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REPRESENTATION OF THE SAINTS IN ORTHODOX ICONOGRAPHY

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Abstract

In Romanian iconography, the icon is described as an image of truth, expressing, strengthening and teaching the truth of orthodox faith. Adept and guardian of the byzantine style, the icon depicts the saints in their divine and human nature, but has traits that show the holiness, perfection and simplicity of their life. Given that the saints have been seen as modest, abstinent, fasting people, they have never been portrayed as overweight, but thin, with hollow cheeks and a frail physical appearance. In fact, the iconographic representations are characterized by a high ability to summarize the reality, the physical appearance of the saints being non-anatomical, disproportionate.

Lately, it has been noticed in certain iconographic representations a change in painting style: to reproduce reality as faithfully as possible. The orientation toward the icon's external beauty involved the redefinition of the iconic portrait of the saints, who are depicted as human as possible.

The icon, as a way to worship holy images, is both an “external” symbol of the deity as well as an “internal” one that reflects in the painted images. It is part of the essence of Christianity, a symbol that materializes an abstract reality and reveals the truth unseen through words.

The term “icon” comes from Greek and means “resemblance”. In a broader sense of the word, it means any visual representation of a thing through art. In a narrower sense it includes the graphic representations made through painting or drawing, while narrowly it defines the pictorial representation of a religious character or scenes (Breda, 2008, p. 97).

As distinct element of Orthodoxy, the icon is the image of the Orthodox church and a means of knowing and communicating with God. It also intensifies the spiritual experiences and becomes a way to see, understand and interpret religious dogmas. Depending on the subject, the icons are classified into dogmatic, feast and liturgical ones. Inside the Orthodox place of worship, they occupy a pre - established and well - delimited place. The icons of saints are placed on the iconostasis, the wall that separates the nave from the rest of the church.

In general, there are five registers of icons on the iconostasis and above it has the cross with Jesus Christ crucified, and on one side and the other the two prayers, the Mother of God and St. John the Baptist.

The upper register is for the Patriarchs and it represents the Old Testament, the Patriarchs being bust represented and carrying frontlets. In their middle there is the Holy Trinity image, most of the time being represented the scene of the Oak of Mamvri, where three winged angels, alike, are sitting down at a table and bless.

Below, on the iconostasis, there is the Prophets’ register, representing the New Testament, i.e. the period from Moses to Christ. This register comprises

the images of prophets also carrying rolls where there are written texts and their prophecies concerning the Incarnation of God. In the center of the register, there is usually the icon of the Mother of God with Baby Jesus.

Each register corresponds to a certain period of sacred history, a time of preparation and each of the characters portrayed are related to the central image which is the culmination point of all the prophecies and their preparations.

The next register of the iconostasis is the feasts which represents all the New Testament period. It shows the fulfillment of all the foretold in the two upper registers and here are presented 12 events that the Church celebrates and which mark the liturgical year, such as: the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God enters the Church, the Annunciation, Nativity, Presentation in the Temple, the Baptism of the Lord, the Entrance of the Lord into Jerusalem, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Transfiguration of the Savior, Ascension, Assumption (of Mary).

The fourth register found on the iconostasis is the so - called Deisis register. The Deisis is a tripartite icon depicting Christ with His Mother on the right and on the left of the Forerunner who prays before Him. This is, thus, the central and essential part of the iconostasis, the themes of this register being the Church’s prayers for the world.

The lower register of the iconostasis is the one of royal icons. It usually means the icon of Christ, on the left regarding the viewer and the Mother of God with the Baby, on the right. Sometimes the icon of Christ is replaced by the patron saint or feast dedicated to the church.

On the side doors, north and south, there are portrayed the Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel or the saint deacons, because during the liturgical celebration deacons play the role of angelic announcers. In some cases, on the south door the archangel is sometimes replaced

with the good thief, which emphasizes that the altar is the symbol of heaven.

