

# Painted glory - Romanian Monasteries

Carmen Sabau and Isabelle Sabau

Independent Scholar, USA and

Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois, USA.

[isabau@niu.edu](mailto:isabau@niu.edu)

**Abstract:** The painted monasteries of Romania provide a unique and irreplaceable window into the 14<sup>th</sup> through the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The frescoes present a vision of the existential experience of their creators, who memorialized the sacredness of their spiritual world and the concrete reality of their dignity and fierce struggles for independence.

## 1. Introduction

The Monasteries of Bucovina and Moldavia represent both the preservation of established styles, mainly Byzantine, and the innovative synthesis of native imagery that synchronizes the natural landscape with the architectural design, fusing the spiritual world with abstractions of reality. Situated at the crossroads between East and West, this highly coveted geographical area stands as a sentinel and silent witness, visually displaying the dignity of its fierce freedom loving defenders. The monasteries, hidden in peaceful valleys, surrounded by the majestic chain of the Carpathian Mountains, echo the natural landscape and visually proclaim the unshaken religious faith and spirituality of their founders. Their imposing stone walls attest to the existential blending of the sacred and the secular, the mystical and practical revealing their heritage of refuge and documenting the struggles of their independence loving population. The uniqueness of these monasteries, vividly painted on both, the external and internal wall surfaces, bespeaks of historical events from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries often cloaked in religious metaphors.

From the earliest times of human habitation, the dialogue between the sacred and the secular world has been rendered visible through

various means of visual representation, from cave walls to the most elaborate later religious edifices. The ancient Roman world with its vast connection of roads and sea routes greatly enabled the spread of Christianity, even though the Christians were often persecuted during the first three centuries throughout the Roman Empire. And yet, apostles, saints and martyrs managed to spread the word and succeeded in converting large portions of the multiple nations that encompassed the Roman world. In the territory of present-day Romania, which was conquered and rendered into a Roman province during the reign of Trajan in the second century, common era; the original residents, the Dacians, soon encountered Christianity which became intertwined with their indigenous beliefs. Over the centuries, the Romanian provinces embraced Christian beliefs and were greatly influenced by the Byzantine church from Constantinople. Moldavia became an independent state in the 14th century, achieving its apogee during the anti-Ottoman crusades of Princes Stephen the Great and Peter Rares. It was during these centuries under the rule of a number of strong princes, in particular the venerated Stephen the Great, that the majority of the monasteries and churches in Moldavia and Bucovina were built. These churches provide a unique synthesis of Byzantine, Gothic and even ancient Dacian

solar cult elements. Although these Romanian territories were often conquered and subjected to various barbarian invasions over the centuries, the populace remained pious and retained its strength and faith in their own dignity, through their sincere devotion to Christianity. Since the 1990's, UNESCO World Heritage recognized a number of these important monuments for their universal value and uniqueness to protect and preserve them for future generations.[1] This paper will discuss some of the important monuments and their unique styles and historical significance.

## 2. The Monuments

The monasteries are situated in the serene valleys protected by the imposing chain of the Carpathian Mountains, which served as both reminders of the majesty of God's creation and as fundamental material for the building of edifices to glorify the Creator. The symbolic protection of the mountains is reflected in the stone walls surrounding the monastic complexes and the foundation for the churches. The serene setting of the monastic complexes invites pilgrims to seek spiritual communion with the mystery of creation. The monastic complexes share in their standard layout, a large rectangle of stone walls with an impressive tower at the gate. The enclosed space contains all the necessary components to retain the monastery's independence and thus ensure a self-sufficient environment for the monks similar to the medieval monasteries throughout Europe. The central church rises within the enclosure echoing the durability of the encircling mountains in the surrounding landscape and contrasts with them by the richness of its iconography presenting a literal theology in color. As Mircea Eliade explained, the church centers the environment and provides an axis mundi, which makes communication between the terrestrial and the heavenly realms possible: "...the church or monastery represented both the Cosmos and the Heavenly Jerusalem or Paradise...the sanctuary as imago mundi and 'Center of the

World'". [2] To further emphasize this vertical axis, the churches often include a tall steeple situated at the cross between the naos and the holy of holies. Entry to the church takes place through a pronaos, which leads to the main nave and focuses the attention on the iconostasis that separates the sacred space of the altar, revealing and concealing it at the same time. During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the Brancovean style added a porch decorated with arches and intricately carved columns.

