

CHURCH UNION IN TRANSYLVANIA AND ITS IMPACT ON VISUAL ART

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Abstract: The present paper deals with the topic of intercultural exchange between the Latin West and the Orthodox East in the regions of the Carpathian Mountains in the period between 17th and 18th centuries. The author focuses on the diffusion of Orthodox icons into Roman Catholic churches, as well as on the diffusion (and, later, the acculturation) of western glass painted images in Transylvania. These phenomena were made possible by the political, sociological, and cultural context at the time, triggered mainly by the Union of the Orthodox Church with the Roman Catholic Church.

Key words: Latin West, Orthodox East, intercultural exchange, visual culture, diffusion, 17th-18th centuries

Introduction

The present paper deals with the topic of the diffusion of cultures between the Latin Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches in Europe, more specifically in the regions of the Carpathian Mountains in the period between 17th and 18th centuries. Given the political act of the Union of the Orthodox Church with the Roman Catholic Church in Transylvania, concretely of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church and the Romanian Orthodox Church being united with the Roman Catholic Church, there have been many attempts, some of them crowned by success, to make use of elements specific to each of the two religious cultures to form a bridge between these Churches. In this study we shall

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look at ways in which the union of the Churches has been reflected in visual arts. The author focuses on the aspect of diffusion and acculturation of Orthodox icons in some of the Roman Catholic churches, as well as on the diffusion of Roman Catholic iconography and the acculturation of western glass painted images in Orthodox Transylvania.

1. Historiography

There has been much work done on the topic of “national” art. Despite the fact that the Carpathian region has always been inhabited by a multicultural society, the various religious and ethnic groups have been treated by scholars separately, and not from the perspective of dynamic intercultural exchange, where phenomena of diffusion, acculturation, or resistance have often occurred. The role of art in the region of east-central Europe and in particular in Transylvania began being reflected by scholars only in the 19th-20th centuries. These were mainly authors from Poland, Austria, or Austria-Hungary, which meant that they saw Roman Catholic art as being superior to others due to the central role played by Rome, considered by them to be the cultural capital of the civilised world¹. It was only at the time when the educated generations of Orthodox scholars from the young Kingdoms of Serbia and Romania began flourishing that research on this topic became multi-focused².

Nevertheless, in the classical handbook on the history the Romanian Orthodox Church written by Mircea Păcurariu, the chapters on Orthodox culture offer no place for a critical approach to Orthodox art or to a comparison with other church art (i.e. Roman Catholic or Protestant art)³. Some Orthodox theologians believe that, after the union of

¹ The cultural supremacy of Rome was questioned by Joseph Strzygowski. He opened a discussion with his slogan *Orient oder Rom* in his book *Beiträge zur Geschichte der spätantiken und frühchristlichen Kunst* (published in Leipzig by J. C. Hinrichs in 1900, 1901). On this topic, see my study: P. BALCÁREK, “Florian Zapletal, Josef Strzygowski a vídeňská škola dějin umění” (Florian Zapletal, Josef Strzygowski and the Vienna School of Art History), in: *Florian Zapletal. Život a dílo. Sborník příspěvků z konference Muzea Komenského v Přerově*, Přerov, 2006, 139-151.

² In the Kingdom of Romania mainly by N. Iorga and I. D. Ștefănescu, for the Kingdom of Serbia and later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia see L. MIRKOVIČ and G. A. OSTROGORSKIJ.

³ Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Romane*, vol. 2, București, 2002, chapters

Churches, the changes that affected the former Orthodox believers were mainly negative. What do these changes consist in? Did they slowly lead the Uniate believers into the bosom of Roman Catholic piety? Were there any aspects of Roman Catholic devotion that were transformed as a result of this political event? Although some Orthodox historians question the validity of the act of union of the Churches in Transylvania, it has become obvious that there have been transformations in either Churches brought about by the impact they have had on each other, at the sociological, as well as the artistic levels.

2. Historical Background

The Transylvanian Church union was the result of the expansion of the Roman Catholic Church to the eastern territories re-conquered by the Hapsburg monarchy. The Hapsburgs expanded from the territory of today's Austria towards the former Turkish vassals – mainly the Protestant princes of Transylvania. The ideological key role for the Counter-Reformation was played by the Council of Trent (organised periodically between 1545 and 1563). The decrees of the Council of Trent were the result of self-criticism concerning corruption within the Roman Church, as well as of the need to fight against Protestant theology. The Council also drew new directions for the Inquisition and set an updated list of *libri prohibiti*; it emphasized the role of the Saint Virgin Mary and focused on mission among pagans and the non-united Churches, with special attention paid to the popular masses.

