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# A POSSIBLE DEMARCATION BETWEEN SACRED ART AND RELIGIOUS ART

**Adrian Stoleriu\* and Irina-Andreea Stoleriu**

*'G. Enescu' University of Arts, Faculty of Fine Arts, Decorative Arts and Design,  
Sărăriiei Str. no.189, 700451, Iași, Romania*

(Received 2 September 2013)

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## **Abstract**

A certain similitude between the different forms of worship and the artistic ones can be tracked down even since prehistory. Religion and art, throughout all civilizations of history, had various common features (the symbolic expression ways and the visualization expressive capacities of art). In such circumstances, the visual representations of the sacred experienced, from one civilization to another, different evolutions, which gave birth to some issues, which could not find yet a full elucidation. The understanding and representation differences common to every culture led to a diversity of specific terms concerning the intermingling of art and religion. Thus, at present, there are known expressions such as sacred art, religious art, church art, art with religious topic, divine art, laic art, profane art, etc. Yet, most of the times, this multitude of denominations is the one triggering major confusions concerning their meanings and confines. This study will focus on the notions related to sacred art and to religious art, which actually determine the most frequent confusions, since they apparently contain the same significances.

*Keywords:* sacred, art, religious

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## **1. Introduction**

History makes us the witnesses of a millenary conjunction between religion and art. This phenomenon has materialized prolifically through a varied range of artistic creations inspired by the aspects of the sacred and the religious, the entire history offering extremely eloquent examples of this interesting communion. The specificity of every culture determined a differentiation of the manner of evolving of the religious and artistic fields, and presently we can talk both about a history of the religious art in general, and about a history of religion or of art in particular. This diversification naturally led also to the development of the languages used in the mentioned fields as well as in the cultural and scientific areas that they share, which is motivated by the fact that religion can be related to the cognitive development of the human being, as it creates unsuspected connections and unlimited possibilities of assertion and creation [1].

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\*E-mail: [adrianstoleriu@yahoo.com](mailto:adrianstoleriu@yahoo.com)

This article deals with the punctual clarification of the meanings of certain phrases fully used both in the past and nowadays regarding the connections of the artistic field with the religious one. The phrases we will refer to along this material are *sacred art* and *religious art*, which are specific to the Christian cultural space and which often tend to be mistaken for one another, both in the specialized literature and in the artistic practice. Nevertheless, we believe that the two terms should not be the object of such confusion, since they have – at least to us – separate significances clearly delimited by their defining characteristics.

We are aware of the fact that to many researchers, theoreticians and artists the notion of sacred art identifies with the one of religious art, which leads to the practically random use of the two terms. As far as we are concerned, we consider that it would be but appropriate to draw a firmer delimitation between these two notions, which would contribute to a better perception of the same.

In Christianity, the differentiation of the two concepts is based on deep incursions in history. In the following pages we will extract only some of the most significant moments of this long history that can offer the language elements necessary in our attempt to define sacred art and religious art.

At the risk of being perhaps subjective, in what follows we will try to list a series of characteristics and even outline a possible definition of each concept, in full accordance with our own vision, specific both to the religious man and to the art creator.

## 2. Historic considerations

In attempting to define the notion of *sacred art* we should emphasize the importance of a remarkable fact rotted around the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., during the age of establishment of the cult of icons and of the belief according to which they work miracles. This characteristic assigned to the holy icons equalled the symbolic presence of Divinity [2], as well as the belief that the icons not made by human hands (*acheiropoietos*) bear in themselves the sacred print of divinity.

Researchers presented in numerous studies the manner in which this cult of the sacred art pervaded among Christians, by means of symbols, of the Paleochristian creations from the catacombs, of those *nomina sacra* - considered among the first forms of visual expression of the Christian culture [3], of portraits, of images on mobile cult objects, of reliquaries or other such artistic representations, which were directly or indirectly connected to different important moments or characters in the history of Christianity. It was even thought that some of these had made contact with the holy characters that they represented or to whom they were dedicated, thus acquiring curing powers or becoming effective symbols and pledges of victory in anti-heathen fights, due to their divine origin [4].

It is also a known fact that the development of the cult of religious images has got through a quite sinuous series of events, which oscillated between different poles of artistic understanding, perception and representation.

