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ICONOGRAPHER SAVU MOGA

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SUMMARY

At first criticized and then appreciated by researchers and viewers, alongside their aesthetic and documentary value, glass icons possess a unique beauty. Over time, they have undergone a transformation, not in a material sense, but symbolically – they have transitioned from being decorative or religious objects to becoming exhibits and subjects of study.

Although we initially approached the phenomenon of glass painting from an art historical perspective, this work has been conceived and executed from the standpoint of a conservator, whose mission is to extend the life of art objects with meticulousness, discernment and responsibility. This can only be achieved after a careful assessment of their conservation status, followed by the observation and understanding of the execution techniques and the materials used (both constitutive and non-constitutive).

The mere theoretical exploration of an artistic phenomenon and the description of sometimes deteriorated pieces cannot satisfy a restorer. This is why the intervention on some of the icons presented here became necessary. In addition to maintaining the heritage in optimal conditions, the restoration process provides a different perspective on the artwork, "treated" and "healed" like a patient silently awaiting a doctor, in this case for decades or even centuries.

Folk painting on glass is often confused with naive painting, but we know that Romanian peasants engaged in the craft of icon painting in this manner due to a lack of specialized education, material resources and simplicity, while naive artists deliberately ignored the rules of anatomy and perspective, which they knew but chose to disregard. It is precisely the innate aesthetic sense and inner beauty of these icon painters that easily resonated with the souls of art lovers.

Highly regarded by specialists and connoisseurs of glass painting in Transylvania, the name Savu Moga carries a special resonance. He is considered one of the most valuable representatives of this art form, among the most well-known and appreciated icon painters of the Olt County. He painted icons throughout his life, leaving behind a true treasure, which we have partially focused on in this work, organized into five chapters.

Chapter 1, *The History of Glass Painting Research*, consists of two parts. The first part provides a brief overview of studies on glass painting that have been published over the years in the countries where this art form was practiced, but in their respective national languages. With one major exception – "Reverse Painting on Glass" (1978) by Mildred Lee Ward in Kansas, USA

– there are no relevant and comprehensive studies in the English language that delve into the history and characteristics of glass painting. Whether created as religious art or as a mass phenomenon, glass painting has sparked interest throughout history in nearly all of Europe. As a result, there are studies published in various languages, but those in German are predominant.

The 20th century brought a rich body of specialized literature on glass painting in Europe. In several countries such as Germany, England, Italy, Spain, France, Austria, Poland, and the Czech Republic, there have been studies and articles dedicated to glass painting. Numerous albums and catalogs have been printed and published as a result of exhibitions featuring glass paintings from museum and private collections.

The native specialized literature dedicated to glass icons is less extensive than that devoted to other branches of Romanian art. The second part of the chapter chronicles the most significant Romanian publications that have brought Transylvanian glass icons into the spotlight. These publications range from fleeting mentions recorded in the mid-19th century to the initial studies conducted by ethnologist Ion Muşlea in the early 20th century, the extensive research by the Dancu spouses in 1975 – which remains a cornerstone in the study of this type of painting – to contemporary articles and albums. It also includes older articles by various authors and the monographic study by Mihaela Proca dedicated to Savu Moga. Initially viewed with skepticism, glass icons have become increasingly recognized and appreciated by researchers and the Romanian public over time.

Chapter 2, *Glass Painting – History and Spread*, traces the evolution of this technique in Europe and Transylvania. The phrases "glass painting" and "painting on the reverse side of glass" refer to the same technique, excluding the famous stained glass windows. The English term "reverse painting on glass" refers to painting on the backside of the glass, with the image being viewed from the front, just like the German term "Hinterglasmalerei."

