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# **THE STYLISTICS AND THE TECHNIQUE OF THE POLYPTYCH ALTARS IN TRANSYLVANIA**

**DOCTORAL DISSERTATION  
Abstract**

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Preceded by a series of paper works referring to the polyptych altars in Transylvania, in general, which analyse them from a historical and aesthetical point of view, this paper throws out a technical and stylistic perspective, referring especially to the altars in the Brukenthal National Museum in Sibiu

The material is commented under various aspects – historical, aesthetical, and technical – bearing in mind the previous studies, from various fields of interest, which deal with this type of artistic manifestation. The preoccupation is to highlight the relation between the information regarding the appearance of the polyptych altars and the elements belonging to such artworks, preserved in churches, or, in this case, in museums, and those referring to the technique, materials and tools used for their execution.

The text of the paper contains various detailed descriptions, alongside eloquent illustrations in order to prove the statements above, and also a bibliographical list where references to all the debated aspects can be found.

The art of the Transylvanian polyptych altars has been debated at large since the 19<sup>th</sup> century by "polihistorians" which were interested in the regional and local history, and, in that context, they gave descriptions, from a aesthetical point of view, on the appearance of these artistic ensembles. The studies became in-depth, along time, regarding their artistic evolution, and descriptions, inventories, analogies and classifications were effected.

The history of the polyptychs in Transylvania is connected to the development of the society in the Middle Ages, in the period preceding the Reformation. The phenomenon created by the colonisation of the Germans in this area led to the rise of new political and social organisation forms. The specialisation of craftsmen, in various handicrafts, started during the 11<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> centuries, led to the formation of an internal market for the products executed by them, and this phenomenon then led to the birth of trade zones as markets for these products.

By the 14<sup>th</sup> century in these trade zones and cities handicrafts, trade and commerce prevailed. The relation between the Germans and the Romanians has always been conducted by the traders' category. The growing number of specialised crafts and their members determined the growth in numbers of the traders specialised exclusively in commerce.

Due to the fact that all the inhabitants had obligations to the Roman Catholic Church, including the nobility and the king, these obligations being called dijma (decima), it usually was converted into money. The catholic culture was sustained by the Hungarian and German population, while the orthodox one by the Romanians. Once the gothic style is present, a development on the construction of catholic churches level takes place. During the 14<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> centuries the medieval society in this area flourishes, and the fact is reflected in sumptuous edifices decorated with artistic elements. In this time period changes of craftsmen are taking place, and they leave a mark on the imposing constructions and the altars decorating their interiors, and also, new local crafts are formed and confirmed.

The Transylvanian polyptychs are, in fact, elements that decorate the initial altars, the tables used for the officiating of the sacrifice of Christ, that contained the sacred relics. Due to the more and more enriched ornamentation, they became, along time, veritable works of art, complete manifestations of the mastery of the sculptor and painter craftsmen, also having, alongside the devotional role, an educational one too, due to the presence of fluent iconographic programs. The churches were decorated with multiple altars, commanded by wealthy members of the society, each having a specific theme and iconographic program.

The case study refers to the three altars, the altar from Boian, the altar from Proștea Mare (Târnava), and the two elements preserved from the altar from Cisnădie, Sibiu County, belonging in the present to the collections of the Brukenthal National Museum, from a historical point of view, with references to the provenience and the type of interventions executed on them along time, which are now a part of their history, but also describes the restoration interventions the items went through recently in the painted wood restoration laboratory, that I executed partially.

Therefore, characteristics of these items are examined, from an aesthetical and technical point of view. The parallel between the aesthetic and technical aspects came from the necessity of creating a paper which would bring into light the direct connection between them. Thus, alongside the original techniques, the later interventions, which were executed in order to repair, preserve and/or restore these items, are described. This assembly of information can constitute a study on the conservation state of these cultural items until the most recent interventions executed by the team of restorers I am also a part of.

As long as the painting on wood execution technique is concerned, the bibliographical material is quite limited, compared to the one referring to the analysis from an art history point of

view. In this paper techniques and materials used in the painting on wooden supports, and also tools are presented. The importance of knowing these aspects allows connections between the technical, aesthetical and stylistic development to be made. The exchanges of craftsmen, which obviously implied an exchange on a technical level, lead to the evolution of this type of art.

Also, the description of the conservation and restoration operations recently executed is a documentation of the new interventions which are added alongside the previous ones to the history of these items, from the technical and aesthetical point of view.

The paper presents the utilised techniques and tools, but also aspects referring to the aspects connected to the materials, such as the characteristics of wood, the material all these art works use as a support, which is described from several points of view, both structural, and also with reference to the degradations it is subject to, which affect the entire structure of the items, and also materials used for the preparation layers which covered the wooden supports, colours and protective layers.

Therefore, all the information known about this type of items, encompassed in a case study, in this paper, has the purpose to create a stepping point for similar analysis on the polyptych altars in Transylvania, in general. Based on the existing studies, which, from a historical and aesthetical point of view point out the specific characteristics of these items, extended studies can be executed, on groups of similar art works, in order to confirm or refute the existing theories regarding the dating or the ascription of items to certain craftsmen or painters.