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SOME EDUCATIONAL LANDMARKS OF SACRED ART IN A
HUMANISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

As a presence in human life sacred art can act through similat forms of expression and reception in different moments of time and places. Humanistic education through sacred art can convey, through different creative manifestations, those ethical and aesthetical values which can transform the (restorers') works of art into landmarks based on sublimation into models of self-realization in several fields. This paper presents some visual and synchrectic examples which illustrate the specific nature of the ethical, aesthetic and heritage aspects of some artistic landamarks in the Romanian and neighbouring Orthodox context of sacred art: motherly love and devotion, child devotion, student-teacher relationship and, last but not least, personal self-realization and cultural awareness. The knowledge of, exhibition, conservation and restauration as well as the emphasis on some (hidden) aspects of sacred art objects can contribute to their appreciation; in particular, through them young people can connect to their own or other spiritual and material, old and updated tradition(s).

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Keywords: Sacred art, educational landmarks, humanistic perspective, ethical, aesthetic and heritage aspects, Romanian Christian.



1. Introduction

Present in time as long as the human species, sacred art is thousands of years old; not exclusively a special section of artistic and religious expression, sometimes polarized in space and time, sacred art represents a substantial resource of aesthetic values. Sacred art can supply a solid ethical background and impact. Art in the religious context is called to act as ‘theology in colours’/words/sounds and to educate, as an inspiration in self-development and heritage-awareness.



Figure 01. – Photos (a- h) Stages in the restauration of the icon of Theotokos. Photographs taken by Stelian Onica

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Sacred art educates moral values

The role of sacred art rests in its core function of conveying traditional religious, moral values, with a potential to change education in humanities as well as visual education today. This role should not be neglected. The moral values of Christianity as a personal faith and a community belief are transferred into the everyday life of the community by artistic means and practices. In what is commonly a long-time effort, this involves, among other forms, (re)creative work, data collecting and archiving (Anastasiu et al., 1976).

Also, the potential of syncretic acts as liturgy has been strong enough to help preserve the identity of smaller or emigre groups (Vascenco, 2003).

2.2. Sacred art gives a sense of identity

A person with an artistic background can have stronger convictions and arguments in a world which shows a tendency to relativize values. Icons and murals as well as spiritual verse are called to educate people and give them a sense of belonging to a certain time and place.

3. Research Questions

The role of sacred art resides in its core function of conveying traditional religious, moral values, with a potential to change education in humanities as well as visual education today. This role should not be neglected. The moral values of Christianity as a person’s faith are transferred into the everyday life of the community by artistic means and practices. This collective effort involves, among other forms, (re)creative work, data collecting and archiving. Also, the potential of syncretic acts as liturgy has been strong enough to help preserve the identity of smaller or expatriate (emigre) groups.

The knowledge and study of the values of Sacred Art can facilitate the infusion of ethical and aesthetical principles which should lead to an appreciation of cultural-religious commodities and to the involvement in their protection, whether they are seen as heritage values or not. The first impression or appearance does not offer conclusive evidence or true answers. Further investigation can reveal hidden phenomena or a complex situation, which need minute work and take time and patience for clarification. An older painting, hidden by a newer repainting confronts the evasion of tradition (by visual surrogates) with its recuperation (by iconographic restoration). The need for professional restoration, which has been done professionally in Romania cannot be overstated (Anastasiu, et al., 1976).

Then, variations on the same theme offer the subtle performance of plastic nuances within the observance of some iconographic canons, as can be seen in the art of some ethnic communities (Russian Orthodox Old-Believers, Lipoveni, 'Lipovans') (Fedotov, 1991/1935; Melnikov, 2013)..

4. Purpose of the Study

The knowledge and study of the values of Sacred Art can facilitate the infusion of ethical and aesthetical principles which should lead to an appreciation of cultural-religious commodities and to the involvement in their protection, whether they are seen as heritage values or not.

Is sacred art still relevant for the young generations today? How is new artwork seen as compared to heritage values? What kind of ethical and aesthetical landmarks can one find in sacred art and humanist education? These questions have been raised by the authors, who, as educators, are in a position to ask them with every new generation of students.

4.1. Icon restoration and spiritual verse

This paper presents some icons and murals from some Romanian sources on which the authors have worked as well as some evidence from the spiritual and artistic life of a relatively-closed Christian Orthodox community church in Northern Romania (Melnikov, 2013). The mother-child love comes from the icon of Theotokos with the infant Jesus Christ. Various sacred images displayed in the church in the area reserved for women strengthen the same virtues of faith, hope and love guided by and guiding divine wisdom and devotion. While some of these images were made by the authors and their students, others were shown in connection to the practice of communal prayer.