The first part of this chapter provides information about the emergence of glass painting and its spread in Europe. Glass, which appeared around five millennia ago in the Near East, became a medium for painting somewhat later, probably around the 2nd century BCE¹. It was initially practiced in a primitive form in Roman catacombs but was forgotten for a time. However, in the 14th century, the craft was introduced to Venice by painters from Byzantium, spreading to central

¹ Juliana Dancu, Dumitru Dancu, *Pictura țărănească pe sticlă*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1975, p. 9

and western Europe², where it later found new applications such as decorating furniture, glasses, mirrors, and more.

Practiced in the 17th and 18th centuries as a refined form of art by professional painters attempting to imitate the easel painting of the era, glass painting experienced a significant decline, leading to a reconfiguration in the form of folk art. Paintings with various themes (often based on existing engravings) from Central Eastern Europe captured the European market³. Glass painting workshops were typically located near glass factories that supplied the glass as a canvas.

Towards the end of the 19th century, demand was still growing, but the subsequent emergence of chromolithographs and photography gradually led to the decline of this widespread phenomenon. At the beginning of the 20th century, there was an attempt to reinvent the technique by a group of artists who drew inspiration from Bavarian folk paintings⁴.

In addition to secular paintings, glass icons were found in almost all former territories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Tyrol, Bohemia, Slovakia, Moravia, Croatia, Galicia, Poland), in Switzerland and Bavaria, under the name "Hinterglasmalerei"⁵, primarily catering to those with modest financial means⁶. Glass painting evolved differently in each geographical region of Europe. After introducing the phenomenon of glass painting in Europe, our focus shifted to glass icons in Transylvania. Initially criticized and later appreciated by researchers, these icons hold significant aesthetic and documentary value. They have transitioned from being religious objects to becoming exhibits and subjects of research.

Although the craft of glass painting did not originate in our region but was adopted from Central Europe, indigenous glass icons in Transylvania have unique characteristics. These characteristics result from the adaptation of the technique to the national specificity, the simplicity, and the beliefs of the Romanian peasant with limited material resources. They did not conceive the depiction of profane subjects on glass, even though, in some instances, they incorporated elements from village life.

² Ibidem, p. 10

³ Dancu, Dancu, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12

⁴ Simon Steger et al., *Kandinsky's fragile art: a multidisciplinary investigation of four early reverse glass paintings (1911–1914) by Wassily Kandinsky*, Heritage Science 7, no. 27 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-019-0268-8>

⁵ C. Freytag, *Hinterglasmalerei*, apud Vasile V. Niculescu, *Contribuții la cunoașterea icoanelor pe sticlă și a xilogravurilor țărănilor români din Transilvania*, în „Studii și cercetări de Istoria Artei”, 3-4, 1957, pp. 297-298

⁶ Mildred Lee Ward, *Reverse painting on glass*, The University of Kansas, 1978, p. 23

Many authors have attributed the emergence of glass painting in Transylvania to the miracle of Nicula – the weeping icon of the Virgin Mary with the Infant Jesus in 1699 – which allegedly inspired the residents of Nicula to reproduce the image of the Virgin Mary on wood and later on glass. However, this theory does not enjoy the same credibility today.

The construction of new churches following the promulgation of the Edict of Tolerance in 1781 led to the need and desire to decorate their interiors with mural paintings. The painters responsible for these murals then adopted the craft of glass painting, with subsequent glass painters drawing inspiration from the work and legacy of their predecessors. The peak of this popular artistic phenomenon occurred approximately in the mid-19th century, especially in some areas of Transylvania, particularly in the south, where a few very talented peasants emerged.

In relation to local conditions, each glass painting center had a different evolution. The scale and organization in the Romanian glass painting centers did not reach the level of those in Central Europe, but there was a division of labor within peasant families, with all members involved in the creative process based on their individual abilities and experience⁷. Since these tasks required attention to detail and finesse, women often handled the copying of the designs and the application of colors, while men crafted the frames and covers. The icons were then sold at fairs either by the painters themselves or by other peasants involved in peddling.

