

A CHURCH FOR A MAN

THE INCULET FAMILY CHAPEL

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(Received 31 August 2013)

Abstract

On the way to Bârnova Monastery, raised by Miron Barnovschi, you can almost miss the unusual form of a church in the distance. Today a parish church dedicated to Saint John the Baptist; the building is situated near the Inculeț family mansion house.

Built between 1942-1947 by his wife and sons, the church shelters the mortal remains of Ion Constantin Inculeț, one of the four personalities who signed the 1918 Union Declaration of Basarabia with the homeland.

With a high and slender figure, for which all the compositional elements concur to emphasize verticality, the silhouette of the church is uncommon to the specific of the Moldavian religious buildings. The shape and the steeple proportion, the delicate and abundant floral decoration of the framework, the position and the configuration of the windows, all these remind of the style of the churches from Muntenia. The surprise of the outside look is augmented by the interior ambiance. The high contrast between light and shadow adds more mystery and highlights the aesthetic effect of the painting, both original and traditional, using restrained earth colours and white. The painter, commissioned in 1947 is Ștefan Constantinescu, professor of Belle Art Faculty in Bucharest.

Our work reveals the architectural and artistic value of the monument, bringing into prominence its historical and national significance, and pleading for its protection as a national heritage building.

Keywords: family chapel, modern church, modern-traditional fusion, Byzantine influence

1. Introduction

Bârnova is a village situated on the southern border of Iasi County, in the region between the south-eastern extremity of the Moldavian Plain and the Central Moldavian Plateau. This region, spectacular and picturesque due to the wide terraces which go down towards the Moldavian Plain, used to be covered by the Iasi Forest, of which large areas of secular woods still remain. In the thick woods of the area, the Moldavian Princes built religious edifices, real secret

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defence fortifications – Dobrovăț, founded by Ștefan cel Mare, Bârnova by Miron Barnovschi and Hlincea, founded by Maria, daughter of Petru Șchiopul. Around these, rural dwellings emerged and developed. This is how Bârnova village was created, related by origin and name to Bârnova monastery, an impressive edifice founded by Prince Miron Barnovschi. Both the monastery and the dwelling were mentioned for the first time in a document dated November 5th 1628 [1].

In this picturesque place, at the same time full of history, Ion C. Inculeț and his wife, Princess Ruxandra Cantacuzino–Bașotă, built in 1920 a summer residence and a botanical park [2]. Situated mostly on a flat terrace of Bârnova River, the grounds descend slightly towards the river valley where its owners created a series of ponds.

Ion C. Inculeț's exceptional destiny, ended in a premature and tragic death, is also related to the building of Saint John the Baptist Church, initially a family chapel.

Ion C. Inculeț was born on April 5th 1884 in Răzeni, Lăpușna County, nowadays on the territory of the Republic of Moldavia, and at the time part of the Russian Empire. He graduated the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics from the Imperial University in Sankt Petersburg with a first degree diploma. Ever since his student years he has been very active in political issues and joined the Revolutionary Socialist Party movement, which he saw as innovating and progressist. In 1917 he got a position as member of the government in Petrograd. In April 1917 he returned to Bessarabia as emissary of the Alexandru Kerenschi Provisory Government. Under his rule, a group of 40 Bessarabian students and university professors went back to Petrograd. He was involved in the political life of the country, with the union of Bessarabia with Romania as a main goal, and this objective was clearly defined after the Bolsheviks got political control following the coup in October 1917. He was elected as deputy in the 'Country Counsel', the first Parliament of Bessarabia, and was nominated president of Parliament on November 21st, 1917. From this position he would play a decisive role in the creation of United Romania, first through the proclamation with a majority of votes of the independence of Bessarabia on January 24th, and then through its union with Romania on March 27th, 1918 [2, p. 110].

After the Union, Ion Inculeț was Ministry of Bessarabia, Ministry of Public Health, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Communications and Vice-President of the Ministry Committee of the Romanian Government led by Ion Gh. Duca (1933-1937). On October 10th, 1918 he was elected as a member of the Romanian Academy [2, p. 111].

