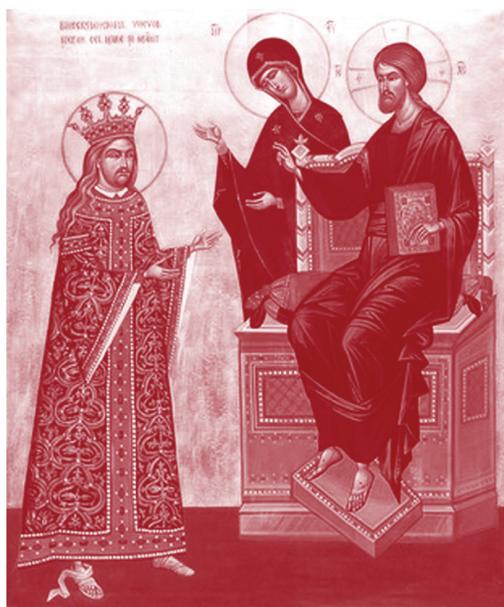


**IGLESIA, CULTURA
Y SOCIEDAD
EN LOS SIGLOS XVI-XVII**

**EDS. REBECA LÁZARO NISO,
CARLOS MATA INDURÁIN, MIGUEL RIERA FONT
Y OANA ANDREIA SÂMBRIAN**



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REBECA LÁZARO NISO, CARLOS MATA INDURÁIN,
MIGUEL RIERA FONT Y OANA ANDREIA SÂMBRIAN
(EDS.)

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THE CHURCH FRESCO AS ETHNOLOGICAL DOCUMENT: VORONEŢ MONASTERY

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The church fresco represents, beyond its indubitable aesthetic value, a document of a specific period of time, regarding the founding of that holly place, the details on addressing the mentality of the age when it was created. It should be mentioned that the term fresco refers to a special type of mural painting that is:

The fresco —(It. Fresco, fresh), is a technical process used in the mural painting, in which the pigments, are mixed with water and applied on a wet lime mortar (freshly plastered), which incorporates it. The fresco technique is based on the so-called process of *carbonation*, through which the limestone suffers a complete chemical process and re-becomes stone, forming a hard, semi-glassy pellicle on the surface, similar to the marble. Once the painting has been dried, *in fresco*, it is no longer affected by water or other destructive agents, becoming one of the most durable techniques of painting. For the fresco, there are preferred the new bricked walls. Firstly it is applied the plaster, called *arricio*, then *intonaco*, in which there are introduced fibrous elements, a layer that incorporates the colours. The plasters are made from filling materials (sand, marble etc.) and lime (the most used binder material for the fresco). The lime is prepared from the best limestone, which is slaked with river water in deep pitches, padded with boards. It is kept here between 6 months and 2-3 years, in order to become less active when painted on it. As type of sand, it is used that coming from rivers,

rough when touched, which is washed, dried and sifted. The grounded marble is taken as filling material from the Romans, and it creates compact plasters, offering luminosity to the painting. The fibrous materials that are finely chopped are carefully mixed with the plaster, before being applied on the wall. The *intonaco* has exclusively tiny straws of flax or hemp. The most used colours for the fresco are the natural ones, mostly the earthy ones. The diluent for the colours is the clean water, lime water or milk of lime. The painting is usually realised from the top towards the bottom, in order to avoid the accidental splashing. In the Romanian spiritual space, the mural painting represents one of the most spectacular artistic accomplishments, in which there were merged Byzantine and Occidental influences, with the autochthonous tradition, resulting an artistically and ethnically refined, exceptional painting. The perenniality, over the centuries, of the church fresco from Romania, proves the profoundness and the stability of an artistic synthesis, along with the fact that the «painters» were educated people, knowing all the artistic innovations from that period of time. [...] Romania is one of the few countries of the world where this technique is still used. This tradition is still kept for the icons painted with watercolours, eggs emulsion on wooden boards, polished with gold sheet, or for the sculpted miniatures. In the true meaning of the term, the fresco is only the painting made on the fresh plaster (wet, and not moistened later), which is the technical procedure that the Italians call *buonfresco* (Fr. fresque, It. affresco, al fresco, Germ. Freskomalerei, Engl. fresco-painting)¹.

We have intended to start an ample debate on several aspects referring to the presence of some ethnographic and folkloric elements, in only few of the representations of the church fresco, from Sf. Nicolae Domnesc Church from Iași, the Church from Proieni, the churches from the North of Moldova, from Bucovina.

Our study is configured as a demonstration of the connection between the immaterial patrimony and the material one, mediated by the church fresco. Moreover, the activities of preservation for the material patrimony can become interdisciplinary through the constant collaboration with the representatives of the folkloric and ethnographic scientific community, historians or art sociologists.