5. Research Methods

This paper presents the results of observation carried out over a longer process of work in icon restoration, field work and archiving. Observation, data analysis, (socio) linguistic analysis and documentation have been involved in a complex methodology.

Documentation, research and restoration correlates a set of minute and long-time activities. Their results, which are not always public knowledge, are destined to keep and convey past messages which might otherwise disappear. Such essential ways (contributing to the development of knowledge) involve many fields of activity and usually take place in anonymity; neither of these fields, scientific, humanistic or artistic, can be considered more favoured or more important, because the diverse material expression of

concepts legitimates them by the very concrete evidence to which they constantly relate. This is why without documentation, observation, analysis, comparison, assessment and conservation-restauration any field is bereft spiritually and materially. The human being risks to be left without the necessary, important and multiple landmarks which let them make progress on the path of knowledge with increased discernment and responsibility. In fact, even if the reference in this paper are concerned with (the need of) sacred art, these landmarks do not target exclusively the faithful or/and people affiliated to iconographical art; they try to attract and raise the visual-artistic-religious-humanist awareness of anyone who sees the work. The following questions are asked in this process: What is a human being's task? What can one say about the human seed which has been shared with you by a work of art? What do you know and what do you do to keep it alive, in yourself and in the community? While these questions and methods to answer them involve the idea of *an open work*, researchers and authors observe the basic principle of restauration: never damage. In the Christian Orthodox faith, the icons are meant to emanate peace and induce a state of inner peace and concentration by the very canons of their creation. Renouncing the icons results in sliding to other ways of feeling and planes of ideas, as could be seen the 17th century icon, repainted in the 19th (or 20th) century.

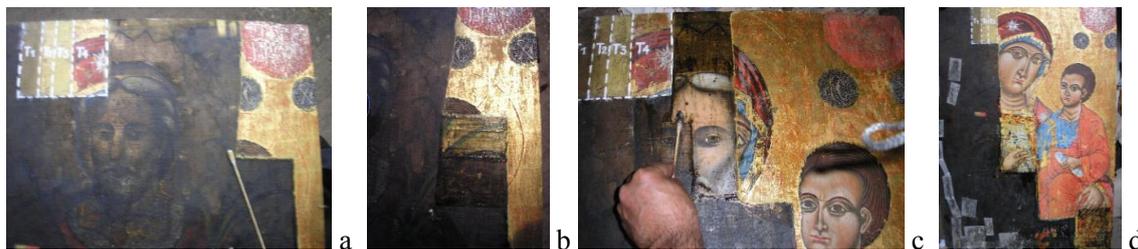
6. Findings

Many genuine values of Romanian national heritage are still unknown, mainly due to historical events. One can discover these values gradually, by combining the research methods of sciences, history, art, sociolinguistics etc. The art history research blends with the current scientific possibilities, especially in the restoration and conservation of cultural and heritage objectives.

6.1. Icon restauration

Sacred art features significantly among these Romanian paintings of the 17th-19th centuries. The actual rediscovery of real values, covered by the "matter of time", can be illustrated by some images of the phases of cleaning a painting on wood and also of an icon and a heritage object in the Orthodox cult (set of photos a-h in Figure 01). Using specific restoration methods of the art work the original painting dating from the end of the 17th century could be discovered under the color layers of the later naive painting of little artistic value, dating from the end of the 19th (20th) century. The latter painting, which shows realistic influences, was covered by a thick layer of adherent grime, which was carefully removed through repeated elimination, in order to excise all the accumulated excess. Repainting after two centuries the traditional icons of Theotokos Hodegitria by a naturalistic image of the Saint Martyr Menas can be seen as a wilful gesture made either in order to hide a valuable item from some danger or as sheer ignorance and a wish of modernization, in tone with other historic and cultural changes. In the latter half of the 19th century, most iconographic realization become non-canonical and conjunctural (as the superimposed image of Saint Menas shows). The recuperation of the original image by restauration produced a basic model, a definition and a symbol in a theological sense: Theotokos Hodegitria (Directress), in which the Byzantine tradition was preserved. With her left hand the Mother of God protects and holds the Holy Child, while her right hand shows the Way, the Truth, the Life. Christ is

shown as a mature child, His left hand holding a rotulus, with Sacred Writ and blessing with His right hand, according to the instructions of Dyonisius of Fournas's *Hermeneia* (Dionisie din Furna, 2000).



Photos a-b-c-d: Details in the process of cleaning and removing the repainting show the comparative difference from a plastic point of view between the decorative style of Byzantine influence of the original painting of Mother and Child (the end of 17th century), and the naturalistic image of St. Menas, a repainting (end of the 19th century or early 20th century).