In 1919, Ion C. Inculeț married Ruxandra Cantacuzino, daughter of boyar Anastase Dumitru Miltiade Cantacuzino and the niece of historian Gheorghe Brătianu. In 1920 the couple built a summer house on the estate in Bârnova, a building in the style of the Moldavian residences from the Middle Age, on one level, with rooms adjacent to a central longitudinal hallway. The architecture of the building is austere, simple. The only particular elements are the wide porch

with columns and the tower-like roof, framed by two dormers in the same style, delimiting the main entrance.

In 2011 the building was renovated by the new owner, The Metropolitan Church of Moldavia, when functional and architectural changes were made.

The residence is situated on a surface of approximately 2.5 ha, on a plateau at the foot of Bucium hill, along Bârnova River, on which the owners also laid out a lake. The natural beauty of the place is brought out in a very pleasant botanical park, currently included in the list of protected areas.

After Ion Inculeț's death, his wife initiated the building of a chapel on the estate in Bârnova and on June 17th, 1942 the earthly remains of the great man and also of princess Ruxandra Cantacuzino's, who had died on May 21st, 1942, were entombed there. The building was finalized in 1947 by Ion Inculeț's sons, Ion and George, with the completion of the exterior painting. The chapel was later donated to the Metropolitan Church of Moldavia and turned into a parish church.

2. The church

The unusual silhouette of the church, visible from a long distance, announces the special character of the building. Although very austere in architectural means, the building has a special charm and leaves a strong impression through its volume composition, as well as through the simple and subtle design of the interior, arousing the visitor's interest in deciphering the mechanisms which generated this space.

The building is based on simple geometry in beautiful proportions. The design starts from a unique, rather long room, slightly widened in the area of the naos, suggesting the shape of the cross. It is interesting that, by chance or on purpose, if we omit the porch, the contour of the chapel from Bârnova is very similar, on a much smaller scale, to the contour of the Golia church (Figure 1).

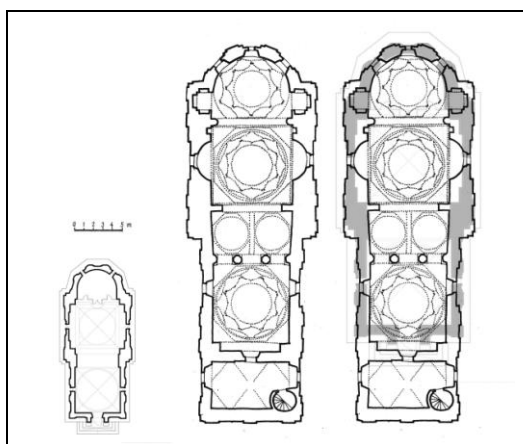


Figure 1. Inculeț Chapel plan (left), scaled and compared with the plan of Golia Monastery (right).

Through a subtle arrangement of the geometrical volumes in interior, and using extremely simple means but of great expressive effect, the architect succeeds in marking the boundaries of the two significant sacred areas of the traditional Moldavian churches: the pronaos, a space in which shade prevails, enhancing meditation before the encounter with divinity, an area of passing from the light of everyday space to the sacred, and the naos, a place where divinity comes down as the light from above. These two areas of the traditional space scheme are found in their whole complexity here, accomplished by an intelligent and fine geometry of space, volume and gradual light.

Even though the space is open, the different areas are subtly but clearly delineated. The pronaos area, slightly narrower and darker, getting light only from two lower openings, makes an expressive contrast to the naos area, marked by a slight widening of the interior space, while the centre is highlighted by the clear light coming from the twelve windows of the wide dome and the two windows of the same height on the side walls.

The modern interpretation of the traditional sacred space is very interesting, influenced on one hand by the subtlety and seemingly immaterial character of the elements and on the other hand by the synchronous experience generated by space and spiritual feeling, marked by a contrasting movement from pronaos to naos.

