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Conservação e restauro



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EDITORIAL

O presente número de *O Ideário Patrimonial*, tal como o anterior, publica alguns artigos com características diversas, desde uma inscrição da Idade Moderna, ou talvez mais antiga, às iluminuras baixo medievais de manuscritos romenos, frescos e escultura religiosa existentes em igrejas ortodoxas do mesmo país. Os temas relativos à Roménia fazem parte da investigação de doutoramento de três alunos da Universidade Nacional de Artes, em Bucareste. Trata-se de uma boa oportunidade de conhecer este rico património da Europa de Leste, menos divulgado no ocidente, sendo os trabalhos em questão profusamente ilustrados.

O primeiro texto, intitulado *Na cidade da Guarda – a importância do poço*, escrito em colaboração por Dulce Helena Borges e José d’Encarnação aborda uma inscrição existente no lintel de um edifício do século XVI ou XVII, situado na zona antiga da Guarda que, apesar de já ser conhecida, não tinha ainda sido convenientemente estudada. A importância desta epígrafe, em pedra eventualmente reutilizada, relaciona-se com a localização do poço da cidade, sendo a inscrição dada a conhecer através de fotografia e de desenho técnico.

Segue-se, da autoria de Elena-Teodora Necula, *Preliminary research of manuscript miniatures on parchment preserved in Romanian collections*. A autora debruça-se sobre a arte de decoração de manuscritos em pergaminho através de materiais preciosos na Roménia, entre os séculos XIV e XV. A sua investigação é um contributo importante para uma melhor compreensão das técnicas utilizadas, oferecendo ainda a possibilidade de se efetuarem comparações entre tradições culturais e áreas geográficas. Este artigo aborda ainda problemáticas de conservação e restauro relativamente aos materiais estudados.

O terceiro artigo, elaborado por Ioniceanu Lăcrămioara, denomina-se *Garment as an identity discourse: power, faith, and representation in votive portraiture from Lesser Wallachia (18th–19th centuries)*. O autor estuda retratística votiva dos séculos XVIII/ XIX, onde se pode observar um discurso identitário, em que as elites emergentes, o clero, mercadores e artesãos empregam o espaço sagrado do nártex de algumas igrejas da Valáquia Menor (Oltenia) para codificar aspirações sociais e políticas. Tal como no texto anterior, este trabalho aborda também problemáticas de conservação e restauro.

O último artigo intitula-se *Ecclesial sculpture and polychromy: from Romanian heritage to European perspectives*, sendo da autoria de Laura Avramescu. Trata-se de um texto que explora o papel da policromia na escultura eclesiástica romena, focando-se nas suas dimensões teológicas, artísticas e técnicas no âmbito de contextos daquele país, mas também a nível europeu. A investigação levada a cabo pela autora demonstra

que a policromia na escultura religiosa constitui um fenómeno cultural complexo, integrando matéria, simbolismo e função litúrgica, refletindo, nas suas palavras, uma teologia de transfiguração visual, onde cor e ouro incorporam presença divina e comunhão espiritual.

Aqui fica esta pequena apresentação dos textos agora publicados, como um convite à sua leitura.

dezembro de 2025

Fernando Augusto Coimbra

Diretor

NA CIDADE DA GUARDA – A IMPORTÂNCIA DO POÇO

IN GUARDA CITY – THE IMPORTANCE OF THE WELL

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Resumo

A inscrição gravada em mui antiga casa na zona velha da cidade da Guarda, embora não tenha passado despercebida, certo é que ainda se não pensara a sério numa tentativa de a ler e, conseqüentemente, atribuir-lhe a importância histórica que, afinal, detém, por localizar o poço da cidade.

Palavras-chave: epigrafia urbana; cidade da Guarda; abastecimento de água; poço; nascentes.

Abstract

The real signification of an ancient inscription engraved in a very ancient house of the city of Guarda, in the northeast of Portugal, is here explained for the first time: in that place was localised the main well of the city.

Key-words: urban epigraphy; city of Guarda (Portugal); water supply; well; springs.

