



ULBS

Universitatea "Lucian Blaga" din Sibiu



Interdisciplinary Doctoral School

Doctoral Field: **HISTORY**

DOCTORAL THESIS

**THE VOTIVE IMAGE IN TRANSYLVANIA.
THE REPRESENTATION OF THE
FOUNDERS IN THE MURAL PAINTING
BETWEEN THE 14th AND 18th
CENTURIES**

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The votive image in Transylvania. The representation of the founders in the mural painting between the 14th and 18th centuries

In the 14th -18th centuries, Transylvania was marked, like Moldova and Wallachia, by the Ottoman threat with which it fought uninterruptedly under the Hungarian authority that ruled this province until 1541.¹

The Transylvanian Romanians will assert themselves in these fights through military deeds for which they will receive in property villages where they build wall churches.² These are the first founding acts of the studied period.

Researcher Elena Dana Prioteasa focused on them through studies on the mural painting in Transylvania, Hunedoara County (churches in Sântămărie Orlea, Densuș, Strei, Streisângeorgiu, Leșnic, Ribița, Crișcior) and Arad County (twice, in Hălmagiu), but also through a study of the image of the founders painted inside them and of the inscriptions that accompany the mural painting.

This work is an extension of the research on the representations of the founders in mural painting for the entire territory of Transylvania in the 14th and 18th centuries. In this sense, nineteen monuments have been identified in which there are representations of the founders or donors, images that have been studied both documentary and in the field, addressing their interdisciplinary treatment from a historical, artistic and religious point of view. Given that in some cases the images were lost or degraded, an analysis of their state of preservation was also performed.

¹ Ioan-Aurel Pop, *Transilvania în secolul al XIV-lea și prima jumătate a secolului al XV-lea (cca 1300-1456)*, în Ioan-Aurel Pop, Thomas Năgler (eds.), „Istoria Transilvaniei”, vol. 1 (Până la 1541), pp. 236-238, 278-282.

Anton E. Dörner, *Transilvania între stabilitate și criză (1457-1541)*, în Ioan-Aurel Pop, Thomas Năgler (ed.), „Istoria Transilvaniei”, vol. 1 (Până la 1541), pp. 297-302.

² Ioan-Aurel Pop, *op. cit.*, pp. 246-247, 264, 272-273.

This research begins with the study of the aspects under which the leader has been represented over time, continues with the analysis of images with founders or donors found in murals, altars or icons in Europe and investigates the assimilation of these models in both mural and Wallachia, as well as in the context of iconographic programs in Transylvania under the influence of neighboring provinces.

The objectives proposed to be analyzed in this research are the evolution of iconographic programs and votive paintings in Transylvania between the 14th and the 18th centuries, the relationship of the votive image with the iconographic program in which it is found, and especially the technical and stylistic elements of the votive paintings, the analysis of a repertoire of image memorials in places of worship and the analysis of the state of conservation of the images and monuments researched with possible proposals for their conservation.

The images analyzed in the work are made in the fresco technique, a painting technique that requires special attention both in execution and in its preservation in favorable conditions. As most of the images are, as mentioned, in a poor state of preservation, caused by the historical context, the inadequate human intervention in their maintenance or by natural causes, there is a possibility of losing these testimonies, a circumstance that would eventually lead to the loss of many historical, social or religious aspects.

Thus, I consider the need to develop and extend such a research and to publish its results, an imperative both from a historical point of view, especially for the history of art and for those who study these memorial images, and in terms of heritage and identity.

The five chapters of the thesis cross the historical periods from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, with emphasis on the medieval period, following various artistic manifestations that have in the foreground the figure of the leader, an exposition of devotional manifestations and in the second part of the work the origin and evolution of the votive image, in the center of attention being the representation of the founders in the mural painting from Transylvania in the discussed period of time.

The first chapter, *Methodological approach. The delimitation of the research area*, presents data on the area and the context considered at the time of elaboration of this research paper, as well as the methods used in conducting the research and the reasons why these methods were addressed.

The proposed research methodology consists of a set of methods such as historical research, case study, descriptive explanation, analysis of causes, comparative method, deductive method and analogical method, taking into account the period researched, when

Transylvania was under Hungarian, Ottoman or Austrian rule, but also by the cultural and political relations of the Romanian rulers with the neighboring states and the artistic influences due to them.

The researched period addresses the 14th – 18th centuries, a period of time in which the first artistic manifestations emerge in Transylvania, related to the assertion of personalities with important attributions in society and which over time try to align with the ideas and behaviors circulated in other provinces, respectively Wallachia and Moldova. At the same time, in the second half of the mentioned interval we notice a change in the execution of the iconographic programs, the founders are personalities with other material possibilities and a different cultural horizon, a fact that can be noticed in their votive representations.

