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# STYLISTIC SYNCRETISM IN RELIGIOUS ART AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE REGION OF ROMANIAN BANAT

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## Abstract

In this study we intend to start a interdisciplinary approach concerning the stylistic syncretism of religious art in Banat region of Romania, particularly focusing on the Serbian monasteries and churches in this area. The study commences with the presentation of some of the aspects concerning the cultural and scientific relevance of the subject. In the second part of the study, applying specific hermeneutical, aesthetics and art history qualitative research methodology, we shall reveal some of the significations of stylistic syncretism in Banat religious art. The third part of the study is composed out of a comprehensive and comparative-empiric analysis of the styles regarding the Serbian monasteries and churches in the Romanian Banat, particularly focusing on the stylistic specific of *The Serbian Orthodox Monastery of Saint George*. At the end of our study, we put forth a couple of conclusive appreciations about the discussed aspects.

*Keywords:* Serbian religious art, stylistic syncretism, multiculturalism, Banat region

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## 1. Introduction

In the present study we aim to start up an interdisciplinary analysis applied to the cultural-artistic sphere of the region of Romanian Banat. Our analysis is a follow up of the process initiated by the contemporary aesthetic theories on religious art, trying to formulate new interpretation criteria from a hermeneutical foundation of the ones in discussion. From a wider angle, the cultural relevance of the problematic is supported by the intent to bring into discussion a subject with a still narrow area of approach in speciality studies and research. One can only find it in some monographic treaties and in fragmented approaches regarding the Serbian religious art in Banat. On a theoretical level, the relevance of the problematic is sustained by the stylistic complexity of this regions religious art, fact that urges the necessity of an interdisciplinary and

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transdisciplinary approach at the same time. Thirdly, the cultural relevance is due to function of the stylistic syncretism in Banat region religious art, to reconfigure special communication and spiritual inter-relational forms, which from a hermeneutical point of view are highly multicultural. Also, we might admit that the problematic is important from a scientific and technological point of view, the religious art restoration and conservation specialists, being concerned with knowing in detail the complex stylistic specific of Banat religious art aim to develop the performance of the technical components and apply these adequately in the restoration and conservation processes.

Our research of the subject is supported on one side by the undoubtedly patrimonial, cultural and aesthetic importance of the Banat religious art, on the other, by the cultural-historic relevance of the Serbian religious art in this region, having complex interdependencies with the Romanian one and the European one in general. What's more, as we have noticed previously, the subject is still in its beginning stages of theoretic, besides a couple of Banat religious art history studies and the proceedings of some specialists looking at the revaluing of Serbian art (M. Jovanović, D.S. Pârvulescu, I. Muresianu, M. Timotijević, V. Matic, V. Popović) [1], there are no other theoretical perspectives of approach. In the present study we do not aim to exclusively focus on the theme, but only to highlight some of aesthetic aspects which confer stylistic distinctiveness and coherence to the Banat religious art.

## **2. Stylistic syncretism in religious art of the Romanian Banat**

In the XVII-XX centuries, once due to the diverse cultural-historical context regarding the ethnic and confessional aspect of the Banat region, context which allowed the contouring of the different styles – traditional and modern, again because of the intend to introduce as many novel elements in the artistic language world as possible, the religious art in this region has as characteristics an original stylistic eclecticism, expressive and uniform as composition goes. We also have to mention that the stylistic diversity of the Banat religious art has been generated not only by the socio-economic and political factors but also by the specific cultural-spiritual context [2]. When talking about the Banat religious art we can see that numerous artistic styles have been contoured, at the level of religious edifices which express Christian aesthetics, the most frequent being the Byzantine style, the Romanesque style, the Baroque style, Serbian Baroque, Renaissances, Classic, Neo-gothic, Moorish, Art Nouveau style. Most common, in the Banat religious edifice one can identify eclectic modulations of the mentioned styles, resignified into an original aesthetic vision which here allows the formation of a syncretic stylistic background, solid as composition. For example, we can find juxtapositions of the Baroque style with Renaissance elements (*The Saint Ecaterina Church*, Timisoara), the Neo-Moorish style with Byzantine and Romanesque influences (*The Cetate Synagogue* and *The Fabric Synagogue*, Timisoara), Classical style with Gothic and Baroque compositional elements (*The Catholic Cathedral*, Timisoara), Classical with Renaissances and

Neo-gothic compositional elements (*The Greek-Catholic Cathedral*, Lugoj), Baroque with Orthodox style elements (*The Orthodox Church* from Lugoj), Art Nouveau style with Gothic and Baroque elements (*The Piaristic Church*, Timisoara).