The leading figures in Transylvania, shifting the Protestants and, partly, the Orthodox people into the bosom of the Roman Church, were the Jesuits. The victory of their missions was ensured by their intense educational programme, i.e. the foundation of Jesuit seminaries with international teachers, who taught in the universal Latin language, and where the local poor students received scholarships. Such were the Jesuit seminaries in Olomouc (Olmütz) in Moravia (today's Czech Republic), in Wrocław (Breslaw) in Silesia (today's Poland), Collegium Romanum in Rome, Lviv-Lemberg seminary in Galicia (today's Ukraine), the Jesuit Academy of Cluj or the Gheorghe Lazăr National College in Sibiu

(Transylvania), etc.. Local native Orthodox and Protestant youth were strongly supported by the Jesuit seminary admission policy.

Once the position of the Hapsburgs and of the Roman Catholic Church in Transylvania was strengthened, the threat coming from Protestantism or popular Orthodoxy became less imminent. Rome once again began to assert its universality to the Romanian nation. Multi-ethnicity in the Roman Church became an important missionary aspect, given especially the Jesuits' missions as far as the Americas, Africa, India and eastern Asia. Arts were an effective vehicle of articulating the message of the Catholic Church's doctrinal dominance over the local Christians. The Jesuits' impact during their missions was profound; all over the world, one can find a very similar style of art in Roman Catholic churches from the Counter-Reformation period. Today this style is called "international baroque". It is a universal style that also incorporates Orthodox icons as an integral part of the Roman Catholic "heritage".

3. The Influence of Orthodox Icons and Theology in the Roman Catholic Church in Transylvania

Despite the different approaches to religious art, the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches in Transylvania developed some common stylistic and iconographic aspects. Diffusion was strong on both sides. Artistically speaking, Rome remained in closer touch with the Netherlands with its most progressive art (i.e. P. P. Rubens). At the same time, Roman Catholic iconography gradually incorporated Eastern Orthodox traditional art, such as icons – those miraculous vehicles on the way towards God. This was due to the popularity of such paintings among the masses of Orthodox believers, who were to be united with Rome, but also to the Jesuits' interest in antiquities.

A typical example in the 17th -18th centuries was the icon from the Transylvanian village of Nicula, which has a special place in the inter-denominational relation of the two Churches. The history of the icon has several, mainly oral, versions: a Roman Catholic one, an Orthodox Romanian one, and the version given by the landowner in the Nicula village.

The Roman Catholic story mentions the Jesuit Church (*Biserica Iezuiților*) in Cluj-Napoca as the first place of Roman Catholic worship

built in Transylvania by the representatives of the Counter-Reformation. This church has a miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary, originally from Nicula. It has been recorded that in 1699, in the period of the union of the Orthodox Romanians with Rome, a number of people reported having seen the icon shed tears.

In the Orthodox version it is related that, on 15th February 1694, a few Austrian officers came into the church and, while they were admiring the holy icon, they noticed it was weeping. The tears were coming out of the eyes of the Holy Mother of God. They ran and brought the priest and all the villagers and they all saw the tears that were falling from the icon. The holy icon kept weeping for 26 days, people would come and wipe the tears. There were many sick people who came and touched the tears and were healed.

The version given by Count Szigmond von Kornis from the village of Mănăstirea (in Hungarian: Szent Benedek) near Cluj is that he took the icon to his chateau, but the Romanian peasants asked it back and threatened the count with the burning of his castle if the icon was not returned. The Emperor decided that the icon should be placed in a newly built church, which will be part of a monastery to be founded by the owner of the land, Count Kornis, near to the place where the icon had originally been. Therefore, the count built the church on the hills near Nicula village and placed the icon there.

It is important to mention that the castle of Count Szigmond in Mănăstirea also had a copy of the icon of the Nicula Mother of God carved in stone and placed above the gate at the main entrance to the castle. According to the monks at the Orthodox Nicula Monastery, the stone copy of that icon is nowadays preserved in the museum of their monastery.

Which version of the story is the correct one is of lesser importance than the fact that the icon from Nicula eventually played an important role in the unification of the Transylvanian people with Rome, at the same time spreading the purely Orthodox iconography of the Mother of God to the western environment of the upper ruling classes and the Roman Church. In fact, this Orthodox icon was venerated by the local Orthodox village population, as well as by their landowner, Count Szigmond von Kornis, in his private church and, according to the Jesuit version, also by

the Roman Catholic believers who reported this icon to have made miracles in the Jesuit Church in Cluj.

The pilgrimages organised by the Armenian Uniate Church and the Armenian Uniate monastery in Gherla played an important role in the diffusion of the phenomenon of devotion to the icon of Nicula within the Roman Catholic circles. The printed paper icons and glass icons of the Mother of God from Nicula have been the means of transmission of this iconography⁴.