The researched area for the identification and analysis of votive images is the territory of Transylvania in its form during the mentioned period. From the point of view of the iconographic programs, we added in the research area also the Maramureș area, because certain aspects and elements illustrated in the painting of the wooden churches from this area are also found in the iconographic programs of the churches from Transylvania.

In the first part of the second chapter is made a general presentation of the evolution of the iconographic program in the churches of Transylvania and the wooden churches in Maramureș, considering the social and religious context, the painters who worked in the area and the influences from outside the borders. The second part of the chapter presents the origin and evolution of the votive picture, starting from the first votive manifestations to the appearance of votive images and the appearance of founders or donors within them in various aspects.

The factors underlying the drafting of iconographic programs are cultural, economic, but also political. The relations of the Romanian rulers with neighboring countries, their travels abroad, the circulation of goods, the contact with various artistic environments, as well as the circulation of craftsmen who educate their apprentices on our territory will contribute significantly to the appearance of iconographic programs and the spread of adapted Byzantine roots to the mentality of the time. The only source through which ordinary people, lacking literacy, could make contact with the Christian teaching were various books circulating in the Middle Ages, such as the *Bible of the poor* or those referring to the salvation of the soul. From these concerns, consequences of the critical moments in which they took part, such as struggles or diseases, result iconographic programs that urge to moral teaching, and also to a reflection on the afterlife, repentance and salvation of the soul. Thus, various themes related to the holy protectors of the plagues (*Saint Christopher*), the *Passion of the Savior* and the

Sacrament of the Eucharist, and also the *Last Judgment* are spread. The last two themes are meant to remind us Christ's sacrifice for the redemption of man and how man presents himself to him at the second coming.

Another important feature of the iconographic programs is the presence of the *military saints*, in some cases the piety being so great that their figure is painted in the apse of the altar, where the *Church Fathers* are usually represented. This fact is encountered as a result of the military activity of the founders and the deeds they assumed, in the case of rulers, at the time of coronation and anointing.

An original feature is the double significance of the iconographic programs seen through the filter of the person of the founders located within the *Triumphant Church*, between holy martyrs and pious people. On the one hand, some of them are considered spiritual patrons of the area of origin of the founders, and on the other hand, they are protectors in politico-military activities or witnesses in religious or social acts such as acts of philanthropy, devotion or maintaining traditions Christian religious. There are also independent scenes in which leaders who fought under the sign of the cross and Christianity are painted near the images of the founders. Two common cases in the painting of churches in Transylvania are the *Holy Emperors Constantine and Helen*, inherited by the Byzantine tradition, and *the three holy kings of Hungary (Stephen, Ladislaus and Emeric)*, represented in the princely foundations of Hunedoara County or in Catholic churches. All this reveals the obvious connection between the material and the spiritual plane, the reflections on the afterlife and the preparation of the founders for it, but also the inheritance or consecration of the forerunners they have as a model, trying to reach the ideal behavior of these emblematic figures from a historical point of view, as well as from a religious point of view, at a time when these aspects were quite fragile as a result of the events that took place not only in the Transylvania region, but in the entire South-Eastern Europe.

With the relocation of the collective religious service from outside the temples to the rotundas or basilicas and the takeover of the state by the basileis, considered God's messengers on earth (an aspect taken from Eastern cultures), the founding activity began to gain momentum, being influenced by the deeds of philanthropy and piety, virtues that they had to achieve.

During this period, the votive paintings of the founders will appear, first in the form of mosaics and then in the form of a fresco, being included in the iconographic program of Byzantine rite churches, initially there being no rule of positioning that representation. In time, the position will be established for the west wall of the nave, tomb or narthex depending

on the purpose it fulfills, commemorative, generally found, or funerary, if it is painted near the crypts.

If ordinary people or aristocrats initially participated in religious services in private or semi-private spaces, an activity that took place in the medieval period and takes place today, as evidenced by the various types of sacrifices made, starting with the bread and wine used in the Liturgy, up to various objects or representations that had the role of protection and salvation, the foundations become a way of assertion among society through the construction of places of worship or donations offered to them, all gifts bearing the written signature, through the inscriptions, or visual, through portrait, of the one who contributed to this act, being a considerable period of time a privilege of those with a high material potential, later finding the nobility, boyars, priests, monks or merchants as founders of a place of worship, all aided by the locals of the area where that foundation was built.