In all these centers, the subjects tackled were similar. Frequently depicted scenes included those from the life of the Virgin Mary, the Savior, the Holy Trinity, beloved Romanian saints, and other biblical scenes.

The technique of creating glass icons and the materials used were the same across all centers and workshops, but over time, notable stylistic, interpretative and representational differences emerged, defining the various painting centers. The execution technique, center-specific characteristics and prominent representatives of these centers are discussed in detail in subchapter 3.

Excessive commercialization, aesthetic degradation and the emergence of chromolithographs contributed to the decline of this craft. Today, glass icon painting has become a visual document that encapsulates the entire world of the Romanian peasant from the past.

⁷ Dancu, Dancu, *op. cit.*, p. 46

Chapter 3, *Icon Painter Savu Moga*, brings us closer to the theme of this work. The northern Transylvanian origins of the master are uncertain, and his birth year is either 1816 or 1822. However, these uncertainties are countered by the certainty of Savu Moga's exceptional talent, making him the most well-known and respected icon painter of the Olt Country. After settling in Arpașu de Sus following his marriage, at the base of the Făgăraș Mountains, he was known by his contemporaries as a skilled craftsman and as a wealthy and respected peasant. This reputation was due to the fact that he worked only on commission and his icons were expensive⁸. According to church records, he passed away in December 1899 and was buried in the village churchyard, near the altar wall⁹.

Constantin Brăiloiu collected over a hundred pieces and organized, in 1943, in Bucharest, the first exhibition dedicated to an icon painter, titled "Glass Icons by the Făgăraș Painter Savu Moga, 1816-1899," which was later exhibited in Switzerland.

Throughout his life, Savu Moga experimented with various painting techniques but remained loyal to glass painting, the technique that made him famous. In his desire to fulfill commissions, he occasionally replaced the fragility and sensitivity of glass, which he was familiar with, with the stability of wood or canvas. However, this brought certain difficulties due to his lack of mastery of these techniques. The choice of support type and dimensions were likely based on the preferences and financial capabilities of the patrons. In both wood and glass painting, we find the same subjects treated slightly differently.

The qualities of this icon painter were best showcased, without a doubt, through glass painting, a technique he mastered and which revealed his talent. His mastery was driven by his skill as a colorist and his sense of spatial composition¹⁰ (Juliana Dancu places his work style at the boundary between folk and religious painting, in the context of church painting).

The glass, as both a support and protective layer, required thorough cleaning. The process involved sketching the design with black on the glass surface, followed by the application of highlights and shadows, and finally, the background colors, metallic leaf, or silver paper. In contrast, in wood-supported painting, the color application stages were executed in the reverse order compared to glass painting. After preparing the wooden panel, the design was outlined and

⁸ Vasile Drăguț, *Un mare meșter iconar – Savu Moga*, în „Artă Plastică”, anul XIV, nr. 8, 1967, p. 24

⁹ Juliana Dancu, Dumitru Dancu, *Doi mari pictori din Țara Oltului*, în Revista „Steaua”, nr. 4, 1967, p. 101

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 104

incised, metallic leaf was applied to the background, halos, or even garments, and then the layers of color were applied. Regarding Savu Moga's icons, those on wood support are rarer than those on glass support, and some of those we've encountered were in a state of poor preservation, caused by technical flaws and storage conditions.

At present, the canvas painting executed by Savu Moga is a relatively new and less-explored subject, as we know of the existence of only one epitaph in the collection of the Archdiocese of Sibiu, which is signed and dated.

In order to conduct an objective analysis of the artist's work in the next chapter, it was considered necessary to provide a brief overview of potential sources of inspiration. These sources include church mural painting, illustrations from religious books and popular woodcuts, sacred texts, apocryphal literature, hagiographic legends, antiminses and painting manuals. Regardless of the models available to the icon painter, they were filtered through the artist's own reason and sensibility, with his unique vision giving a unified character to his entire work.