Nonetheless, what interests us is precisely to discover the factors that provided the distinct character of the religious images that enabled the unprecedented proliferation of their cult in the Byzantine Empire. Studying the documentary vestiges of the imagery of that period, many times it is rather difficult to draw a clear border between the images with a strictly decorative character and those that sought to evoke the sacred character of persons or historic events. Surmounting these difficulties, the answer is offered to us by André Grabar, who by means of the example of a multitude of images belonging especially to the 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries induces the idea that they actually represented a manner of transposition of religious feelings to visible form, which is why they came to be considered actual prayers in images. On this line, Grabar reminds of the specificity of scenes such as the ones in Saint Demetrius Basilica in Thessaloniki, where together with the images of saints the images of their donors were also represented. This reveals one of the prop pillars of sacred art, which consists of the *believer's attitude* itself – the donor's attitude in this case – regarding the mentioned type of art. As the quoted emeritus author asserted, this type of images explains the importance of the Christian sacred art, by uniquely joining the human image with the divine image. This artistic model reveals at the same time the believer's attitude towards divinity, by expressing visually his communion with the transcendental world, through prayer. The image becomes in such situations an actual prayer, artistically reflecting man's attempt of associating himself *ad sanctum* by means of art [4, p. 172-173].

The same attitude was felt when it came to *acheiropoiotos* images, reliquaries with holy relics, vials of oil coming from martyrdom places or wax medallions with the image of different saints, in which believers found the existence and actual manifestation of the divine grace that resided in such objects. In fact, summarizing these examples, we believe that an extremely important aspect that contributed exceptionally well to defining and outlining sacred art is *faith*, both that of the artist achieving the sacred art image, and that of the person donating it or contemplating it. Let us remember these first two important aspects – *pious attitude* and *faith* – which we will resume with comparative purposes in this research, by means of contemporary examples.

Continuing the historic series of representations of sacred inspiration in the Christian cultural space, the Middle Ages art marked a special period of connection between the artistic and the religious fields, art serving the spiritual interests of religion and facilitating to the believer his approach to divinity. Artistically, the Middle Ages marked an intense creative and spiritual effervescence, as the transcendent character and the detachment from the material world constitute an objective transparently materialized in the splendid creations of these epoch filled with sacrality.

This phenomenon was going to experience a new appearance during Renaissance when, besides the extraordinary development of the artistic representation manner, certain disjunction began to emerge between the mentioned fields, art and religion seeming to take gradually more and more solitary paths. In visual arts, the place of the sacred started to be taken by the

human element, which became the major centre of interest of the artistic expression, by approaching laic and profane themes that already announced the long process of society secularization.

The reorientation of culture from the theocentric vision to the anthropocentric one is to the mind of different researchers responsible for the oscillation of the artistic phenomenon between sacred and religious, starting with Renaissance [5]. Supporting humanistic value by redirecting the artistic speech from the theories centred on the importance of the divine intervention in the creative process to the one founded on the artist's subjective capacities represented one of the factors responsible for drawing the borders between sacred art and religious art and it still does. This is why many of the paintings that represent Virgin Mary or Christ Himself achieved starting Renaissance – emptied of their transcendental essence in favour of the human one – tend to be included in the category of religious art and not sacred art, whose unquestionable exponent remains the Byzantine icon, even after so many centuries.

Without pursuing an exhaustive presentation of the events that led to the separation of the categories of sacred art and religious art in the Christian culture, we intend to summarize this historic course, emphasizing the fact that the periods that followed the Renaissance deepened the said differentiation, confirming this tendency up to the dawn of contemporary art.

### 3. Sacred art

As regards sacred art, the contemporary artistic theory and practice attaches several significances to this art category, due to the influences of the two approach manners of the *sacred* concept: from philosophic perspective and from religious perspective [J. Cottin, Peut-on parler d'art sacré?, <http://www.protestantismeetimages.com/J-Cottin-Peut-on-parler-d-art.html>].

The first vision on sacred art is actually the one we prefigured from the very beginning of this study, which consists in identifying it and superposing it on religious art, taking into account that the two art categories assimilate one another and differentiate themselves radically from unreligious or laic art. We have already expressed our opinion on this first vision, considering the fact that their identification is many times the object of arbitrary use or even of term confusion, without minding their meanings, the resemblances and especially the differences between them.