Besides the image of the Mother of God as such, there was another important aspect transmitted from Orthodox theology to the Roman Catholic world: the fact that there is no need to search for the original of an icon in order to venerate it. Orthodoxy teaches us that the copy of an image/icon has the same value as its original, through the faith in the saint depicted in it – and this belief became again an aspect common to both Churches at this time. The Council of Nicaea, i.e. the Seventh Ecumenical Church Council in the year 787, had attempted to reconcile all quarrelling parties. Nevertheless, the outcome of the debates at this Council had been incorrectly translated and transmitted to the West, to the Frankish Church. At the court of Charlemagne and in the Frankish dioceses there was thus no understanding for the Byzantine symbolic theology of the *image* and *likeness*. Western theologians had a simplistic, literal understanding of icons and were not able to distinguish between *veneration* and *adoration*. Frankish non-symbolic theology treated Byzantine symbolic theology as “Greek”, “unbiblical”, even “schismatic,” practically led the Church of the transalpine countries to iconoclastic Calvinism. Due to the incorporation of Orthodox icons back into the liturgical life of the Roman Catholic Church from the 17th century onwards, this simplistic approach to iconography in the Western world has eventually been overcome.

One can easily find similar stories such as those about Nicula in other countries, e.g. in Poland. The Roman Catholic Church in Poland

⁴ On the Nicula icon and on glass icons in general, see: I. DANCU/D. DANCU, *Folk Glass-painting in Romania*, Meridiane Publishing House, București, 1982, especially pp. 22-26; more extensively see I. DANCU/D. DANCU, *Pictura țărănească pe sticlă*, Editura Meridiane, București 1975, especially pp. 40-47. On the miracle working icon from Nicula, compare: E. PAPP FABER, *Our Mother's Tears, Ten Weeping Madonnas in Historic Hungary*, New Bedford, Massachusetts, 2006, 57-62.

needed support against the Muscovite Empire which was expanding to the west. It was mainly in the 17th-18th centuries that the Roman Catholics in Poland began using icons into their churches. The Polish-Russian border and the Hungarian-Romanian zone were buffer zones, with a Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant mixture of populations, and such diffusion or intercultural exchanges were commonly expected.

Given the expansion of Jesuit missionary work, it is not surprising that, in the central part of the Hapsburg Empire, in regions such as Bohemia, Moravia, or Silesia, we find a cultural situation similar to that in Transylvania. The land of the Bohemian kingdom was distant enough to feel secure in what concerns Russian and, at that time, also Turkish influence, but in these territories the influence of the Eastern Orthodox culture came with the Counter-Reformation missionaries. It was the policy of Post-Trident Roman Catholic Church to attract masses of former Protestant believers to the bosom of the Roman Church by means of miracle-working icons. Thus, the Roman Catholic Church incorporated Orthodox icons into its churches in Austria. Icons were not only liturgical art venerated by masses of former Protestant believers, but they were also present in the majority of Roman Catholic shrines, on Holy Hills, by Holy Springs, a.s.o.. Icons also served as objects of private devotion for members of all social classes. In the same way as Count Szigmond von Kornis venerated the miraculous icon from Nicula, Prince Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz-Rietberg, the Chancellor of Empress Mary Theresa, placed a copy of a Byzantine miracle-working icon above the main entrance of his château Slavkov (Austerlitz) near Brno (today's Czech Republic). On 6th December 1805, a treaty between the victorious Napoleon and the Russian Tsar Alexander I. and the Hapsburg Emperor Francis I. was signed in the chateau of Slavkov; coming into the building by the main entrance, the participants might have well noticed the protecting Orthodox icon above them.

4. Roman Catholic Iconographic Techniques and Models Acculturated in Orthodox Iconography

In what concerns visual art in the liturgical life of Counter-Reformation, after the Trident Council the Roman Catholic Church stressed the role of a realistic presentation of the Biblical narratives or the

saints' lives, rather than incidental, imaginary moments of "intellectual" or "metaphysical" artistic interpretation of Biblical events. For example, the Jesuits replaced the gothic altarpieces with large, mainly baroque, naturalistic paintings visible from a large distance, while the original carved wooden altarpieces – the former pride of many Hungarian late medieval cities (such as Levoča in Upper Hungary, today's Slovakia) – were abandoned. In the Roman Catholic Church at the time, art had the simple role of encouraging piety. The source of such iconography were the influential writings of the Jesuit Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621)⁵. The art of the Counter-Reformation pointed at topics such as the *Repentance of Peter* (or the *Denial of Peter*), images typically showing *Saint Peter in tears*, often with his hands clasped, sometimes with the crowing cock in the background. Thus, the visual programme of the Roman Catholic churches stressed the emotional side of the presented characters, placing together also images such as *Repentant St Mary Magdalen* and *St Virgin Mary Praying* without Jesus, often with her hands clasped.