One of the most expressive manifestations of the stylistic diversity in Banat religious art shows in the eclectic combining of compositional and decorative elements, so generating an exclusive stylistic background. A paradigmatic example shown here is *The Metropolitan Orthodox Cathedral* of Timisoara. From an architectural point of view, the monumental building designed by the architect Ioan Traianescu (1936-1940), consisting of 13 towers, is the manifestation of the combining of decorative and compositional elements traced back to the Neo-Byzantine style and the style of the medieval Moldavian churches of the XIV century, such as Cozia or Prislop. As Neo-Byzantine in style, especially by resignifying elements characteristic to *The Hagia Sophia Cathedral*, we mention the architectural blueprint in the shape of a cross, the decorative side of the façade, the shape of the exonarthex, of the narthex, nave and the altar, the picturesque structure and composition of the iconostasis and the density of the decorative elements. Out of the specific traditional architectural style elements of the Moldavian churches [3] we mention the four counterforts present in the main body of the building, the church steeple, the spire staircases, the inner headings, the columns and pilaster decorations, the structure of the niche, the ceramic enamel and coloured discs which cover the towers, the alternation in rows of the apparent bricks and some of the painting elements in the altar. Besides the aforementioned styles, elements specific to the Neo-Romanesque style can be found in the architecture of the Cathedral, as well as elements specific to the neo-Brancovenian style (iconostasis decorations). As far as colour goes, distinctive are the enamel and coloured tiles in red, yellow, blue on the green background of the towers. The chromatic palette, very rich in sacred art symbolism, as well as the elevated appearance of the architecture allows a successful blending of the edifice with the surrounding environment, the park.

How could we understand from a hermeneutic perspective, the specific stylistic syncretism of the Banat religious art? Admittedly, the Banat religious art syncretism can be fully grasped in its content and meaning by putting it in context, remaining integrated once its religious and sacred significance and second correlating it to its multicultural signification. Besides the evident historical reasons which generated this phenomenon, the stylistic syncretism of Banat religious art expresses more than its emulating development and pre-existent style form application, it expresses a cultural tendency, and we could say an over-symbolic function. From a hermeneutic perspective, the eclectic stylistic of religious art expresses a space for cultural dialogue and connexion, a diverse spiritual coexistence. Religious art becomes a meeting ground for spiritual and cultural new encounters, configuring a certain type of social behaviour governed by symbolic models of spiritual proximity. What's more, in its syncretic state, religious art carries an imprint of aesthetic interactive culture,

the aesthetic and religious values being in close connexion with the extra-aesthetic values-ethic, social, ethnic.

### **3. Serbian monasteries and churches in the Romanian Banat**

#### ***3.1. The characteristics of Serbian monasteries and churches style in the Romanian Banat***

There are 52 Serbian Orthodox monasteries and churches in the Banat region. The vast majority of which have been built in the XVII-XVIII centuries, among the oldest are the ones built in 1225 (*Zlatita*, *Bazias* and *Ciusici* Monasteries in Caras-Severin County, patroned by Saint Sava). In the year 1924 there were 58 churches on Romanian soil: 41 of which belonged to the former Timisoara Episcopcy (out of which 39 parochial, 2 monasteries), and 17 belonging to the former Vârset Episcopcy (14 parochial and 3 monasteries) [4]. Most of this distribution has been kept to date, mentioning that new churches have been built in different cities (Resita, Svinita, Divici, Deta, Peciu Nou, Munar). In the last few years, especially after the year 2000, Romania has seen sustained efforts in restoring and conserving these sacred edifices, most of them being subjected to constant reconditioning processes, as much architectural as the mural paintings, the iconostasis, sculptural and the decorative elements.

Regarding the style, the Serbian monasteries and churches in Banat are characterised by monumental architecture and dimension, decoration density and rich usage of mural paintings. We would like to note that part of the iconostasis and mural paintings have been created by artists as Konstantin Daniel (*The Serbian Church in Fabric*, Timisoara), Nikola Aleksić (the churches in Arad, Varias, Sânpetru Mare, Sânmartinu Sârbesc, Becicherecul Mic), Ljubomir Aleksandrović (the churches in Dinias, Rudna), Arsenije Teodorović (Sânnicolaul Mare, Saravale), Sava Petrović (Mehala), Jakov Orfelin (Bezdin Monastery), Jovan Isailović Senior (*The Saint George Orthodox Monastery*), Simion Băncilă (Gad) [4, p. 8].