At the same time, we could assert that the identification of sacred art with religious art is also the object of a – let us say – prudent attitude to which numerous theoreticians or practitioners of the artistic field adhere, observing the extension of the applicability of the *sacred* term to certain areas of existence and knowledge to which it did not interacted in the past.

Another acceptance confers sacred art an extremely wide sphere of meanings, though without being related directly to the institutional religious field. According to this acceptance, sacred art encloses a multitude of artistic creations, grounded on a notion of sacred with wide, universal meanings, in full

compliance with the current philosophic theories regarding it. Hence, religious art (understood here more clearly as church art) would tend to occupy only certain area of the extended field of sacred art, referring explicitly to the art dedicated to Church.

Eventually, the third contemporary acceptance of the sacred art reverses the relations established within the previously presented vision, describing religious art as a term with much wider significances, according to which sacred art constitutes one of its particularities, determined by the fulfilment of these very strict conditions related both to the external form and to the internal or conceptual structure. We will resume this last idea along our study.

We believe that any of the three acceptations previously presented are patterned upon a general formula defining sacred art. In an attempt of synthesizing numerous theories formulated about art and sacrality, we could admit the fact that sacred art has – at least in Christianity – a series of traits that are valid most of the time. Thus, we notice that sacred art is characterized by universality, detaching itself from the shapes of the living world by searching for realities superior to the human existence, and being practically the fruit of divine revelation [6]. In full accordance with Titus Burckhardt's theories, sacred art is conditioned by a tight conjunction between the artistic or visible forms of the creative process and the spiritual vision that coordinates this process. Hence, he refers to an analogy between the form and the content of sacred art, introducing this way the concept of *science of the form* [7].

Overcoming the level of ephemeral experiences and impressions, as well as the level of its material form, sacred art concentrates on discovering, highlighting and representing symbolically transcendental realities, in full accordance with the man's permanent need to recreate God's image [8]. To this purpose, the formal language is not enough. That is why one of the defining traits of sacred art consists of its symbolism, by means of which the viewer gets the feeling of the presence of the sacred and the conscience of his direct relation to the same. By symbol, sacred art discovers the immaterial forms of the spiritual world, connecting man to divinity. We are thinking at this point about the manner in which the Byzantine icon fulfils this idea, guiding the religious man (*homo religious* – Mircea Eliade's famous formula [9]) in the spiritual space of divine perfection. In other words, sacred art offers the opportunity of an encounter with God, as the work of art acts as a mediator between the material and the spiritual worlds. This is actually one of the reasons for which, between the visual (external) expression of the sacred art work and its internal substance nucleus must share a special interdependence relation. As Christianity has a long tradition of iconographic representation, we consider that authentic sacred art is the one that does not only copy, take or continue the traditional patters, but also interprets them permanently, adding the spiritual vision of the artist who, ideally, should master the artistic technique and the religious idea fundament, and experience himself the message of sacred art.

Titus Burckhardt demonstrates this by showing that not any work of art treating sacrality or religion related subjects is truly a work of sacred art by excellence. By imitating the manner in which the divine creative spirit acts, true sacred art does not confine itself to the material or temporal levels, but it is conditioned by its effective affiliation to the religious vision it represents. This aspect taps a dilemmatic subject regarding the quality level of sacred art. Therefore we wonder which creation is truly a sacred art work: the work of a technically and conceptually accomplished artist who is unreligious, non-believer or indifferent to the spiritual meaning of the image he represents, or the work of a less talented artist who nevertheless truly lives the spiritual essence he intends to transmit through his own work? Some would probably answer that the work of art and its accomplished technical level are the elements that matter and last in time – conditioning definitively its effective quality of sacred art – and not the level of religiosity and spiritual deepness of the artist who created it. Others, on the contrary, will strongly argue that the sacred resides in any artistic representation of a religious theme or inspired from the spirituality field, regardless of its technical quality or its execution manner. Extrapolating this theory, the quality of sacred art assigned to any artistic representation of this sort (e.g. the image of a saint) is equally transmitting the feeling of sacrality both in a proper icon, made according to all the execution rules, on wood, with pigments or tempera and egg emulsion [10], and in a lithographed icon, reproduced on paper or transposed by different modern means on different more or less common materials. As regards this last aspect, we wonder rhetorically: to what extent are the artist's talent, faith and pious attitude important, while modern technique is capable of reproducing art images with an aesthetic value and spiritual potential similar or identical to the one of the authentic works of sacred art? As for us, we consider that the aspects we have emphasized above should play an essential role in the qualification of a work as sacred art. The artist's talent and spiritual feelings transposed to the higher quality level of the work is able to approach the viewer to the creation in question, enabling him to experience the feeling of sacrality more intensely than an artistic creation on any religious theme.