São por demais bem conhecidas as regras de construção em área urbana. Há, em todos os aglomerados, regras específicas, que se prendem com as características do solo, em primeiro lugar, e, depois, com o plano diretor previamente aprovado, de molde a dar ao conjunto a necessária funcionalidade, em termos de eficaz gestão do espaço e tendo em conta o bem-estar da população residente.

Já lá vão mais de vinte anos que um empreendedor decidiu comprar junto à chamada Porta do Sol ou da Estrela, à entrada nascente da cidade da Guarda, um terreno, na mira da construção. Dava mesmo jeito levantar ali um edifício, pela oportunidade da sua localização na cidade. Só que aconteceu depois o que não se esperava: facilmente tudo ali ficava encharcado, mal caía uma chuvada maior. Por outro lado, a proximidade às muralhas, património classificado e sujeito a regras, acabou por também condicionar profundamente o propósito idealizado. E o projeto ficou sem efeito.

Foi, então, que, em conversa de rua (como sói dizer-se), em comentário ao ocorrido, recordaram os mais velhos que por aí se situavam outrora as melhores hortas. Ali havia as melhores terras, cresciam as melhores couves e demais produtos hortícolas. Era como que a horta da cidade. O terreno, parecia, ressumbrava, a mostrar que o lençol freático não era aí despiciendo.

Havia, porém, por perto construções com ar de nobreza, que não passaram despercebidas, por exemplo, a Virgílio Ferreira, que as referiu num dos seus livros (Fig. 1). Também despercebido não passava um estranho letreiro (Fig. 2) patente numa casa que, em tempos idos, decerto fora construída aproveitando a parede da muralha medieval bem junto a uma das portas, a já referida Porta do Sol ou da Estrela. Está o edifício localizado fora do perímetro da muralha; contudo, o portal onde se encontra o lintel com a inscrição mostra-se biselado, remetendo assim para uma construção dos séculos XVI ou XVII ou – o que também amiúde acontece – para a reutilização posterior de pedras antigas... Poderia não ser esse o caso, atendendo a todo o enquadramento.

Tivemos, pois, a curiosidade de atentarmos no que ali poderia estar escrito, uma vez que, pela localização num lintel, dava a impressão de ser identificação de um imóvel.

Começámos por verificar que o letreiro era precedido de uma gravação: como que uma espécie de sol com raios. Seria a representação do sol? Aliás, essa hipótese se nos afigurou legítima, na medida em que a tradição falava das Portas do Sol aí. Não acreditámos logo na viabilidade da eventual descoberta e seu significado. Importava era decifrar o que vinha a seguir, a tal inscrição que toda a gente via, achava curioso, interrogavam-se porventura e... seguiam viagem!

O certo é que, de facto, lemos claramente **poço da cidade** (Fig. 3). Ou seja, o lintel teria estado primitivamente identificando a entrada para o poço da cidade, eventualmente uma fonte de chafurdo, com nascente própria, como frequentemente acontecia. No século XVI, **poço** escrevia-se com z – e, portanto, tínhamos aqui um documento antigo com história para contar.

Poderá perguntar-se: «poço da cidade»? Que interesse há aí em identificar tão solenemente o sítio onde está o poço? As pessoas não sabiam? Saber sabiam; contudo, o letreiro assim solene acentua o valor que ele tem; e, por outro lado, identifica muito importante recurso da cidade: a água!



Fig.1 – Antiga porta da cidade da Guarda



Fig.2 – O lintel inscrito.

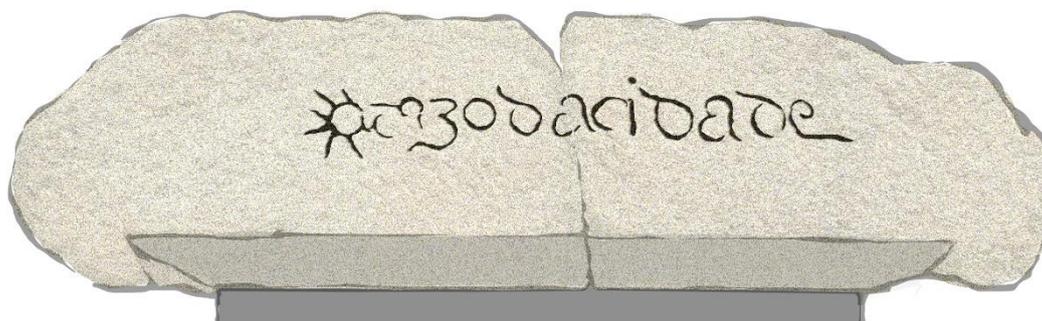


Fig.3 - A inscrição. (Desenho de José Luís Madeira)