Regarding the exterior of the edifices, the predominant architectural style is Serbian Baroque [2, p. 7], which most of the times presents itself with Byzantine elements, Neo-Romanesque elements, Classical style, Art Nouveau, Serbian Rascian style and the Russian Orthodox style (e.g.: the Russian style cross at the Serbian church in Arad). Naïve painting elements are also present (the Serbian church in Cenad). We do specify that specific architectural elements of the Serbian Baroque style, especially found in the bell tower construction are extremely sublime, this conveys a solemn but at the same time elevated character to the edifices. A remarkable exception is the Serbian church in Ivanda whose architectural composition contains elements of the Renaissance, evident in the outer display of a series of ornamental columns. Similar Renaissance elements are displayed in The Serbian Church in Varias, the inner architecture of the Serbian churches in Fabric, Mehala and Cetate districts in Timisoara. Another exception is the church from Lucaret, built before 1744 [4, p. 71] at

small scale, being the only Serbian church in Romania build out of wood. *The Bazias Monastery* contains architectural elements belonging to the Romanesque and Neo-gothic style. From an architectural stand point, most of the churches present a solid nave; above the narthex we find a tall and svelte tower or two towers, one of which is usually smaller in dimension than the other one. The interior is shaped into a cross, roofed in brick, the altar apse into a semicircular arch.

The sculpture in the iconostasis, the decorative paintings are especially rich and ornamental building a harmonious ensemble with the icons [5]. The lace appearance of the iconostasis sculpture contains elements of the Byzantine style (*The Bezdin Monastery*, Timis county) or of the Art-Nouveau style, the ornaments representing either floral or vegetal motifs. The iconostasis, most commonly being of the taller type is made up of an ensemble of icons harmoniously distributed, depicting sacred scenes: *Jesus' Birth, The Baptism, Jesus preaching in the temple, Jesus' Rising, Pentecost, The Crucifixion, The Transfiguration of Christ*. The arches and the archways are either painted with images of biblical scenes in a row formation of medallions, or depicting less biblical scenes but covering a much larger surface. Some of the arches and archways are put forth in a Renaissance style (*The Serbian Church* in Denta).

There are a couple of more modest churches when talking about the presentation of the iconostasis and the interior decorations, aspect most likely due to economical factors, but remarkable is the fact that the exterior of the edifice maintains Serbian Baroque characteristics (the churches in Cralovăt, Pecica, Turnu).

### ***3.2. Stylistic aspects of the Serbian Orthodox Monastery of Saint George in Banat***

*The Serbian Orthodox Monastery of Saint George* declared historical monument by the Timis county, is situated at the edge of the forest close to Mănăstire village, Birda commune. The monastery is not well known in the tourist sightseeing route in Banat, although its orthodox aesthetic value is remarkable given its stylistic complexity with clear genuine aspects. According to the engravings on the commemorative plaque of stone, the monastery dates back to the medieval period, founded in the XV<sup>th</sup> century under the reign of the Serbian ruler Jovan Brancović. The history of the monastery only registers a couple of pillages, one of the most recent being the destruction of the Saint George mosaic icon on the frontispiece of the building, above the entrance. After 1990, the monastery has seen several restoration processes, the most significant between the years 2003-2006 at the initiative of the Religion Ministry accompanied by a group of Serbian specialists from Belgrade part of the Serbian Republican Institute for Monument protection. The restoring and renovating techniques used during that period had been applied to the exterior of the building, the iconostasis and the interior decorations. The inner part of the

