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THEOLOGY

MATERIAL CULTURE REFLECTED IN THE ICONOGRAPHIC
PROGRAMS OF FORTIFIED CHURCHES FROM SOUTHERN
TRANSYLVANIA
(XIV-XVI CENTURIES)

SUMMARY

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Keywords: ecclesiastic art, panel painting, mural painting, material culture, churches, southern Transylvania, XIVth – XVIth centuries, late Middle Ages.

The need for a paper covering the medieval material culture present in Gothic or Renaissance iconography, continuing till present, especially in the ecclesiastic art of Transylvania, has been felt plainly over the last years. An additional justification for this endeavour may come from the fact that the recent restauration work which has been done to an ever-increasing number of medieval churches built in the georgaphical area colonised by German and Székely ethnics, have brought to life important mural ensembles that had previously been hidden from interested gazes.

While chiefly dedicated to spiritual purposes – one prevalent one being didactic –, medieval mural painting had attracted the attention of researchers since the end of the XIXth century. From viewpoint of research into the elements of material culture depicted here, regardless of the meduim on which they had been created, this readily available data base has been insufficiently fructified. It is precisely these lesser-studied aspects that this paper sets out to reveal.

The message of the interior liturgical space of these monuments depicts, as it should, images and scenes from the Old and New Testament, as well as moralizing hagiographic legends, always presented as examples leading to salvation. The artists' preference for depicting the lives of certain saints reveals the artistic relationship and the close ties with important European cultural centers from Germany, Austria and Slovenia, where the same scened can be found. Moreover, this resemblance is undeliable proof of allegiance to the same spiritual culture. Artistic imports had not been confined to merely using the western graphic models popular at that time, but rather the authors of these paintings, whether hired timporarily or settled in Transylvania, in local ateliers, have left their own personal marks, teh artistic language and the estetic leval differing from one monument to another.

It is known nowadays that no research endeavour into the vast field of medieval material culture can be complete if said effort is confined to archaeological investigations or examination of documents from that time – of which few survive in the first place.

If the lack of or frailty of artifacts cannot create a complete image of medieval material life, if surviving wrtitten accounts are incomplete, images supplied by plastic arts represent a welcome substitute for these losses and are able to provide us with the essential key for decyphering the material culture.

Iconography serves another purpose as well: on the believer's journey towards

eternal life and in pursuit of Paradise, the artist had managed to span the centuries and convey to the more prosaic contemporary historian a priceless and often unique testimony that other documentary sources have lost or, perhaps, had never had.

Whether we are speaking about an art of volumes in space or of bidimensional images, "material culture" has received concrete answers to questions related to the life of the medieval man. And if in these images we can recognize so many current aspects, albeit concealed by a thin but shiny veil, we can only conclude that the pejorative use of the term "medieval" loses its footing.

It is this very pursuit of material life depicted by mural paintings and polyptichs that prompted us to focus our research directly on the source of this information. Throughout this paper, we have identified and photographed the mural ensembles and the pieces of painted carpentry – the retables – placed then, as they are placed now, on the altars of German churches from Transylvania or gathered for safe-keeping in several, more important, churches, such as the ones from Mediaș, Sighișoara and Sibiu or the pieces displayed in the collections of the Brukenthal National Museum in Sibiu or those of the National Art Museum of Romania.

Being aware of the vastness of the subject, we have concentrated the analysis on the geographical space of southern Transylvania, colonized by German ethnics: to the west, the area is bordered by the localities Cricău and Sebeș, Băgaciu and Cund in the north, Prejmer to the east and Râșnov to the south.

The time frame of this study corresponds to the XIV-XVI centuries, the lower limit being represented by the creation of certain mural ensembles, while the upper limit was set by the adoption of the Reform in Transylvania and, thus, by the drastic decrease in the number of images present in the ecclesiastic field as a consequence of the new religious doctrine.

Of all these historical documents that have defied time, except for garments and military equipment, the best represented image is that of the book. That should come as no surprise, if we consider the cultural and economic standing of the patrons of these pieces.

Iconography has often displayed, in the background of scenes depicting biblical events, views and images of the medieval town. Close examination of these images has drawn the attention of specialists, who have identified – in a hypothetical sense, of course – the images of medieval Vienna, Mediaș and Brașov. The image of the church of Mălâncrav is shown by a model held by a patron, painted on the north wall of the nave of this monument. Furthermore and once more hypothetically, we could identify the image of the Evangelical Church C.A. of Sibiu and maybe that of the rotunda which existed once close to the

monument in the picture of the polyptych of Șoroștin (Sibiu county). While it remains to be seen whether or not these interpretations shall be validated in time, a conclusion is certainly already apparent: the images created by painters who did not take inspiration from books of graphical models, have their origins in the artists' immediate vicinity. This claim must, however, be put into perspective. The authors of these paintings (Martin Schongauer, Israhel van Meckenem, Albrecht Dürer etc.), who served as inspiration to other Transylvanian painters, had also been inspired by the same daily realities, while bringing their own innovations.

The delimitation and fencing of exterior spaces, granting explicit individual right of use of a certain area, had been portrayed as walls or wooden fences made of grooves or wicker, dotted by gates resting on pillars and covered by shingle wrappers with one or two partial sides. This practical and generally inexpensive delimitation is still used today in certain rural areas.

Natural or artificial lighting of rooms is revealed to us by the painted images of stained glass embedded in lead or wooden frames, or in drawings of torches, fire wood baskets, candlesticks, candles and lanterns.

Aspects concerning private and social life in connection to every day objects are portrayed by representations of common cutlery, baskets and receptacles, purses and money bags, keys, mirrors etc. Additionally, we have the images of tools used for agriculture or crafts and drawings of instruments for measuring weight (scales).

The only image of a timepiece, an hourglass, present in Transylvanian frescos, has been identified in the painting of the choir of the Evangelical church of Sebeș (Alba county). Symbol of ephemerality and of the unstoppable flow of time, this image bears a symbolic character.

Although the Transylvanian depression, endowed with a dense hydrographic network, is not crossed by any big rivers, the attention paid to naval transport certifies this trade. Images of rafts, boats and ships have been rendered both onto frescos and panel pictures. The representation of seagoing ships takes inspiration from western models and depicts two iconographical themes: *Saint Nicholas saving the ship from the storm* and *The Journey of Saint Ursula* and *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*.

The last chapter of the paper is dedicated to objects associated with faith and spiritual culture; here, we have listed and described the images of musical instruments, almost always associated with scenes from the Last Judgement or which depict biblical

events, of books and utensils needed for writing, of liturgical vessels and bishop crooks. These are all objects familiar to medieval artists.

It is well known and accepted that this is but a mere morcel of the much more vast visual art present in medieval society. Here, we include the multitude of images embossed on garments, sheets of paper either loose or tight between the covers of literary works. Secular frescos, displayed in the intimate space of one's dwelling or publicly was, undoubtedly, a lot more extensive than what we could imagine today. The art of volumes in space – sculpture –, has also left us with numerous examples. Be that as it may, the richest data base containing images that is currently accesible to us remains ecclesiastic painting. The reasons for this lie in the care with which rural or urban communities had looked after religious monuments.

The repertoire of the pieces represents an appendix to the PhD paper. In total, there are approximately 750 pieces in this *Repertoire*, each image photographed, inventoried and described iconographically within the thesis, depicting an object or an ensemble of material objects, classified afterwards into special categories and presented in 275 presentation drawings.