Habitados como – felizmente! – ainda estamos a ter água com um simples abrir de torneira, esquecemos que água ao domicílio só começou, e mui timidamente, pela terceira década do século XX! Durante muito tempo, o chafariz público com os tanques de lavar roupa acoplados – e, antes dele, as fontes e as nascentes – era o ponto de encontro da vizinhança. Nesse âmbito da importância do poço, chegou-se mesmo a propor, por exemplo, que o topónimo BIRRE, de uma localidade da freguesia de Cascais, devia ter tido origem etimológica na palavra árabe *Bir*, que significa «poço», fazendo, assim, remontar à época árabe o povoamento desse lugar, nascido em torno de uma nascente pública de chafurdo – que, diga-se de passagem, sem consulta prévia à população, há anos o executivo camarário alienou a um particular.

Sítios e localidades há em cujo nome entra a palavra ‘poço’, a anotar a sua antiguidade ou as lendas a eles associadas:

- Poço da Moura: sítio emblemático do Ecomuseu Natural e Cultural da Serra da Labruja, em Ponte de Lima;
- Poço de Broca das Frádigas, freguesia de Vide, concelho de Seia;
- Caminho do Poço das Casas, em Almancil;
- Poço das Casas, pequena aldeia do concelho de Condeixa-a-Nova, que recebeu o nome de um antigo poço que abastecia os viajantes do percurso Coimbra – Tomar;
- em Lisboa, o Poço do Borratém.... (Fig. 4).

E um pouco por toda a parte: a Rua do Poço, o Caminho do Poço... Inclusive no concelho e no distrito da Guarda: o conhecido Poço do Mestre, em Trancoso; a aldeia de Poço Velho, em Almeida; a Rua do Poço, em Celorico da Beira, designação que remonta ao século XVIII; a freguesia de Poço do Canto, no município de Meda...

Por isso se diz que mudar o topónimo Poço de Boliqueime, no concelho de Loulé, para apenas Boliqueime correspondeu a uma atitude impensada e, porventura, caprichosa. Primeiro, mudou-se para Fonte de Boliqueime; as placas toponímicas da Via do Infante apenas registam Boliqueime. O povo acabou por solicitar que, de novo, fosse

Poço, ainda que, na atualidade, seco ele esteja já. Fica, todavia, duradouro registo da sua existência e importância primordial para a população.

Voltando à cidade da Guarda, dir-se-á ainda que, para se completar o enquadramento deste poço já inexistente e que, porventura, seria por ali perto, apresentamos, a título de ilustração, postais antigos da Porta da Estrela e edifício anexo, lado direito, onde se encontra a inscrição (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4 - Poço do Borratém



Fig. 5 – Porta nascente das antigas fortificações

Em conclusão: não são raros, um pouco por toda a parte, quer em zonas urbanas quer mesmo em perdidas áreas rurais, letreiros antigos, por vezes já bem cobertos de líquenes que mal se distinguem. Corresponderam sempre à vontade de alguém, um dia, por necessidade ou para facilitar a vida às pessoas, gravar uma identificação, uma mensagem útil ou mesmo simples grito d'alma. Gravou na pedra, porque era sua intenção que longamente permaneça.

Razão tivera o profeta Job quando, em resposta a Baldad, exclamara: «Oh! Quem me dera que se escrevessem as minhas palavras e se consignassem num livro, gravadas por estilete de ferro numa lâmina de chumbo, ou se esculpisse em pedra, para sempre!» (*Job* 19, 23-24).