The French researcher, Paul Henri, who studied the Romanian culture and civilisation at the beginning of the 20th century, offered a very ample study that refers to the connection between folklore and

¹ *Dictionarul de arta (Art Dictionary)*, 1995.

the religious iconography, specific to the churches from Moldova, underlining the Romanian ethnicity of the painters, due to the popular beliefs that transpires in the frescos from Bucovina:

the artists from this region (Bucovina) had taken their inspiration from the religious legends of the Romanian people, when depicting the scene with the Customs of Heaven. [...] it was therefore constituted an iconographic type around this well-known belief of the Romanian folklore².

The researcher also noticed the existence of correspondences between folklore and certain ideas, present in different printings from that period, from which he mentioned «The life of St. Vasile the New», described by his disciple Grigorie, a book written in Greek, but translated many times in Romanian. There was sufficient time for some fragments of the paper to be integrated into the popular stories, «therefore, the folklore and the painted images have the same source»³, the book and the popular tradition increasing each other's strength, in order to offer an imaginative support for the artist's theme, «the popular element being the main source of inspiration for the painter». In the same time, the researcher brings forward the Romanian painter, individualising him through his beliefs, and differentiating him from other Greek and Serbian painters «for this monuments at least (the churches from Bucovina), the painter was neither Serbian, nor Greek [...], but a Romanian, and more than that, a Moldavian [...], the popular inspiration [...] allowing the painter to unravel the force of his originality»⁴. There are numerous legends that refer to the Customs of Heaven: when Satan revolted along with his legions, God defeated and banished them from the sky, making them falling for three days and three nights, until God shut the gates of heaven by saying «Amen», that moment each of them remaining in the place where he was, some in mountains, others in valleys or water, others between heaven and earth, these last ones interfering in the customs, presenting the sins of the soul that wishes to ascend towards the heavenly gates. The guardian angel is that who helps the soul to ascend and to pass through the customs, chasing the demons away. The angels remind us about the

² Henri, 1928, p. 63.

³ Henri, 1928, p. 64.

⁴ Henri, 1928, p. 64.

virtuous behaviour, contest the demons, unravel their lies and defeat them by force sometimes, reducing them to silence, rebuying their soul and opening the gates of heaven. These «orally told» representations are accessible to the people, being well known that «the ornaments of the churches, both in Orient and Occident, have as a purpose the education of the believers and constitute the bible of the uneducated»⁵.

The fresco painting of Voroneţ church preserves the belief in the existence of the two guardian angels, who help the soul to ascend in heaven, along with those from Vatra Moldoviţei, Gura Humorului, Arbore, where there is as well found the theme of the divine ascension.

An interesting representation is at Suceviţa, where the souls ascend on stairs, under the protection of several rows of angels.

As our painter, the Romanian peasant knew that between the last customs and heaven there is a terrible obstacle: the bridge of heaven, a narrow passage, like the blade of a knife, traversing through a profound obscurity [...] The right reach the top and, not finding the stairs to descend, are grown wings that take them up to the entrance of the gate to heavens⁶.



Fig. 1. The angels' stairs, Suceviţa.

⁵ Henri, 1928, pp. 65–66.

⁶ Henri, 1928, p. 72.



Fig. 2. The angels' stairs, Sucevița, detail.

The bookish conception about the Customs of Heaven from the book of Grigorie, seems complete, as regarding the symbolic imaginary of the painter on numerous popular beliefs:

the book did not imposed itself on the painter's imagination, because the inert issues of a theological work were abounding with the alive materials of the eschatological principles of a people where there had been prospering millenary beliefs. These popular beliefs determined the artist to go beyond the limitations of the book [...] In Bucovina, we can observe an innovative art, woken by the popular tradition that the artist belongs to, with his entire spirit, being therefore able to say that he was autochthonous⁷.

The fresco succeeds in communicating beyond the representations that it brings to life. Thus, it manages to present information about a lot of customs from the old times. There is an entire bibliography that describes this aspect, from Nicolae Iorga, *The history of Romanians in faces and icons*, to C. Bobulescu, *Musicians and popular dances in the paintings from our churches*. Lucilia Georgescu realises an ample study about «The relation between lute and kobsain the monasteries from Northern Moldova»⁸: «The music

⁷ Henri, 1928, p. 82.

⁸ Georgescu, 1967, pp. 133-145.

history researchers noticed the necessity for studying, among other documents, the church fresco, in which we often meet scenes with musicians⁹.

As a result, we might say that the fresco succeeds in answering some questions, to solve dilemmas, to offer viable answers for the scientific researches:

If the musical custom of the time met the instrument called *lute*, on the frescos of the monasteries only this instrument could be painted, illustrating the scenes as closely as possible to the text of Byzantine Erminias (books on iconography) and the Psalter; as a conclusion, the painter could depict only the instrument that he had seen. The artist of that time had to paint this instrument in such a manner that it could be recognised by the believers that came to church, because, otherwise, the presence of the guiding scenes, made at the request of the founder (boyars or the ruler) and paid by them, would not make sense. Even more, we can affirm that the painter struggled to present as faithfully as possible, the instruments of that time, for underlining even better the theological idea of believers sin's —when they used to celebrate at great feasts with the musicians— or, on the contrary, in order to evidence both the special favour that the king-singer David enjoyed in front of the Lord, and the miraculous, healing force of his music, dedicated to God. If the king and psalm singer David —the virtuoso player— is painted playing *the lute*, it means that, for that age, the instrument enjoyed a special popularity¹⁰.