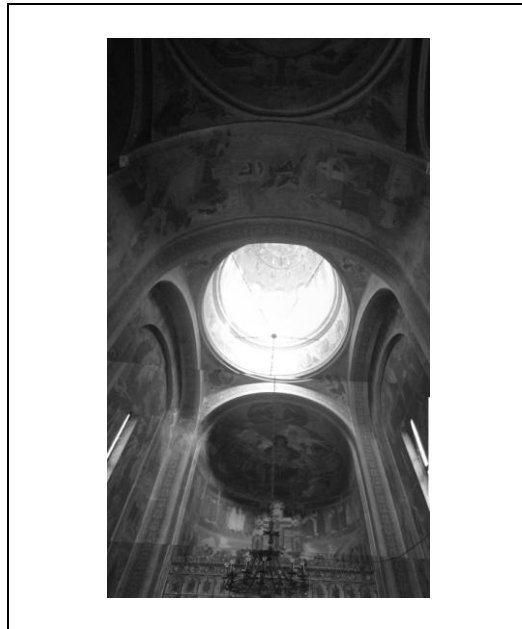


Figure 2. Interior view of the naos.

The synchronized perception of the space has a static characteristic. The whole view is seen in a single sequence of time, but the two poles – shadow and light – influence the movement of the observer and the spiritual state is amplified the moment the lighted centre of the naos is reached in a forceful

widening of space on the vertical dimension which is highlighted by the steeple (Figure 2).

If in the traditional church the vertical amplification of the space in the naos suggests a rotation movement given by the gradual diminishing of the steeple diameter in a system of cross arches, here the width of the steeple and the incoming light give an extraordinary force to the perception of ascension. The modern, original method used by the architect to reiterate the experience of getting closer to divinity through a gradual perception of light and spatial movement gives the building new dimensions, suggesting sincerity and commitment, in contrast with the sense of mystery and surprise offered by the traditional model

The static component of the above mentioned perception arouses a feeling of solemnity and meditation at the same time, in this place where a tragic personality of our history rests in peace, a figure whose life was dedicated to the ideal of national unity and whose death is related to the moment of its disintegration at the beginning of the Second World War.

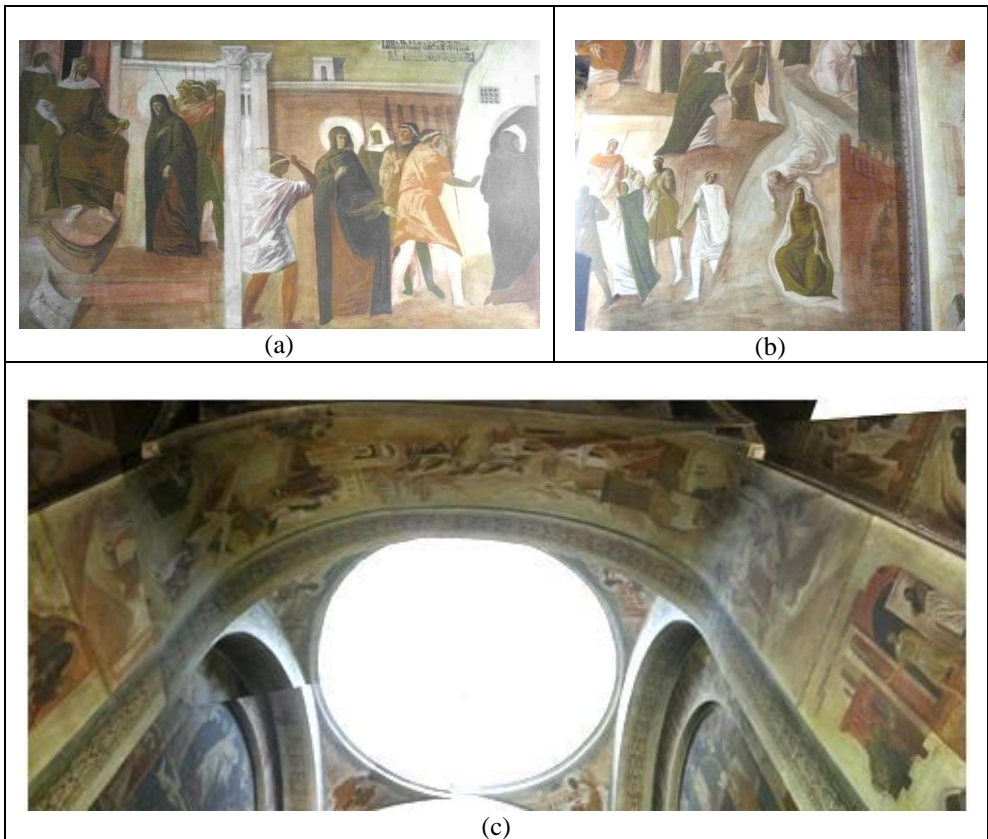


Figure 3. Interior painting details.