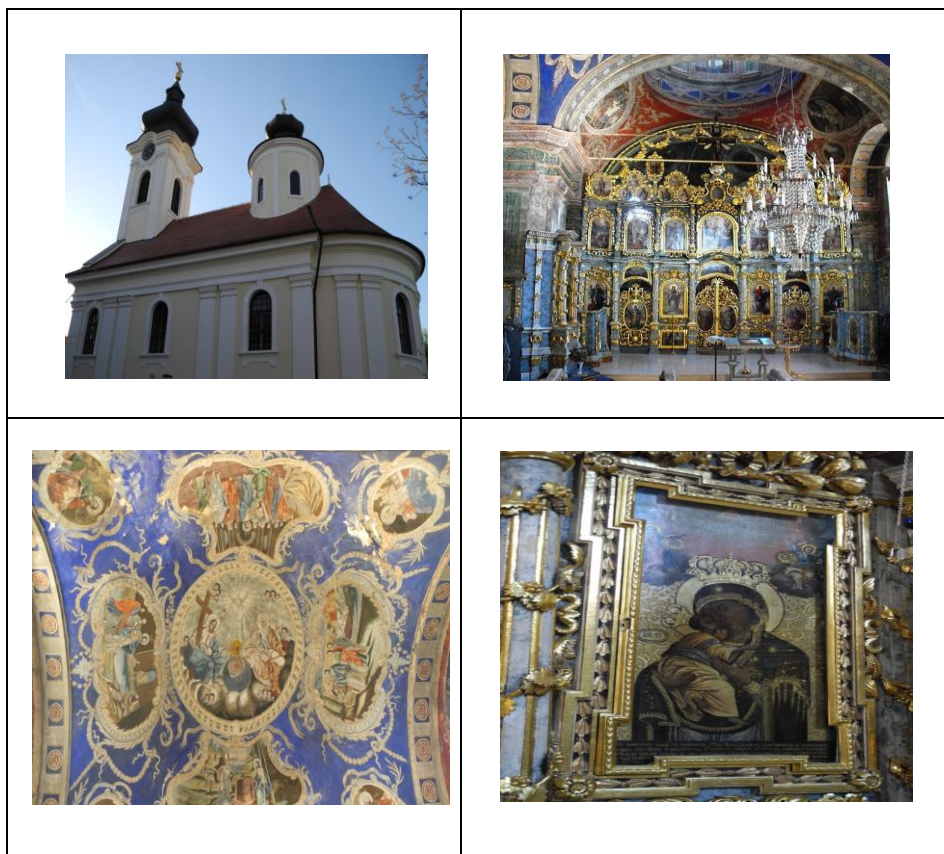
edifice still requires sustained restoration; special attention needs to be focused on the wall cracks and a part of the mural paintings.

In the monarchical complex we find a church and a few appendix buildings which form the xenodochium and the cells. The first church in *The Serbian Orthodox Monastery of Saint George* (Figure 1) dates back to 1485, and is built out of burnt brick in Serbian-Byzantine style having a crucifix base with a separate dome and bell tower. The monastery church that is now on the grounds of the complex had been built between the years on 1793-1794, when it was first subjected to a restoration process, maintaining the bases of the same Byzantine style, element of Serbian Baroque being also added. The church impresses with its architectonic poise, the harmony of the outer pillars conformation, through the complexity of the paintings and the grace and opulence of its decorations. The edifice is built in a mono-nave Byzantine style, with three traves and a semicircular apse, the bell tower is situated on the western side. The church has two towers, Serbian Baroque style decorated and built, with the mentioning that the height, architectonic and their positioning also refers to the Serbian Rascian style. Other elements of the Rascian style on the church are found in: the semicircular archway, the rounded dome, the rounded shape of the eastern wall behind the altar. The western tower has a rectangular shape while the spire situated above the first trave of the nave is circular. Geometric shape symbolism of the two towers (rectangle and circle) expresses the synthesis between proprietary and transcendent, material and spiritual. The exterior of the edifice harmoniously structured, with clearly defined lines, retaining the specific elements of the Serbian Baroque and strongly contrasting with the vivid polycromy and the decorative richness of the interior.

The interior of the church is divided in narthex (above which we have the choir balcony), the main body and the altar. It impresses through symmetry and positioning of the lateral parts compared to the altar, the svelte and refines decorations. The chromatic palette used in the paintings and the mural decorations is distinct; its originality consists mainly in light effects and colour saturation which conveys a special atmosphere to the church interior. The most frequently used colours are blue and gold, followed by red, green, yellow, grey and white, symmetrically positioned and proportionate to light and colour saturation, thus creating the impression of an ample space. The colour with the utmost usage is blue with distinct light effects and colour saturation. The position of the church windows as an Athonite manner to organize the mural paintings also offers a sense spaciousness.

The mural paintings, with stylistic athonite and Renaissance motifs, are designed Pavel Đurđev in the year 1799, the mural decoration being restored in 1928 by the painter Fekete from Timisoara [2, p. 34]. In the church some icon paintings by Pavle Teodorović (1748) are also present, worth mentioning are also the engravings by Zaharia Orfelin (1767-1769). The composition of the mural paintings depict the sacred events associated with The Lord Jesus Christ (*Path to the cross, Jesus before Pilate, Jesus healing the blind, The Disbelief of Saint Thomas, The Samaritan woman at the fountain, The Holy Trinity*) but also

porters of Serbian saints – on the dome surface. The contours flow in broad brushstrokes, the gesticulation of the characters is harmonious, the architectural background as much as the landscape is being represented in a specific Renaissance style.