The central or Royal doors are decorated with icons from ancient times. It is usually depicted the Annunciation, and above, the four Evangelists. Sometimes, on them the image of St. Basil the Great and St. John Chrysostom appears, holding in their hands the Gospel book or frontlets with texts collected from the Masses they created. Above the royal doors there is pictured the scene of the Holy Eucharist, also known as the Last Supper, where Christ Himself communes with the Apostles, handing them the Bread with one hand and the Cup with the other.

Historical confessions date icons from the early centuries of Christianity, iconographic appearances being mentioned since the existence of Jesus Christ the Savior. Although the first iconographic representations were under threat of idolatry, a pagan custom spread through the artistic act, there was a fundamental path that talks about the existence of an icon of the Savior during His life and icons of the Saint Virgin immediately after Him (Uspensky & Lossky, 2006, p. 31).

Despite clear opposition from the iconoclasts, the icon has gained an important role in the practice of the Church, becoming a way of spreading Christianity, not only the teachings but also the sacred faces (Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, Saints, Angels). In other words, the icon joins the Scripture and the Cross as a form of transmitting the truth and knowing God.

With the 1st and 2nd centuries, the baselines of Church art are formed, i.e. pictorial reflection of the dogmas of faith. Therefore, in paintings, in addition to allegorical representations we also find scenes inspired by the Old and New Testament. Regarding the face, the rendering is simple, but very expressive. The iconographic representations are largely symbolic, with the role to clarify or indicate a certain biblical theme.

During the Constantine era, 4th and 5th centuries, there were fixed most iconographic compositions related to fundamental celebrations of faith, which are also found today in the Orthodox Church. In fact, with the 7th Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, in 787, first iconoclastic period ended, the icon being recognized as an integral part of church tradition, as long as the veneration of the icon identifies with honoring its spiritual significance, and not with the icon's material or the specific worship of divinity.

Between 813 and 843 the second iconoclastic period was reported marked by clear actions to remove Christian images represented by icons. Later they tried restoring Christian art and implicitly iconography, imposing first of all a superior iconographic style expressing orthodox dogmas, but also a current that highlighted through icons the fight against a religious faith condemned by the Church.

The 10th century meant a religious revival by the emergence of some valuable writings. A period of artistic boom is represented by the 11th and 12th centuries, dominated mainly by a dogmatic fight against religious faiths that deviate from established teachings. This conflict with heresies was especially manifested in art, exactly by its "spiritualization". At the same time, Christian art reaches a form that fully reflects Christian reality. The image reaches its peak as an appropriate expression both through its clarity as well as its precision (Pădurețu, 2010, p.70-71).

The conquest of Constantinople, capital of Byzantium, ended the artistic renaissance of the 12th century and precisely in the 14th and 15th centuries Christian art would blossom again, a period called the "Renaissance of Paleologues". This revival manifested exclusively in religious art.

The general rules of church painting, set in the post - iconoclastic period, remained unchanged in the Orthodox Church until the 18th century. At

the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century, the iconographic representations comprise a simplification of composition schemes which give it balance and unity. The 18th and 19th centuries show a total indifference towards the icon, a break between image and religious dogma, being raised to icon level those images that have a religious subject.

The 21st century is characterized by religious and artistic syncretism. In iconography it is identified an artistic mosaic, by merging some elements that do not belong to the sacred art.

In Orthodox tradition, the iconographic canon was fully respected, the icon representing the expression of the faith teaching and the Orthodox Christian life concept. Thus, in the Romanian Orthodox Church, the icon becomes a means of revelation by face - word and visual images. There is a standardization of forms of holy people, called prototypes. "The Orthodox Church has never accepted painting icons from the artist's imagination or after any living model, because this would mean a total and conscious break from the prototype, and the prototype whose name bears the icon would arbitrarily be replaced with another person" (Uspensky & Lossky, 2006, p. 53). Therefore, to accurately render the image of the saint, icons are painted after old models.

Therefore, icons become accurate interpretations of prototypes, which include, besides portrait features, spiritual ones. That is why, the face of St. Apostle Andrew tries to express his specific features, which clearly differentiate him from those of St. John or St. Michael.