Photos c-d: Details of the removing the repainting progressively reveal the initial writings and the image of the icon of Theotokos Hodegitria



Photos e-h: Revealing the initial image (Theotokos Hodegitria) on the 17th century icon, after the removing of the 19th repainting and of other restoration stages. The almost symmetrical gravity of the expression of the faces resonates with the asymmetrical parallelism of the hands on the background of the red vestments (symbolizing humanity, commitment, love, sacrifice) which covers their blue zones (a symbol of spirituality and celestial dimension). The golden uncreated light in the background is counterpointed by circles of inscriptions, personalized in colours and dimension for Theotokos and Child Jesus Christ. The sobriety of the faces appears as a counterbalance in a symmetrical spirit to the gestural resolution of the hands, which seem smaller, but wholly protective in their rectangular rhythmic. A monolith of a visual expression, the image is rigorous, balanced and harmonious. Eventually, after the contemplation of the icon, a feeling of suspension in internalization lingers and the feeling of material substance is transgressed.

Photos “ a- h”¹ - Stages in the restoration of the icon of Theotokos (Popăuți Monastery, Botoșani)

The Eight Sequences Shown In Figure 01 (A-H) Display The Precise Film Of A ‘Surgical’ Process On An Object, The Painting Layer Of An Icon Which Was Repainted And Blackened By Grime. By Cleaning And Chromatic Reintegration, The Icon Was Restored To Its Original Aspect, In Accordance With The Scientific Intervention Norms For Recovering The Genuine Image. An Artwork With Profound Empathy Towards The Human Experience, Expressing The Inwardness Of A Premonitory Sadness (The Passions Of Jesus Christ The Saviour) Through The Spiritualized Expressiveness Of Theotokos Hodegitria Was Thus Revealed; The Mother Of God Points Symbolically At The Way To Follow Jesus Christ, Represented As An Infant, Offering A Hieratical Blessing, In An Adult Gesture, With His Right

¹ All the photos in this paper (Figures 01-08) belong to the personal archives of its authors. Individual efforts of personal recording of images under different circumstances (of conservation-restauration and documentation) gain a copyright as by their exhibition they imply personal attitudes, punctual objectives and observation, mentioned in research carried out and briefly presented in this study.

Hand, In A State Of Inner Seriousness, With The Responsibility Of An Adult, While Holding, In The Other Hand, The Rotulus Of Knowledge To Be Transmitted And Followed. In Fact, No Humanistic Perspective Can Do Without Deep Religiosity. The Very Placement Of The Human-Devine Person In The Centre Points At The Importance Of Some Fundamental Values As Related To The Human Being, An Appreciation Initiated And Maintained By The Orthodox Faith. So, The Iconographic Canons Of The Christian Orthodox Religion Can Be Also Seen As A Philosophical Structure Which Orders And Guides; A Variety And Creative Plasticity Is Grafted On This Structure, In An Expressive Manner, In Time And Space. With Similar Subjects And Following The Same Model, Seemingly Identical, Orthodox Icons Are Never Totally Identical. While Showing Similarities, As People Do, In Orthodoxy, Icons Do Differentiate By Subtleties Of Visual Details, Just As Human Beings Who Make Them. So, Icons Invite One To Gather Oneself Out Of Despair, To Concentrate On Finding Out One's Own Spiritual Depths, To Ascend To The Divine.



Figures 02.-03. - Russian (Lipovan) Theotokos (St.Sergius Church, Climăuți); Photographs taken by Marina Vraciu.



Figure 04. - Our Lady of the Sign (Znamenie): Russian (Lipovan) icon, 19th c., ICEM Tulcea Museum Complex;

Figure 05. - Our Lady of the Sign (Znamenie) Russian icon, 18-19thc.

Figure 06. - Russian (Lipovan) icon, 19th c., Cetățuia Monastery, Iași;
Figures 04.-06. – Photographs care of Bogdan Cojocea

Other images of the Theotokos with the infant Jesus (Figures 04-06) present a centered image and a symbolic extension, full the joy of receiving and offering the heavenly message, by a prayer as an Axis Mundi of the relationship between reality and the transcending to the divine. Represented as praying (Oranta), Theotokos has the Child placed in the centre of her chest, next to her heart. She holds her hands

up in prayer to the Heavenly Fatehr. The iconographic representations of Theotokos show only typologies of iconographic programme, not a visual uniformity, as the indications in the *Hermeneia* are rather vague, sometimes only orientative. So, on stable canonical compositional structures one can creatively variate plastic and nuanced technical expression.

6.2. Religion and ethnic identity

The identity of the relatively-closed community of Russian Christian Old Believers in Romania, known as the Lipovans (*lipoveni*) has been defined in religious terms (Melnikov, 2013). Forced to leave their homeland by a church reform in 1667 which caused a Schism, the Old Believers found refuge and settled down in other countries and continents (Poland, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Asia, America, Australia) (Vascenco, 2003). They brought along icons, kept as family relics in every home, and built churches in their monasteries, villages, towns. The latter were painted by talented, often self-taught painters, decorated according to standard iconographic programmes.