The highly expressive and original geometry of the church is doubled by a sense of the ineffable, strengthened by the impact and authenticity of the mural paintings which completely cover the interior walls. The paintings were made by university professor Ștefan Constantinescu from the Faculty of Arts in Bucharest and were finished in 1947 (Figure 3) [3].

Freed from the rigidity of the Byzantine sacred painting, the silent movement of the characters recreates in front of our eyes the eternal sacrifice serenely accepted by those who have chosen the path of the high ideal. The painting trespasses traditional rules by illustrating on almost the whole surface of the interior walls, the life of a single character from the Bible – Saint John the Baptist, patron of Incuieț family, whose passion reminds the exemplary life in sacrifice led by the great historian. The wall painting is an original and inspired interpretation of the Byzantine decorum.

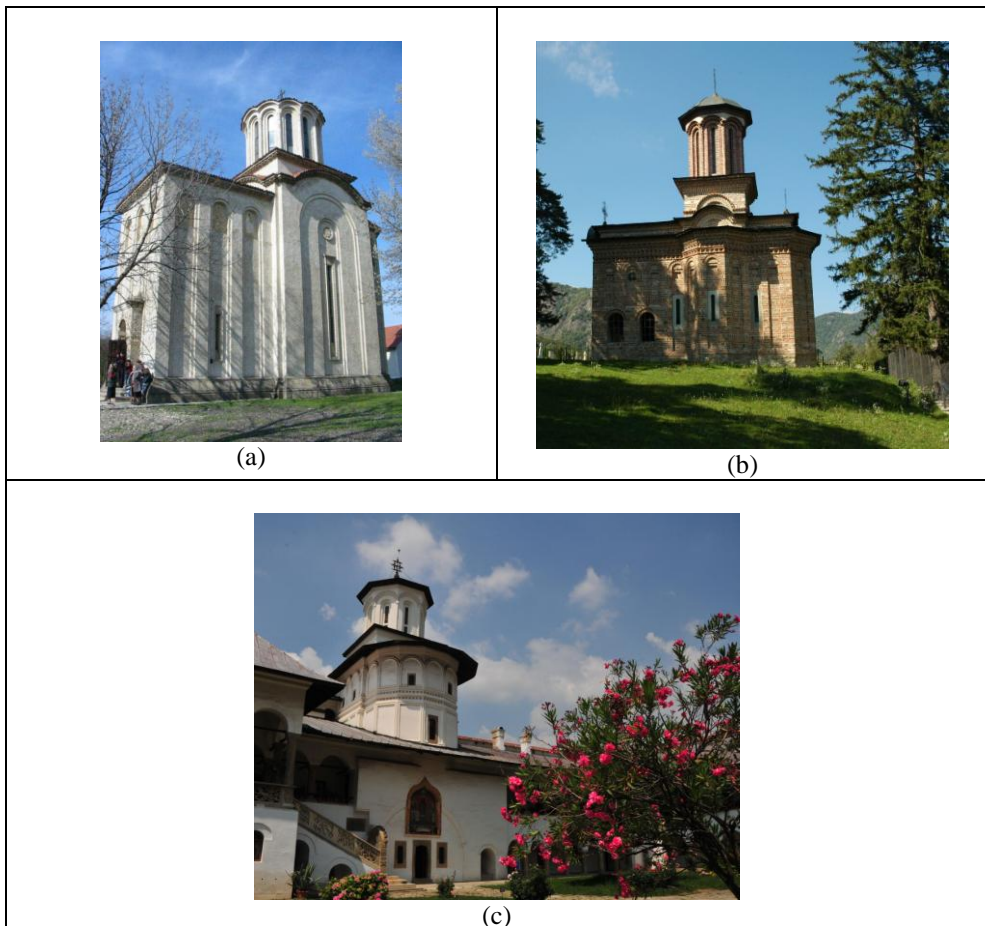


Figure 4. (a) Inculeț family church, (b) Cozia Monastery infirmary, (c) Hurezi chapel [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:M%C3%A2n%C4%83stirea_Hurezi_02.JPG].