From the desire to keep in touch with tradition, the iconographic representation of saints is done according to specific biblical scenes, but also the fundamental physical traits. From the perspective of biblical scenes, in Orthodoxy we recall the icon where the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul check the

Savior's tomb, located in a small cave, to confirm the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here is illustrated St. Peter approaching the grave in rush and Paul who is behind him.

Another example includes the "Belief of Thomas" which presents Jesus Christ appearing after the Resurrection, before His disciples locked in the house for fear of the Jews. In this icon the Savior is presented facing the Apostle Thomas, whose right - hand index finger approaches the area where a spear poked Jesus Christ's coast. On the other hand, the Savior is facing Thomas, with one raised hand and the other on the right side of the chest in order to show the cut.

Regarding the specific physical characteristics, the iconographic analysis includes the face, body and clothes. Spiritual perfection of the saint is often illustrated by a specific expression of the body: thin body structure, thin nose, big eyes, small mouth, pronounced wrinkles, long beard and white hair. Although saints are depicted with human earthly appearance, symbolically it is suggested the holy ascetic aspect, which with his spiritual evolution "sharpens" and "restrains" his senses, which become spiritualized: the body eats and drinks as needed, the eyes see only what is beautiful and clean, being directed to God, the mouth speaks with moderation and only good, while the wrinkles, beard and white hair suggest the wisdom gained.

Thus, the natural proportions of the body are modified in order to enhance his deified qualities and experiences. For example, the long and thin hands suggest orientation towards holiness, and those represented bigger than normal suggest the action of praying. At the same time, the feet of the saints appear unnatural when naked, being very thin and with a strong contour. Only in this way there can be constructed the image of a solitary man, who imposes to himself an austere life, in prayer and in an isolated place. In this sense, we find iconographic

representations of St. John the Baptist and Mary of Egypt.

Saints are often illustrated entirely, their face being rendered frontally. The profile representation of the saint is very rare in Romanian Orthodox iconography, a violation of this principle is considered a sign of ignorance from the iconographer. The profile rendering of a person does not include the halo, because they are not considered saints. Judas, one of Jesus Christ's apostles or demons are represented in this situation.

In total, in Romanian Orthodox iconography, saints are portrayed with a halo clearly drawn around their head, a symbolic language illustrating their divine holiness and grace. It "does not entirely surround the head, but the top and sides, stopping at the shoulder, at both sides of the neck. The halo is detached from the background by a circular line drawn around it, with a contrast color"(Cavarnos, 2005, p. 20).

The iconographic image of the saints is completed by garments. They are long, fully covering the body, but without imitating the body shapes. So, the folds that appear in various geometric shapes suggest the difference between everyday clothes of man and those of the saints. In this way it is made the transition from the profane, natural world to the sacred one, the Kingdom of God.

For example, in the icon the "Beheading of St. John the Baptist", the saint is completely painted, and has two large back wings: tall, very thin, with very thin arms and legs, bareheaded, with long hair, flowing in locks on the back and over the shoulders. His face expresses strong faith, unflinching character and humility. The saint wears an olive - green tunic and a brown cloak, which lets the eye see a naked arm to the shoulder and both legs below the knees.

He is painted standing between two rocky ridges (representing the wilderness), with the face and body turned to the right, towards Christ, who appears in the upper

left corner of the icon, coming from heaven, and blesses him. The right hand of St. John the Baptist is lying in a gesture of blessing and with the left is holding a frontlet and a long, very thin cross. In the lower left corner one can see the head of the Baptist on a platter, and behind his feet there is an ax, at the root of a tree close to the ground.

The clothing's colors do not appear "commonly in nature, but are in mystical colors, suggesting another world, a higher one. They are never living, but always serious, calm, expressing sobriety and inner control. There are also used delicate, gentle tones of colors like blue, red, green and others." (*Ibid*, p. 21) Besides these colors white is also used as a symbol of physical and spiritual purity, of the sanctification they have reached through a life dedicated to God. Therefore, angels appear clothed in white in icons, being also the predominant color in the icon "Transfiguration" (Jesus Christ is represented in white, touched by divine light).