There has been a phenomenon of diffusion of this kind of iconography into the Orthodox churches, e.g. the famous icon of the Virgin Mary naturalistically depicted, with clasped hands, therefore not holding the child Jesus Christ in her arms, at the Sihăstria Monastery in Moldavia. Some of the monasteries in Bucovina have taken over another iconographic theme taken from Jesuite printed books, i.e. the various stages of punishment and torture of the sinful in the fire of hell.

Less theologically harmful was the diffusion among the Orthodox Transylvanian population of the purely western technique of paintings on glass, which in this region became a widely spread phenomenon applied to Orthodox iconography. The Roman Catholic Church in Transylvania, by means of glass icons, tried to spread its theology of the Immaculate Virgin Mary Assumpta or to promote western Roman Catholic saints,

⁵ S. MICHALSKI, *Reformation and the Visual Arts: The Protestant Image Question in Western and Eastern Europe*, London, Routledge, 1993; G.G. COULTON, "Art and the Reformation Reviews", in *Art Bulletin*, no.11 /1928; J.L. KÖRNER, *The Reformation of the Image*, The University of Chicago Press, 2004; J.B. KNIPPING, *Iconography of the Counter Reformation in the Netherlands: Heaven on Earth*, 2 vols, De Graff, 1974.

such as Saint Leopold, Saint Rosalia, etc⁶. However, the technique of painting icons on glass was incorporated into the Romanian national cultural tradition by preserving most of its Orthodox aspects (Orthodox iconography, Orthodox saints, the use of gold, etc.).

The reason for some elements of Orthodox iconographic tradition missing in religious paintings on glass in Transylvania (sometimes it being hard to distinguish an Orthodox from a non-Orthodox glass icon) is that, after the period of union in the 18th century, the Orthodox elite in this region, such as Orthodox bishops or aristocrats, had been scattered⁷. These would normally protect the purity of their flock's faith and support Orthodox culture and education (e.g. high quality art).

Conclusion

The topic of the union of Churches in Transylvania and its impact on visual arts could be treated only as a dynamic process, possibly looked at from the perspective of the phenomena of diffusion, acculturation, or resistance; such a theme cannot be circumscribed into a "final and firm" conclusion concerning the art of the respective society. A more genuine view can be gained by dealing with events that took place in a strictly defined territory and within a limited period of time.

The union of Churches is not only a matter of Church representatives signing a legal document: it has taken place also at level of artistic, intercultural exchange.

In Transylvania, the mission of the Roman Catholic Church was made more effective by the use of Orthodox icons, which attracted more converts than the Protestant denominations at the time.

The Orthodox theological aesthetics and Church teaching about the liturgical value of a copy of an icon was taken over by the Roman Catholic Church beginning with the 18th century, which led to the multiplication of images of miracle working icons by using various techniques (prints,

⁶ *Icoana transilvăneană pe sticlă, între devoțiunea populară și patrimoniul cultural*. J. Nicolae (ed.), Editura Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2016, 217-255.

⁷ E. Lupu, *Ctitori și ctitorii la curbura Carpaților în veacurile XIV-XVIII*, Bibliotheca archaeologica Moldaviae XVI., V. Spinei, V. Mihăilescu-Birliba (eds.), Doxologia, Iași 2011, see especially chapters III., IV., V., and document no. 4.

of God of Vladimir. The icon was the protector of the Roman Catholic aristocratic family of Count Caretto-Millesimo from the Kingdom of Bohemia, copper engraving, 1st half of the 18th century.

Moravia from the book *Gemma Moraviae*, 1736. The ship represents the Roman Catholic Church of Moravia, the bishops on the boat are the first Great Moravian bishops Saints Cyril and Methodius. The two saintly missionary are baptizing the first Moravian king Svatopluk. On the boat sail is depicted the miracle working Byzantine icon of the Mother of God from the Church of the Ascension of the Virgin Mary in the Augustinian Monastery in Brno. The original icon is dated back to the 12th-13th century.



Baroque copy of the icon (dated back to the middle of the 18th century), mounted above the main entrance of the Château Slavkov (Austerlitz) near Brno, Czech Republic. It is a miracle working icon and protector of the château of Prince Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz-Rietberg. The original icon comes from Byzantium and it is dated back to the 12th-13th century; today it is located above the main altar of the Church of the Ascension of the Virgin Mary in the Augustinian Monastery in Brno.

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