Uniquely, these churches were painted on both, the outside and the inside, with brilliant frescoes bespeaking of piety and faith "a glorious parchment imbued with blue and fully adorned with figures and scenes." [3] The frescoes are perfectly adapted to the architectural background with scenes separated and framed by strips of dark color hemmed in by white lines.[4] Meandering stalks and palm ornaments echo the decorations of gravestones, characteristically found throughout the area. The patrimony of the nation is concentrated in the synthesis of spiritual, cultural artistic and incidental history yet transcends to universal values. Professor Mircea Eliade explained: "The great mystery consists in the very fact that the sacred is made manifest... for in making itself manifest the sacred limits and 'historicises' itself...the sacred accepted self-limitation." [5] The importance here lies in the Incarnation of Christ in a particular place and at a specific historical time. Thomas Altizer elaborates: "This revolutionary transformation of the archaic religion was grounded in a new theophany, a new manifestation of the sacred as a personal God who ceaselessly intervenes in history, who reveals his will through events." [6] The God of Christianity is a personal God who can be directly accessible and His presence can be directly experienced in the Church. The aesthetic program that developed in the Orthodox Church strictly adhered to the idea of rendering the invisible visible and thus provided the viewer with opportunities for the contemplation of divine

presence within the edifice. The Church as the 'house of God' displayed a glorious vision of the heavens. The Eucharistic liturgy provided the answer to the mystery of the Trinity, by a re-enactment of the sacred drama and communion with God.[7] The centrality of the Eucharist was amplified by rich hymnody, elaborate ceremonials and extensive decoration, which continuously emphasized the fact that God had revealed Himself to humanity in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

In the Moldavian churches and monasteries, the traditional Byzantine iconography is rendered soberly and yet expressively, the themes are symbolic, arranged in frames and horizontal bands. And yet the individuality of the artists is visible. The figures appear monumental, moving slowly with restraint gestures and serene calm, displaying the inner spirit of strong individuals determined and laconic. Byzantine models were modified to reflect the physiognomy of the sincere peasants who joined the army and became heroes, defending their freedom against the hordes of invaders and conquerors.

In the 15th century, a new style arose as the forms were rendered more complex, inviting aesthetic contemplation and the narrative aspect was more emphasized. The vegetal and floral decorations became more elaborate and florid in the horizontal and vertical bands that separated the narrative scenes. A remnant of the influence of Byzantine mosaics remains in the large eyes and deep inner gaze of the faces. The most common themes evoke the request that the divinity may aid in saving the land from its various barbarian attacks and proclaim confident faith in final victory. The Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist are shown as intercessors for the populace asking for compassion. However, the details incorporate local traditions and folklore. The solar cult of living fire and the solar symbol of the rose, the spiral shape of the rope indicating an aspiration toward infinity and union with divinity reveal the continuity of beliefs leading back to ancient

Dacia. [8] The figures and symbols are rendered with an expressive line of discreet eloquence, a visual language that is energetic, direct and succinct. On the South Western wall, the decoration was traditionally reserved for the founders of the monastery, who are shown in solemn procession holding the model of the church and placed on a vivid blue background studded with golden stars. Patron saints mediate as intercessors with the divine, while military saints lead the procession further in the nave toward the apsis of the altar led by St. John the New, the patron saint of Moldavia. [9] One of the most important scenes is the Last Judgment, which combined the opposite elements of motion and stillness, of disorder and equilibrium, of fantasy and reality, of lyricism and crude realism. These monasteries attest to the deep conviction and integrity of the people, who persevered, in spite of continuous adversity and external threats, to maintain their identity and beliefs. Despite regional differences, the hieratic linear style of the images permeated all Romanian lands attesting to their common ethnicity, language and creed.