The distinctive features of the icon painter's work, even when referring to only a portion of it, highlight the qualities and authenticity of his style that allowed him to emerge from anonymity. These features include balanced and symmetrical compositions, individualized faces, the uniqueness of each icon even when using the same template, thematic diversity, sure and precise drawing that emphasizes details, modulated lines, harmonized colors, subtle shading and gradients and delicate brushwork.

The work of the icon painter Savu Moga in museum and private collections forms **Chapter 4**. Recognizing the value of this icon painter's work, specialists have ensured that his icons transitioned from rural to urban settings, finding their place in museum or private collections. Some pieces have been lost over time due to carelessness or neglect, while others are still waiting to be discovered.

This chapter brings to attention 61 icons signed or attributed to Savu Moga, painted on glass, wood, or canvas over the course of 53 years (1841-1894), covering nearly his entire period of activity. These pieces are part of the collections of various institutions, including the "Astra" National Museum Complex (Sibiu), Brâncoveanu Monastery - Sâmbăta de Sus (Braşov), the Archdiocese of Sibiu, the Museum of Făgăraş Country "Valer Literat" (Braşov) and the Museum of Glass Icons "Pr. Zosim Oancea" Sibieli (Sibiu). Additionally, there are icons in various private collections, both in Romania and abroad.

Each icon is accompanied by identification details, a brief iconographic and stylistic description and information about its state of preservation. The classification is based on the importance of the depicted theme, following the chronological order of religious holidays according to the structure of the church year.

The themes depicted are highly diverse and encompass various representations of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the Holy Trinity, Imperial Feasts, saints (such as Saint Demetrius, Saint George, Saint Nicholas, Saint Charalambos and others), as well as scenes like the Last Supper and the Entombment.

Chapter 5, *Aspects of Restoration Work*, first addresses the issues related to the conservation and restoration of glass icons. It mentions the causes of deterioration over time, including the quality of materials used, the execution technique, storage conditions, natural disasters, and human factors. The types of deterioration are also described. The main stages of restoration are then detailed, with reference to current practices in the country. These stages include dismantling the artwork, consolidating and cleaning the painted surface, mechanical and/or chemical cleaning of the support (the non-painted part), the frame and the cover (consolidating the latter), chromatic integration, repairing glass fragments if necessary and mounting within a frame. All these steps must be followed by ensuring optimal microclimate conditions for both display and storage.

The glass icons painted by Savu Moga have stood the test of time, and the deteriorations they have experienced are primarily due to the aging of materials and improper storage conditions. In the final part of the chapter, practical application of the previously described theory is discussed through the restoration of twelve pieces attributed to the icon painter – eleven painted on wood and one on glass – from the collection of Brâncoveanu Monastery, Sâmbăta de Sus. Case studies on the condition and restoration interventions of these icons are presented.

The conclusion and the outline of future research directions, along with the bibliography and relevant annexes, conclude the work.

Keywords: icon, glass painting, wood painting, canvas painting, iconographer, reverse painting on glass, Savu Moga, Transylvania, craft, collection, execution technique, drawing, chromatic, conservation, restoration, case study.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1. HISTORY OF GLASS PAINTING RESEARCH.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.1. History of Glass Painting Research in Europe	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.2. History of Glass Icon Research in Transylvania	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2. GLASS PAINTING - HISTORY AND DISTRIBUTION .	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.1. The Emergence of Stained Glass Painting	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.2. Glass Painting in Europe	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.2.1. Italy and Sicily	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.2.2. Central and Eastern Europe	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.2.3. Western Europe	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.3. Glass Icon in Transylvania	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.3.1. General Aspects	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.3.2. Icon Painter Centers	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.3.2.1.Nicula	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.3.2.2.Iernuțeni	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.3.2.3.Șcheii Brașovului.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.3.2.4.Făgăraș and the Olt Country.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.3.2.5.Valea Sebeșului	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.3.2.6.Maieri	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.3.2.7.Mărginimea Sibiului	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.3.3. Execution Technique and Materials Used	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.ICONOGRAPHER SAVU MOGA	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.1. Biographical Data	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.2.Arpașu de Sus – Location and Description	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.3. Execution Technique.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.3.1. Glass Painting	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.3.2. Wood Painting.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.3.3. Canvas Painting.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.4. Sources of Inspiration.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.4.1. Wall Painting.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.4.2. Illustrations from Religious Books and Popular Woodcuts ..	Error! Bookmark not defined.