A nós, passantes, mormente se profundamente interessados na História e no Património, compete parar e não deixar – nunca! – de cabalmente satisfazermos a curiosidade despertada. Como se escrevia nos epitáfios da antiga Roma: «Olá, tu que chegaste! Já leste? Passa bem!»: *Venisti ave legisti vale!*

No caso da inscrição da vetusta cidade da Guarda, assim aconteceu: chegámos, parámos, refletimos e seguimos viagem – mas com mais um pedaço da história urbana guardense no taleigo.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH OF MANUSCRIPT MINIATURES ON PARCHMENT PRESERVED IN ROMANIAN COLLECTIONS

INVESTIGAÇÃO PRELIMINAR SOBRE MINIATURAS DE MANUSCRITOS EM PERGAMINHO PRESERVADAS EM COLEÇÕES ROMENAS

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Abstract

Over the course of more than a thousand years, a remarkable art of writing and decorating manuscripts developed in Western Europe, employing a wide range of precious materials. The evolution of artistic taste was shaped by the social, historical, cultural, religious, and intellectual contexts of the periods in which these manuscripts were produced. The combination of literary, theological, or scientific texts with finely executed painted elements gradually led to the formation of a true craft. In most cases, the production of medieval manuscripts was carried out by monks, although specialized scribes and illuminators also played a significant role.

The study of manuscripts involves both their localization and dating, as well as the analysis of the chronologies associated with them. These chronologies highlight key moments related to the production process, including the involvement of scribes, the techniques employed by illuminators, and aspects of the manuscripts' historical trajectories, reflected through their successive owners or patrons. Consequently, the manuscript should be understood not only as an artistic object, but also as a witness to cultural continuity and the transmission of knowledge across centuries.

Technical analysis of illuminated manuscripts is primarily undertaken to address complex historical and art-historical questions. The study of materials and techniques provides valuable information regarding production methods, levels of craftsmanship, and, in some cases, the identification of specific artists or workshops. Such investigations contribute to a deeper understanding of working practices and enable meaningful comparisons between different artistic traditions and geographical areas of medieval Europe.

In specialized research, each manuscript is examined from a dual perspective: textual-historical and technical-material. The latter focuses on identifying pigments, colour application

techniques, support materials, and binding characteristics. Scientific analysis of these elements supports the dating and authentication of manuscripts overall.

Keywords: manuscript, alumina, polishing, parchment, gold, latrine

Introduction

The presence of the monasteries of the fifteenth century also implies the existence of the books necessary for the celebration of services and the only foci of culture. The manuscripts are specific to the Middle Ages period, as presented in the history of art by Mikhail Alpatov: "The beginning of the Middle Ages means the end of ancient culture." (Alpatov, 1966, p. 340) The sources of artistic inspiration, in terms of religious painting in Romania, the models and the first builders came from: Serbia, Bulgaria or the large centers of Constantinople and Thessaloniki (Sinigalia, 2018, p. 157).

In this sense, Western medieval manuscripts can be considered both works of art and fundamental documentary sources, which provide essential information about the spirituality, mentalities and visual culture of the Middle Ages. The art form was transmitted throughout Europe, and on the territory of Romania most manuscripts copied and illustrated with miniatures come from Moldova (Florea, 2016, p. 173).

At the same time, the study of pigments, binders and application techniques revealed in the last decade thanks to advanced investigation techniques (Pinna, 2009, p. 10) highlight how knowledge circulated between workshops and how artistic innovations were transmitted from one cultural center to another. The choice of materials used reflected not only the technical resources available, but also the social and economic context of the time, since the opulence or sobriety of a manuscript was closely related to its function and the status of the commissioner. The cost of the manuscripts was exuberant, only very wealthy people could afford to order such a precious object. The component materials, such as parchment, were obtained by slaughtering an extremely large number of animals and by laborious methods that consumed time. The transcription of the texts and the decoration involved another effort on the part of the creators.

One of the scanned incunabula put on the site is the Bible by Anton Koberger (Fig.1), printed in 1482. The presence of red polish is noted by erosions and forms of active degradation, even from the photos scanned and presented on the site. Unlike the images rendered in the Romanian publications of the '70s of the Meridiane publishing house (Simionescu, 1972, p. 6), although full of useful information, they are of a lower quality that does not allow a thorough study. Digital scanning and uploading to digital platforms with high-quality colour images allow researchers to study important elements of manuscripts, incunabula, documents, or old books.

You can see from the photo next to it the erosions of the gold leaf, around the letter only the red bolus is kept.