07



08

Figure 07. – Murals.

Figure 08. -Russian (Lipovan) multiple icon, 18c. (St.Sergius Church, Climăuți).

Figures 07.-08. – Photographs taken by Marina Vraciu

Lipovan iconography shows a preference for some specific representations, such as the forty faces of the Theotokos, shown in Figure 08 above. Part of the traditional and compulsory education of any Lipovan, church-going, knowledge of Slavonic and ritual has created (and exported) a set of basic humanistic values. The strict division of women and men during liturgy in Old-Believers churches - the women enter through the west door and stand exclusively in the pro-nave - is reflected in the specific decorations in this part of the church: Theotokos (Figure 07). Other 'Lipovan' icons have lost their masters, but can safely rest in the welcoming Orthodox medium (Figure 06). Others yet are exhibited in museums (Figures 04, 05) in need of further attention.

The readings assigned to some icon feasts are accompanied by spiritual verses whose significance cannot be overlooked. Old Believers treasure a traditional Russian form of sacred poetry, the so-called

dukhovnye stikhi ('spiritual verses') (Melnikov, 2013). These verses are sung particularly during Advent and Lent and include apocryphal subjects such as the *Lament of the Theotokos (Plach Bogoroditsy)*. Their distribution in the area stands alone, as a subject to be assimilated and taught to all generations. (Figure 08). In Lipovan icons, the image of Theotokos tends to take over the human nature of the 'Lipovan' women and their round, kind smiling faces. Moreover, as in other East-Slavic iconographies which bear the imprint of local traditions, ornaments abound and create a rich but discreet texture in the haloes and in the background of the icon, in the uncreated light bring closer to any faithful by this decoration. The taste for the joy and beauty of life has a say and thereby naturalism gains room. Iconographic scenes take a progressive distance from the hieratic Byzantine tradition and tend to fall into a Westernized realism.

So, forms of plastic and literary art are vividly present in this strict community which manages to educate their young generation into the essential Christian moral values, as well as into the specific associated art forms.

At the interference between the canon of images, epic context and religious significance, the image of the icon brings together a complex of feelings and information; its mission is to educate, from a spiritual and humanist perspective, any onlooker or believer who discovers its inherent value through their own faith and receptivity towards the simultaneously received spiritual, ethic, aesthetic and heritage messages. In sacred art, these messages are conveyed along as educational and humanist landmarks; they tend to induce the reaching of the essence of being through sublimated forms of expression, which, in turn, illustrate the content that individualized them and the harmonious features that brought them together.

7. Conclusion

The questions the authors asked themselves have generated some observations and suggestions included in this study. The authors have collected data from the field of icon restoration, mural representation and sacred oral literature present in the life and work of a community living in Romania. The fact that young generations today have developed an interest in sacred art, the increasing number of schools of painting, both part of systematic and occasional (summer) education show an interest that has been 'exported' to Europe. Along with traditional arts and crafts, sacred art in Romania - either in the general community and in some local (ethnic) communities holds a special position.

The two aspects presented in the two iconographic situations: the hieratism of Byzantine tradition illustrated by Theotokos Hodegitria and the naturalism of 'Lipovan' iconographic representation have as plastic connecting points the rubicond images of Theotokos Orans, which belong to the Orthodox iconographic type; but by excessive visual expression, this frame is naturally overcome, the decorative techniques for showing the veneration of Sacred Persons and the enhancement of visual attraction are evidenced as an artistic option to be used.

The element of hieratism and austerity, of the awareness of the Saviour's sacrifice, which is bound to follow, the anticipation which informed the grave faces of the icon of Theotokos Hodegitria is paralleled by the element of joyful and serene invocation of divine protection, by the prayer oriented in a gesture to God - in the icon of Theotokos Orans with the Holy Child. In both cases the symbolic elements in the parent-child-divinity communion draw one's attention to the need and importance of asking and receiving divine protection, either with the feeling of a path taken to basic-reference religious values, or to those

situated in its axis, to accede to the divine from their own depths. The selected visual illustrations, beside their message as heritage values, contain some essential connotations without which human beings cannot find and maintain in time their positive sense of earthly life and their balance to be adopted as beings.

In other words, religiosity expressed here in a Christian Orthodox sense is a component of the human being, irrespective of its degree of exteriorization in a spiritual and material sense; from a theoretical, concrete, dogmatic and artistic perspective, sacred art represents a set of symbolic vehicles for the journey of sharing diverse typologies of religiosity.

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