The title of founders or donors, found in various forms in documents or inscriptions, as well as a study of the various types of founders and information on how they were made, gives us a picture of the evolution and significance of the image of the founders. The leaders, initially represented as fighters and masters, undergo a transfiguration through the way they become mediators between the material and the spiritual world, returning towards the end of the period studied to this legitimation, sometimes met until then only in inscriptions. On the other hand, the formulas in the inscriptions used for prayer for the salvation of the soul reveal the concern for the afterlife, which is often observed visually by presenting the founders or donors to divine persons, usually Jesus Christ or the Mother of God, who sit on the throne, the path to the divine space being sometimes opened by an intercessor who takes over the model of the foundation, or they are represented in the hypostasis of the *Last Judgment*.

A very important aspect to mention is that the permission to establish a place of worship or monastic settlement does not guarantee all founders or donors the right to a burial in the church, like the right to have votive representation inside the place of worship.

The third chapter refers to the aspect of votive images in Transylvania, the channels they appeared, the compositional schemes they follow, the specific elements of the founders' rendering in this area, but also the way in which their achievement was influenced by various factors.

Artistic aspects similar to the votive representations on the Romanian territory are found in the Byzantine basilicas and, in a larger number, in the medieval foundations in Serbia and Bulgaria. These representations have a great influence on the images with founders from the Romanian provinces through the circulation of painters, an essential role in these

cultural exchanges being the political, economic, and cultural relations of the Romanian lords with these countries. At the same time, the origin of their wives has a well-defined role in certain aspects related to the construction of the foundation or the clothing in which they are represented with the rulers.

The simultaneous existence of the two denominations in Transylvania and the coexistence of several nationalities, but also the origin of the founders or their relatives from other geographical areas, is reflected in the votive paintings by their clothing that combines local pieces with those from the West or the East. The different dominions in the Romanian provinces also have a strong influence on these images. The gestures and posture of the founders are the Byzantine ones, usually found in the votive images from Moldova and Wallachia or in Western painting. The images of the donors from the Catholic rite churches are influenced by the paintings from the western environment, similar figures being represented in frescoes, paintings, or polyptych altars.

The votive picture in Transylvania is a sign of high social status, often illustrating certain elements that prove this, but also of social affirmation. On the other hand, it has the role of legitimizing the person and personality of the founder or donor of the church but also to provide certain information on the period in which the act of founding was made by notes found in the inscriptions painted or incised near the votive paintings.

The fourth chapter begins with the presentation of the images of the founders of the churches in Țara Hațegului previously analyzed by researchers Elena Dana Prioteasa and Zeno Karl Pinter, supplemented with certain information and opinions resulting from their own research, continuing with the analysis of votive images personally researched iconographically and iconologically, treated both separately and in the context of the iconographic programs of which they are part.

The presence of these votive paintings in the architectural and iconographic ensemble of the places of worship has several connotations both the sponsor and the painter were aware of. The illustration in the nave represents the affiliation on the one hand to the community of believers, but also the participation in the liturgical service of remembrance on the occasion of the services carried out in the church. In parallel, the representation in the narthex was funerary, this aspect not being valid in all cases considering the representations from Sâmbăta de Sus, where the only tomb of the metropolitan who renovated the hermitage was temporarily located in this space, or from Teiuș, where the crypts are located in the nave.

The votive images are dominated by mysticism, their inner atmosphere being rendered by the component elements, each with a well-established role through tradition or pure desire

of the founder, respectively of the painter subordinated to him. The act of donation makes the transition from the material state to the spiritual state, and this can be noticed not only in the positioning of the iconographic program in a certain place, but also in the sacrifice that the founder humbly makes, reflecting on the salvation of the soul, the forgiveness of sins and divine protection.

As can be seen from the above mentioned assertions, the case studies focused not only on the iconographic analysis of the representation of the founders, but also on the iconological approach, each gesture, feature, positioning or element represented in this image included in the iconographic program of the churches having certain meanings or providing us with historical-documentary information.

The chapter ends with the presentation of an image with a donor, lost in 2001, through which the introduction to the last chapter of the thesis is gradually made.

Chapter five refers to the state of preservation of monuments, more precisely of murals and votive images. In the first part of the chapter are presented some general notions about the history of the fresco painting technique as well as the way in which it is influenced by various factors that contribute to the alteration of its conservation status. In the second part of the chapter are listed the monuments, respectively the votive images, indicating aspects related to the state of conservation, previous interventions, and possible proposals to stop the process of their degradation.

The paper ends with the conclusions of the research, the bibliography used and the annexes with documentary fragments, images, graphic reconstructions or digital editions of votive paintings or murals representative of the research, as well as images we referred to during the research to clarify some issues brought into question.

Keywords: votive image, Transylvania, founder, mural painting, donor, patronage, portrait, costumes, gestures, posture, shrine, weapons, foundation, dynastic legitimation, intercessor, votive inscription, inscription, state of conservation, military saints, the three holy Hungarian kings, The Holy Emperors Constantine and Helen, Holy Cross, the Last Judgement, iconographic program.

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