### 3. Iconography

Turning to specific examples we will start with the most famous monastery, Voronet, near Suceava and the town of Gura Humorului, built by Stephen the Great in 1488 on a long and narrow riverbank. The structure and the interior spatial solutions were linked to the Byzantine and south Slavic tradition while the exterior, with its buttresses along with the door and window frames were related to Western European High Gothic. [10] The Moldavian craftsmen, although employing all Byzantine motifs, added new themes and elements from their day to day life and environment with a new coloring technique using mostly blue. The most remarkable of the frescoes belongs to the narrow west wall, where, squeezed between two long abutments one can witness as in a monumental picture, the Last Judgment, seen in the most original form of all those to be found in Byzantine church art. Starting at

Jesus's feet and progressively widening is a red river of fire, in which sinners burn on their way to Hell, where the black devil awaits sitting on the multiple tailed crocodile-like animal as on a throne. On both sides of the central axis two groups of people are painted. To the left, guided by St Peter, are those who will make it to Heaven, to the right, scolded by Moses who makes a violent gesture with his right hand while holding the stone tablets with the 10 Commandments in his left hand are those who, squeezed against one another are doomed to eternal suffering in Hell. Behind them a group of Jews and other heretics can be seen followed by a clearly distinguishable thick horde of Turks followed by nonbelievers, the pagans. They wear expensive clothes and they are frowning.[11] In 1547, the Metropolitan Bishop of Moldavia, Grigore Roșca, added the exonarthex to the west end of the church. The small windows, their rectangular frames of crossed rods and the receding pointed or shouldered arches of the interior doorframes are Gothic. The south and north doors of the exonarthex of 1547 have rectangular frames, which indicate a transition period from Gothic to Renaissance. However, above them, on each wall is a tall window with a flamboyant Gothic arch. The whole west façade is without any openings, which indicates that the intention of Metropolitan Roșca was since the beginning to reserve it for frescoes. The exonarthex is a rectangular space with a transversal barrel vault. The west wall is without an opening, but on both lateral walls, there is an entrance and a tall Gothic window. During the half century that separates the paintings of the exonarthex from those of the naos, Moldavian art had evolved from sober and rigorous to more complex, decorative and lively. Floral decorations fill all available empty space, divide scenes and registers, and accentuate architectural elements such as niches and arches. The clothes of the figures turn from simple into sumptuous, and the bleak landscapes are now filled with vegetation.

Details win ground where earlier spiritual intensity and austerity dominated. Another typical fresco usually located on the South exterior wall is the Tree of Jesse encircled by the bright blue background and displaying chromatic harmony. A characteristic feature of the churches, which signifies that the church was dedicated by a prince, is a prominent steeple decorated on the inside with the traditional Pantocrator surrounded by archangels, seraphs, prophets and apostles. Other iconographic details in the naos, such as the Virgin and Child enthroned, the Deesis, the main events from the Life of Jesus, the Passion cycle and the Liturgical calendar, complete the interior decorations combining archaic poetry with the mystery and sacredness of the church.

### Conclusion

These cycles re-appear in all the major monastic environments of Voronet, Moldovita, Humor, Sucevita emphasizing the synthesis of the divergent forces from the East and the West while at the same time, assimilating the natural landscape that surrounds them and fusing ancient beliefs with existential history. Henry Focillon described the significance of these monasteries "Romanian medieval art is a testimony of the past, the rulers and tumultuous history...There is an immemorial force expressed by means of an art which conveys the profound and permanent aspirations of the national soul." [12]

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