This diversity of opinions should warn us regarding the definition of sacred art, posing even more issues related to this subject. Trying a synthesis formula that might combine all these theories, at least in the Christian culture, we believe that the connection element could be found in the two aspects emphasized from the very beginning, consisting in the man's attitude and faith regarding these art forms.

Actually, we believe that defining sacred art implies at least two interpretation perspectives. The first is the one already speculated upon from the beginning of our study, which we could call 'external perspective'. It reflects the position of the contemplator of the work of art, of the believer or of the mere viewer who, by means of the faith invested in the essence or the prototype represented by the creation in question, endows it with the attributes of sacrality. According to this vision, the sacred art objects are treated with peculiar respect,

the recognition of their remarkable spiritual quality being proved at mimic-gestic or verbal level, through specific reactions and attitudes (crossing, kneeling, kissing, praying, etc.) [11] triggering special spiritual feelings.

Within the borders of this vision any work of art of religious (or laic) inspiration can fall into the category of sacred art, if it is considered as such based on objective or subjective reasons specific to the religious culture to which it belongs. This vision explains at the same time why the sacred art objects of a culture (such as the culture of Ancient Egypt, for instance: sarcophaguses, mummies, representations of gods, etc.) do not have the same meaning and do not stir the same spiritual feeling in other religious cultures such as the Islamic or Christian, in which such artefacts are recognized first for their artistic quality and only after for their sacred or religious quality, given the fact that these are actually the exponents of a completely different system of beliefs.

The second interpretation perspective, which we will call 'internal' reflects – in our acceptance – the processes and relations established in the internal or intimate context of the achievement of the work of art. From this point of view, sacred art is conditioned by the observation of a precise set of rules and principles, which are essential in attaining its transcendental quality. In ancient times, the true icon painters would observe a special conduct in achieving the work of art, both related to the technical and substance level of the work of art they were creating and related to the artist's attitude, in his capacity of *homo religiosus* [6, p. 59]. The icon represented the secular expression of the divine world, which reinforces even today the idea that, ideally, there should not be a sacred art whose expression forms are profane. But, between the external expression and the interior spirit of the work of art there should be a perfect cohesion. Nevertheless, numerous theories that currently accompany the concept of contemporary sacred art tend to contradict this principle.

To the two already mentioned interpretation perspectives we could add another one, whose exceptional character ensures it a particular place as regards the manners of defining sacred art. This vision owes its importance to the sanctification ritual of the works of art (especially those dedicated to the religious cult or to its afferent practices), which invokes the descent of the divine grace on them.

Though it could seem improper to our process of defining sacred art, the 'sanctification' idea must be taken into account as it refers to an extremely potent factor – divinity – which, from the perspective of the religious man, can confer the sacrality attribute to any religious art object, regardless of its quality or the artist's attitude. This is why in many circumstances believers place on the same level of sanctity artistic objects of different qualities (technical, substance-related and spiritual), such as an icon of Byzantine tradition and its printed representation on paper, for instance. This phenomenon confirms once more – if necessary – that in Christianity the believer adores the prototype and the person represented by the icon, its divine model, and not the icon as an art object in itself, which he only honours.

The conclusion we naturally draw is that sacred art must imitate in the deepest sense – but not literally – the primordial or divine creation. Mircea Eliade shows that according to the religious conception the human creation can be understood as a re-update of the cosmogony [9, p. 76]. In his turn, in a synthesis of the theories about sacred art, Frithjof Schuon identified three main categories of sacred art. According to his vision, the first category is the one related to the strictest meaning of the concept of sacred art, indicating art achieved in compliance with the direct prescriptions of divinity (for example, the Ark of the Covenant from the Old Testament – Exodus 25.10-22). The second is that art of sacred character achieved in compliance with a particular artistic genius and eventually the third is the one in which certain decorative aspects prevail and in which the artistic genius expresses himself less by the rules but in full accordance with the final objective of this art, consisting in the idea of spiritual transcending [6, p. 41].