The colour palette, in blue, white and earth colours, in austere but nonetheless soft shades, applied in thin layers, together with the delicate placement of the scenes on the dark surface of the walls, have an extreme effect of annulling the building tectonics, specific to the Byzantine space (Figure 3c).

The original and suggestive expression of the interior as a whole leaves a strong feeling, created by an unexpected world which dramatically but gently wraps around the one who enters.

The exterior is the result of the same simple geometry with expressive proportions. With its tall and slender silhouette, where architectural elements concur in highlighting verticality, the church is an unexpected sight in the Moldavian region. The shape and size of the steeple, the delicate floral designs on the frames and the position of the windows, all these remind of the churches from Wallachia (Figure 4).

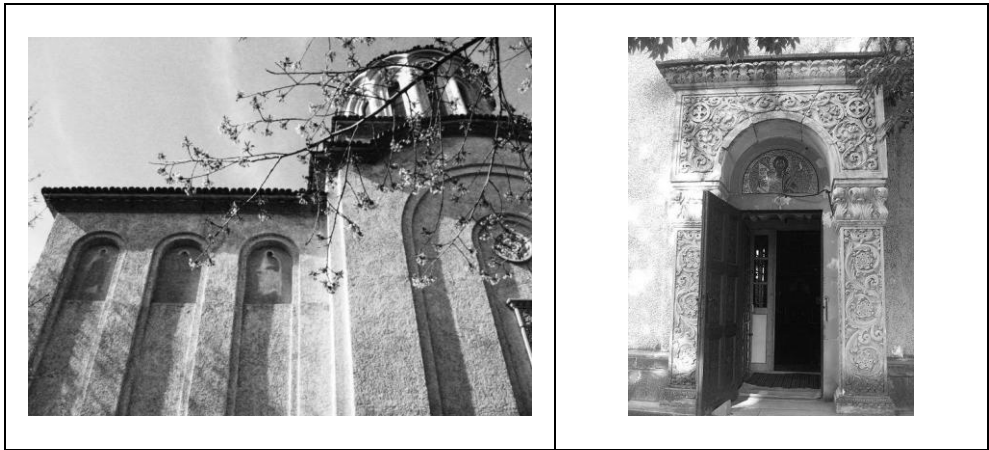


Figure 5. Inculeş family chapel: (a) facade detail, (b) main entrance

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Biserica_SF%C3%A2ntul_Ioan_Botez%C4%83torul_din_B%C3%A2rnova4.jpg].

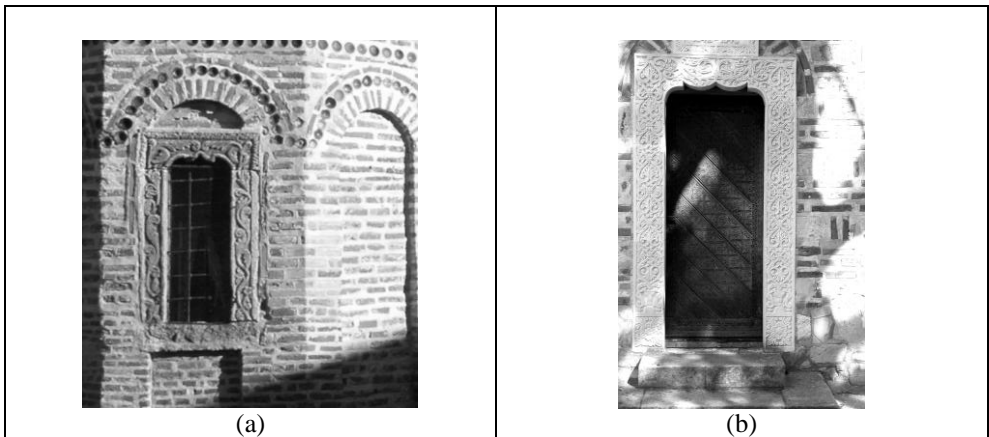


Figure 6. (a) Window stone decoration from Cotmeana Monastery, (b) Cozia Monastery - infirmary main entrance.