**Figure 1.** The Serbian Orthodox Monastery of Saint George.

The Byzantine style is particularly present in the altar and iconostasis decorations: the diversity and abundant distribution, though balanced of the luxuriant organic motif decorations: laced leaves, roses, oak leaves, grape bunches, acanthus leaves – a leitmotif of the decorations. The Byzantine style is repeatedly present in the shape of the dome, the arches, the main calotte situated above the nave and the very precise delimitation of the church sides.

The ensemble of the thrones (designed to the sculptor Avram Manojlović) represents the Renaissance style and also shows Baroque elements, particularly drawing attention to the symmetry in ornamental column distribution.

The iconostasis has an elongated shape and is composed out of a pictorial ensemble, in the middle of which the icon painting of the *Coronation of Mary*, in the arch we see *Christ preaching in the Temple*, on the Holy Doors we find *The Visitation*, the rest of the paintings depict scenes associated with the Saviour.

The upper part of the iconostasis is occupied by *Jesus Christ on the cross* with *Saint John* on the left and the *Holy Virgin Mary* on the right. The painting of the iconostasis is linked to Jovan Isailović Senior dating 1803-1804, presenting a strong Byzantine influence. The upper centre of the iconostasis composition is occupied by the cross, a favourite in orthodox aesthetics. The colour palette of the paintings, the contour of the features, the lines in the clothing drapes, the contained gestures [3, p. 34], the bashfulness of the effigies are some of the Byzantine expressions in the iconostasis. The colour symbolism is also to match the principles of Byzantine aesthetics: White – symbol of the Father, of belief and purity, Red – symbol of Love and the Holy Spirit, Green – the symbol of spiritual rebirth, renewal, spring, the colour of the prophets and the Evangelist John, The Heralds of the Holy Spirit; Gold – Jesus Christ, faith, eternal life; Yellow – the Logos; Brown – piety. Interesting is the fact that black is very rarely used, in the Christian iconostasis black symbolises death, chaos, punishment, hell. The colours grey and brown are most dominantly used in the mural paintings of the narthex, its Byzantine origin signification is the piety of the believers.

An interesting particularity is given by the image of Saint George inside the iconostasis, rarely encountered in the Serbian church iconostasis [4, p. 170]. The frontispiece situated above the monastery entrance also depicts an mosaic icon of Saint George, according with the Byzantine iconography. We see Saint George astride, spearing a dragon, according to the piety legend, where he saves the Silena fortress from the province of Libya.

The church and the monasteries ensemble impresses with the clarity of the architectural planning, stylistic refinement, the harmonious and balanced positioning of the stylistic motifs, with the intense contrast between the bear exterior, abstemious and imposing and the overwhelming interior through the beauty and grace of the representations, the intensity of suggestions and the evoking of the transcendent, the feeling of joy, hope, rebirth and the devotion. The stylistic syncretism of the monastery is so in agreement with the orthodox aesthetic principles, according to which the artistic beauty symbolizes God as “the Archetype of Beauty” [6] and an “attribute of divinity, revealed in the beauty of the created world and man as bearer of the divine reason aspect” [7]. Its contemplation expresses participating in life’s celebration and joy, the possibility of spiritual communication by making beauty sacral. The subtleness of evoking the transcendent, the complexity of the symbolic significations, the harmonious symbolising of the synthesis between the visible and invisible generates a unique atmosphere, the artistic beauty metamorphosises into anamnetic beauty, symbolising the holy grace.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Due to the original and creative assimilation of the different stylistic influences, the Banat religious art shapes a specific aesthetic language, with an over-symbolic stain, expressing an inter- and multicultural spiritual



communication model. The stylistic syncretism, as tendency of symbolic oversaturation and exceeding the aesthetic immanent, conveys a particular and undoubted vision of the religious art in this region. Besides its main liturgical, doxological and symbolising the sacred function, religious art, from a hermeneutical point of view contains an over-symbolic communication function of the spiritual communication, transgressing the different formal aspects into a solid model. From a hermeneutical point of view, we believe the stylistic syncretism of religious art in the Banat region can express a spiritual and cultural openness co-participation, which at the religious attitude level but also at the aesthetic level entails social interaction, recognising the artistic multi-identity and cultural diversity.

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