3.4.3. Holy Books, Apocryphal Literature and Hagiographic Legends	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.4.4. Antimins	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.4.5. Hermeneutics of Painting	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3.5. Specific Features of Savu Moga's Work	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4. THE WORK OF ICONOGRAPHER SAVU MOGA IN MUSEUM AND PRIVATE COLLECTIONS	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.1. Representation of Lord Jesus Christ	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.1.1. Jesus Christ Pantocrator.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.1.2. Eucharistic Jesus Christ	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.2. Representation of the Virgin Mary	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.2.1. Virgin Mary Hodigitria with Child	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.2.2. Virgin Mary in Grief	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.3. The Holy Trinity	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.4. Representation of Imperial Feasts.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.4.1. The Exaltation of the Holy Cross.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.4.2. The Entry of the Virgin Mary into the Church	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.4.3. The Nativity of the Lord.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.4.4. The Baptism of the Lord.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.4.5. The Meeting of the Lord.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.4.6. The Annunciation.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.4.7. The Entry of the Lord into Jerusalem.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.4.8. The Resurrection of the Lord.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.4.9. The Ascension of the Lord.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.4.10. The Transfiguration of the Lord.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.5. Representations of Saints	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.5.1. Saint Demetrius the Great Martyr	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.5.2. Saint Nicholas	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.5.3. Saint John the Baptist	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.5.4. Saint Haralambos	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.5.5. The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.5.6. Saint George the Great Martyr.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.5.7. The Holy Apostles Peter and Paul.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.

4.5.8. The Holy Prophet Elijah of Thesvita.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.6. Other Representations	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.6.1. The Last Supper	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.6.2. he Descent from the Cross and the Burial	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5. ASPECTS REGARDING THE RESTORATION OF THE WORK	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5.1. Issues in the Restoration of Glass Icons	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5.2. Restoration of Icons Attributed to Savu Moga - Case Studies	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5.2.1. The Wood Icon "The Transfiguration," Inventory No. 3207 MBS	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5.2.2. The Wood Icon "Palm Sunday," Inventory No. 3208 MBS ..	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5.2.3. The Wood Icon "The Baptism of the Lord," Inventory No. 3209 MBS	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5.2.4. The Wood Icon "The Exaltation of the Holy Cross," Inventory No. 3210 MBS	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5.2.5. The Wood Icon "The Entry of the Virgin Mary into the Church," Inventory No. 3211 MBS ..	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5.2.6. The Wood Icon "The Nativity of the Lord" 1870, Inventory No. 3212 MBS .	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5.2.7. The Wood Icon "The Ascension of the Lord," Inventory No. 3213 MBS	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5.2.8. The Wood Icon "The Resurrection of the Lord" 1870, Inventory No. 3214 MBS	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5.2.9. The Wood Icon "The Meeting of the Lord," Inventory No. 3215 MBS	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5.2.10. The Wood Icon "The Annunciation" 1870, Inventory No. 3216 MBS	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5.2.11. The Wood Icon "The Resurrection of the Lord" 1869, Inventory No. MBS.	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5.2.11. The Glass Icon "Saint Prophet Elijah," Inventory No. 4309 MBS	Error! Bookmark not defined.
CONCLUSIONS.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
BIBLIOGRAPHY	Error! Bookmark not defined.
APPENDICES	Error! Bookmark not defined.