Conceived as a chapel, and thus of reduced dimensions, the church hints to the supple shape of other historical buildings of the kind: the infirmary from Cozia (Figure 4b) or the cemetery chapel from Hurezi (Figure 4c). The steeple follows the model of the medieval Wallachian type of Byzantine influence - tall, wide in diameter, with long light slits and clearly marked half-circle frames, with the roof following the shape of the dome.

The facades, with their impressively emphasized verticality, are decorated with delicate and sober lines (Figure 5a).

The window frames and especially the entrance door frame are decorated in the spirit of the Wallachian tradition (Figures 5b and 6). The flower designs in stone, accomplished in a geometrical and orderly, modern style, are slightly rigid, creating the appearance of an austere perfection which is in contrast to the vitality given by the tiny ‘imperfections’ created by the medieval craftsmen. Nevertheless, this rigidity is softened by the discretion and scarcity of decorations and by the beautiful white background.

The simple body of the church is articulated by highlighting the volume of the most important part – the naos. It stands out in height and surface, as well as in the specific shape which transcends the geometry of the prism. The two large side arches which support the steeple gives it character, following the model of the Byzantine churches in the shape of the Greek cross.

The shape of the side walls which close the pronaos made by the Moscow-based architect Luminița Ilvițchi find similarities between the silhouette of the chapel and that of the Pocrov na Nerli church, near Vladimir, Russia (Figure 7) [M. Slănină and L. Ilvițchi, *Basarabia, cea cu două suflete*, <http://armoniasuprema.blogspot.ro/2012/01/basarabia-cea-cu-doua-suflete-dr.html>, accessed on 18 January 2012].

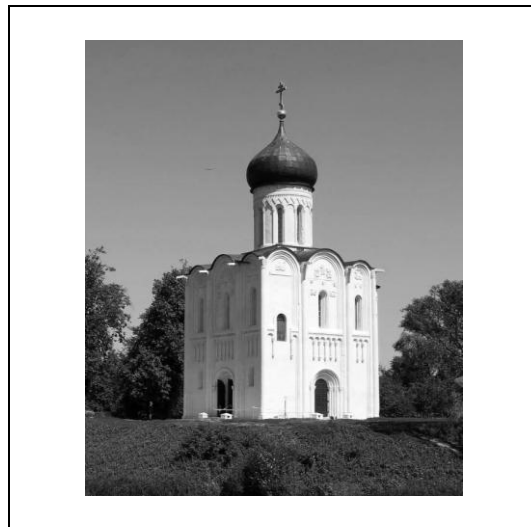


Figure 7. Pokrov na Nerli Church, Russia

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Church_of_the_Protection_of_the_Theotokos_on_the_Nerl_10.jpg?uselang=ru].

The main part of the church is decorated with fine lessons, with half circles that emphasize the verticality and slenderness of the volume. The painting on the upper part, with icons of saints in discreet colours, shaded by time, remind of the arched niches in the Moldavian churches.

3. Conclusions

The church chapel of Inculeț family undoubtedly presents a high significance for the national history of Romania and Republic of Moldavia. Its artistic value illustrates the harmonious interfusion between traditional and modern, a goal that many architects strove to achieve in the search for a regional specific style of Romanian architecture. The simple shape, the humble scale, in contrast with the interior spaciousness, demonstrates the mastery of dosing the matter and space in order to achieve a grand architectural effect.

Its relatively short distance in time from the present time should not be a conditioning in our judging its value. The chapel is an important monument of the 20th century that played an important role in our historic and cultural conscience, making it all the more worth pleading for its protection as a national heritage building.

Acknowledgement

The architectural survey was made by the students Răzvan Mircea Nica, Alina Mihaela Tudose and Oana Văleanu.

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