On the other hand, in iconography the colors red and blue are also predominant. The blue color is understood as a transcendence color and is most often seen in the garments of the Virgin Mary and the saints' tunics (especially in the depictions of St. John the Baptist). Instead, the red used in the garments of Jesus Christ means his sacrifice for mankind's salvation, and the one used in the garments of the martyrs means their sacrifice to obtain eternal life.

In most cases, there are enough symbols in an icon that allow us to recognize the saints honored in them. In their absence, there are details that indicate at least the category they belong to: apostle, monk, martyr, doctor, prince, etc.

Thus, prophets are represented with frontlets in their hands, rolls where their prophecies are written, the Holy Archangels are painted with wings, the Archangel Michael is holding a sword and the Archangel Gabriel a lily, military

saints are painted in military garments, and Saints George and Demetrius are recognized as standing on the horse and killing a griffon or dragon.

The four Evangelists are also easy to recognize because they are accompanied by certain symbols. Thus, next to the Holy Evangelist Matthew an angel is painted, near Mark a lion, Luke is painted with the Bull and St. John the Evangelist with the eagle.

Currently, the Romanian Orthodox iconography is dominated by the pictorial exposure of saints in a typical classic, Byzantine manner, still keeping the traditional line both in terms of characters and setting.

Thus, the face, which became the center of representation in Byzantine iconography, is done in a transfigured manner, with spiritualized face areas to illustrate both the body and soul. Attention is focused on the look, which reflects firmness and some severity. The forehead is often high and curved, the nose long, the cheeks with deep wrinkles showing fasting and prayer. The mouth is often delicate, geometrically represented and always closed as a symbol of contemplation. The chin is clearly outlined, but not in an authoritarian style, and a descending beard. (Sendler, 2005, pp. 66-67)

The garments are rich but stylized, replete in details of great preciousness, with small ornaments, thoroughly developed, keeping the tradition of a certain type of decoration, but also the chromatics imposed by the Byzantine rules.

Regarding the decor, the oversized scale appears, with ample architectural structures and colors out of the chromatic pattern of nature. The image itself must contain the inner, divine truths, and that is why it is sought to use a language hidden from the world and full of mystery.

On the other hand, there are also influences icons from Brâncoveanu's style, displaying numerous sets specific to that time. This decorative Brâncoveanu

repertoire inspired itself with elements from the Renaissance and Baroque, such as human figures, fantastical animals, winged heads of angels, birds and flower vases. In the unitary compositions there appear vegetable ornaments, figurative and geometric floral ones, that are intertwined with the vine whose stems follow straight or curved lines, being at the same time adorned with large twisting sheets (meanders' vine) (Muzeul Național de Artă al României, p.123).

The saints' typology in icons dominated by Brâncoveanu's style present specific characteristics: "slightly long oval face, round chin, big eyes, highlighted by dark circles, arched eyebrows and a lot elongated towards the temples, and the lower lip is marked by a specific shade" (*Ibid.* p.126). Besides the skill of face rendering, the iconographic painting skillfully captures the outfit, consisting mostly of red and green on a gold background, sometimes decorated with incised vegetal motifs. Such an icon is represented by St. John the Baptist with the Cup in hand, whose background is fully decorated with floral and vegetal elements.

From an artistic point of view, other icons seek to imitate cult parts, following as much as possible the rules they must obey. That is why, physiognomies get out of control, by the lack of school teachings or the iconographic tradition center, there appear disproportions in the representation of the face and clumsiness in rendering the anatomy. Painting the garments simplifies, sometimes even the chromatics is easily turned to nontraditional tones, the ornamentation becoming more superficial.

The Orthodox religion gives great importance to the icon cult, being understood as a revelation of what is not seen, a liturgical image that propagates the truth of faith. By the icons where places are represented (the tomb of Jesus, birthplace of Jesus in Nazareth, the Mother of God in the city temple) or specific

events (Birth of the Virgin, Annunciation, presentation at the temple of Jesus Christ, the Entry in Jerusalem, the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, Ascension, etc.), we get an awareness of what man can become, and how to obtain salvation. In the same way, by the rendering in the saints there is more than just a simple life story or image, and proves a reality dominated by the divinity of Jesus.

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