Fig. 3. The king-singer David, Voroneț.

⁹ Georgescu, 1967, p. 133.

¹⁰ Georgescu, 1967, p. 141.

The presence of the popular costumes in the church frescos represents a special subject. They are either a spontaneous, laic representation of the painter, or they are a part of a national discourse, as we shall further notice.

In the first category, there are the frescos of the Church from Proieni, in which the founders are represented in popular costumes. The Church from Proieni —under «All the Saints» patronage— is in the locality with the same name from the Valley of River Olt, Vâlcea County, and belongs to the city of Brezoi. The Church from Proieni is surrounded by many legends, but the one that is confirmed by the old writings, refers to the fact that this is the most probable place where Michael the Brave was married to Lady Stanca. The popular legends also say that, in this church, the ruler Michael the Brave was baptised. Nonetheless, from the historical point of view, the church is documentary attested from 1798, being the construction of Davidescu from Râmnic.



Fig. 4. The Church from Proieni.



Fig. 5. The church from Proieni.

The church was built on parts, and on the last side, the former porch, it is written that it was made by Constantin Davidescu in 1798, and that the pulpit was painted by Nicolae Popescu, in 1875. The church porch was added in 1817, and it was painted by the new founders. The painting was done in 1875, on the expense of Nicolae Popescu. When it was built, the church had only a narthex, a nave, without a porch, which was added after 1700, after the ruling of Constantin Brâncoveanu, using his architectural style.

If the altar and the nave painting were made in a distinctive way, in the old porch, the painting is naïve, and the last founders, who probably helped to the rehabilitation of the place, are portrayed near the door, wearing peasant clothes. The painting of the church is made by Ioan from Ocnele Mari, and by deacon Radu, and dates from 1798-1800. The church from Proieni was recorded in the list of the national historical monuments from Romania, in 1955.

The church Sf. Nicolae Domnesc from Iași represents an interesting case, as regarding the representation of the popular costumes in the church fresco. In the fresco from the right of the entrance, there are painted King Charles I, Queen Elisabeth, princess Mary, the heir prince Ferdinand (the future King Ferdinand I), princess Mary (the future Queen Mary), princess Elisabeth and prince Charles (the future King, Charles II). The royal children are wearing Romanian popular costumes.



Fig. 6. The Fresco from the Church Sf. Nicolae Domnesc, Iași.

The Church «Sf. Nicolae Domnesc» from Iași, is an orthodox church from the municipality of Iași, built by Stephan the Great during 1491-1492 and remade in 1884-1904, by the French architect André Lecomte du Noüy, after he had torn it down and then rebuilt it, on the same foundation and approximately in its initial shape, and renouncing at the later added parts. It is situated in the centre of the town, on Str. Anastasie Panu nr. 65, near the Princely Court, between the Palace of Culture and The Arched House (Dosoftei House).

Among the rulers that were anointed in the Church «Sf. Nicolae Domnesc», the chronicles name the following: Gheorghe Ștefan (1653, 1653-1658), Dimitrie Catemir (1693, 1710-1711), Grigore al II-lea Ghica (1726-1733, 1735-1739, 1739-1741, 1747-1748)¹¹ and Costantin Mavrocordat (1733-1735, 1741-1743, 1748-1749, 1769-1769). The last ruler to be anointed in this place was Grigore Alexandru Ghica (1849-1856), on the 2nd of October 1849.

¹¹ <https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biserica_Sf%C3%A2ntul_Nicolae_Domnesc_din_Ia%C8%99i-cite_note-11> [13/09/2015].

Lecomte du Noüy rebuilt the church considering the style of the town churches, built by Stephen the Great, and after a votive painting from Antonie Ruset. The church was rededicated on the 2nd of October 1904, in the presence of the entire royal family, several members of the government and a great number of officials. The royal children's popular costumes transmit the elements of a Romanian spirituality that was to last.

Therefore, it can be asserted that the church can constitute a liaison between the material and immaterial patrimony, through its profound value, not only aesthetic, but also historical and ethnographical.

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C o l e c c i ó n B a t i h o j a



El presente volumen recopila una serie de trabajos que, con enfoque multidisciplinar, abordan la relación entre Iglesia, cultura y sociedad en los siglos XVI y XVII. Los temas varían desde la perspectiva filológica e histórica hasta la teológica y filosófica, todas las cuales aplican su método específico de análisis a las obras del Siglo de Oro español (con extensión, en algunos casos, a la cultura rumana), destacando así la multitud de perspectivas desde las que dicho periodo se puede pensar y (re)interpretar.

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