recognition of the object is imperfect because there is no reciprocity, is opposed to the subjective knowledge from Heaven as if a turn from the reflection to the reflected one as Bousset interpreted [13].

That is why, not only the many places from our Father's house do not mean isolation, but also the affiliation to a certain category does not mean either exclusivity. Though, because an obvious separation can be understood from the biblical verse, we can also notice a distance left between different groups of characters. This space is nevertheless filled with dialogue. The representation of the faces on three quarters is preferred to the more usual frontal representation as an expression of a continuous inner dialogue existing between those dwelling in Heaven and at the same time as an expression of the more general or exterior dialogue between those in Heaven and the ones on Earth.

Finally, I have to mention that all these details in debate, referring to the communion and communication inside Heaven, have obvious connection with the answers from the first moral speech of Saint Simon the New Theologian. Saint Simon, while warning about the danger of questioning about things that surpass our measure of virtues, underlines the fact that the saints are similar to God and that they will know God. Furthermore, the saints that didn't see each other in this earthly life in flesh and blood, being gods as a result to their life actions and housing God inside them, wouldn't miss each other's acquaintance [14].

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, we know that the method of interpreting images it is stated the fact that we can never say everything about an image and that the only equivalent of the image is the image itself [15]. But in the theological acceptance of the complementarity of the two ways of transmitting the Christian faith, the whole iconographical programme of Golia's church exonarthex raises some ideas of interest about the representation of holiness in the Romanian iconography. First of all, we can state that the iconographical details are chosen after a careful reading of the Holy Scripture and as a result of a high spiritual life. Furthermore, the inner living, the only authentic one, opening the way to the communion with Christ, is the one which conditions the manifestation of an iconographic originality inside tradition. At the same time, we can see that there exist several innovating statements for the iconography about the afterlife state of the human soul (of the Saint's souls in particular), about the diversity and unity inside the Christian church. And as for the answers to the essential question regarding the seeing of God during this life and after it, whose understanding separates the Orthodox Church from the Romano-Catholic one [13, p. 11], they are enriched by a possible answer given through the analysed composition, about the knowledge that saints have in Heaven each about the other. It remains for us to consider and make further researches about a possible collaboration between the painters employed by Vasile Lupu to finish the decoration of Golia or the painters from the 19th century and the theologians that might have suggested the iconographical programme, leading to this original outline of saints' places in Heaven, as it is supposed it was the case in the establishment of the iconographical programme from Voroneţ monastery influenced by Metropolitan Grigorie Roşca [16, 17].

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