In conclusion, according to our conception, sacred art is the art inspired by the essences of a religion, achieved in a creative process fully aware of its importance, capable of transmitting to the viewer the deepest religiosities which are due to feeling the presence of God and the communion with Him.

#### **4. Religious art**

Differentiating sacred art from religious art is extremely difficult, as one does not always have the most solid analysis fundamentals. In Christianity, for instance, the two categories are often considered equal, and they can mean at large iconographic art, the art of the liturgical or church space, as well as an art of transcendental inclinations, inspired by different mystical experiences. Considering sacred art as the highest level of accomplishment of an art of spiritual connotations, capable to approach man to God, helps us discover, by comparison, the meanings of religious art, too.

Therefore, we can assert that, unlike sacred art – understood in absolute terms, as we tried to define it, religious art refers to those works of art whose theme aims at supporting the content of ideas and dogmas of a religion. Religious art can be understood as the art achieved to serve the religious cult and Church in general. In Christianity, religious art seeks to illustrate visually the belief truths, biblical themes, important events and characters of the Bible, without reaching that transcendental level that characterizes ideally sacred art. This is the reason why religious art, though being able to approach sacred themes, unlike the authentic sacred art, most times confines itself to dealing with secular space, temporal and sensorial aspects, limited or ephemeral, not managing or even not intending to surpass the level of these physical borders [5, p. 182]. In other words, though it can represent sacrality, religious art does not necessarily have a sacred character, given that numerous works of famous artists of the past five centuries, at least, demonstrate this important differentiation. Presently, the influences of the series production and the artistic commerce mark more and more clearly this type of creations, bringing equally benefits and clear

prejudices, such as the proliferation of the kitsch in this type of art. But, as previously stated, the viewer or artist's attitude make the difference, at least subjectively, which can lead to considering such art objects exponents of authentic sacred art.

As a matter of fact, the disjunction between sacred art and religious art established in the Renaissance has not managed to absolutize this phenomenon, either during the periods immediately following this reference time of the history of art, or in contemporary times. Genuine sacred art continue to exist, though more 'shyly' and more 'sporadically' in the creations of a relatively small number of artists, unlike religious art that – at least from our standpoint – seems to occupy a much more extended area [12].

## **5. Conclusions**

As already shown, sacred art and religious art share a series of extremely subtle relations, their differentiation being very difficult most of the times. In Christian culture, the influences felt during Renaissance generated major changes in the perception and definition of the two art categories. Summarizing the ideas presented in this study, we notice the fact that this phenomenon of superposition and identification of sacred art with religious art is fairly natural in traditional societies, which guide their entire existence according to the principles of sacrality [5, p. 178]. In the traditional societies and cultures, sacred art and religious art are one and the same thing, reflecting the spiritual or even mystical existence of the social-cultural frame in question.

Nonetheless, in modern societies, the dissociation of sacred art from religious art is necessary, at least from our point of view, as the differentiation of the two arts leads to a more clear understanding of the principles that characterise them and of the visual expressions under which they artistically materialize [13].

To conclude on the traits of the two art categories discussed upon, we share the opinion of the author Michelle P. Brown, who said that art can be *religious* when it serves the interests of religion by conveying them through specific images and symbols, and it can be *sacred* when it observes 'devotedly' the sacrosanct and sublime values of the culture in question [14].

Furthermore, another element with special significances that can differentiate permanently sacred art from religious art is divine inspiration, or better said divine grace, which descends where it is invoked or sent by divinity, offering the creation in question an invincible and unquestionable asset related to its affiliation to the category of the sacred. Like the Byzantine icon, the discovery of the beauty and value of authentic sacred art is conditioned by receiving divine illumination, which is an essential element capable to determine the transfiguration of the spiritual experiences and the recapturing of the absolute paradisiacal beauty [15].

To conclude, we select a quotation that we consider extremely suggestive regarding the definition of sacred art and religious art and with which we completely agree: “*Art becomes sacred art only when spiritual perception is embodied in shapes, when these reflect its brightness. If a certain spiritual vision postulates an appropriate language, the art on a sacred theme that resorts to the formal language of the profane art deserves the name of religious art, and not sacred art.*” [16]

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