Fig. 1 – The Bible by Anton Koberger printed in 1482 – The Incunabus
 (photo source <https://bibnat.ro/services/biblioteca-batthyaneum/>)

The text was printed on paper with lead letters, and the decorations were painted freehand, leaving the necessary space to make them, but not always enough. Probably the red details of the letters were also applied manually. Miniaturist artists were free to create and used all the space of a page, they knew very well the techniques of polishing and painting the decorations. From the photographic analysis of the latrine decorated with wheat, all these details of the craftsmanship can be observed.

The oldest manuscript preserved on the territory of Transylvania, also considered the most valuable on the territory of Romania is the *Codex Aureus* (Fig. 2). Written in Latin letters in *lowercase and gold letters*, it contains pages painted with vignettes and frontispieces, borders framing the text, the manuscript dates from the ninth century. The codex preserved today in the collection of the same Batthyaneum library in Alba Iulia was made at the order of the Frankish emperor Charlemagne (742-814) (Simionescu, 1972, p. 5). The Codex Aureus (Golden Book) of Lorsch also has the English name Lorsch Enagheliar (Whalter, 2005, p.86) is of French origin and was written in Latin between 778 and 820. Another term used for miniatures is illumination (Popescu, 1995, p. 28), a Latin term that means to make them shine. It is associated with manuscript mines containing gold or silver foil applications (Olteanu, 1002, p. 250).

Through the project implemented in 2023 in Trier, Germany, 11 Carolingian manuscripts were included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. On May 24, 2023, the Codex Aureus manuscript kept in the Batthyaneum Library in Alba Iulia was also included. The tumultuous history of the codex caused it to be torn in two parts by a soldier. The first half took the road to Central Europe, to Vienna, and the second half to the West, to the Vatican Library, in Rome. From the library of Archbishop Christofor Migazzi in Vienna it was bought by Ignatie Batthyani in 1785 (Buluță, 1978, p.9).

The unique method of preparing materials and the study of their behaviour over time made the old masters lay the brush with a duct that would last over a thousand years. The main element, which clearly distinguishes it, is the gold polishing. The method of decorating letters with gold was by using gold powder, which in mixture with a binder could be applied with a brush. The authors of the manuscript are anonymous, their signatures are completely missing, characteristic of Carolingian texts. The significance of man's nothingness in relation to God, as a symbol of piety. The graphic peculiarities of the Carolingian era, through the love of books, the care with which the content had materialized. The letters in an upright position were positioned as a printing letter, and the text was written in neat lowercase uncial (Simionescu, 1972, p. 6).

The texts are interspersed with exquisite ornaments chosen with taste, and the scenes painted in the adjacent pages have a realistic tinge in the rendering of the garments and portraits. Latin manuscripts approach the influences of Renaissance paintings by rendering the characters in detail as close as possible to the natural reality of things.

What uniquely distinguishes this manuscript, however, is its original, fully preserved cover, made of gold-plated wooden tablets adorned with precious stones, cloisonné enamels and ivory plates. The central composition is a scene carved in ivory representing the Crucifixion of Christ, surrounded by medallions and plant ornaments, all fixed in a gold frame decorated with translucent enamels and stones of intense colour (garnets, sapphires, emeralds). In addition to the aesthetic value, the cover played an

essential role in signalling the sacredness of the text: the Gospels were not considered only religious texts, but sacred objects in themselves, worthy of a covering worthy of worship. The use of gold, ivory and rare stones was thus a gesture of glorification, and the association of these materials with Christian iconography transformed the object into a true visual relic. The codex is equipped with Carolingian-type metal fasteners, designed to protect the integrity of the parchment block and maintain the material tension of the volume. These clasps were made of gilded bronze and fastened to the sides of the covers, providing both a practical function and added visual authority, giving the book a regal and tamper-proof look. (Leidinger, 1925, pp. 98-100). In conclusion, the Codex Aureus is not only a manuscript decorated with refinement, but also a masterpiece of medieval bookbinding art. The materials used luxury parchment, gold, ivory, enamel, precious stones and the complex craftsmanship involved in the creation of the cover and the closure system confirm its exceptional status as a liturgical object, a symbol of imperial power and sacred authority.

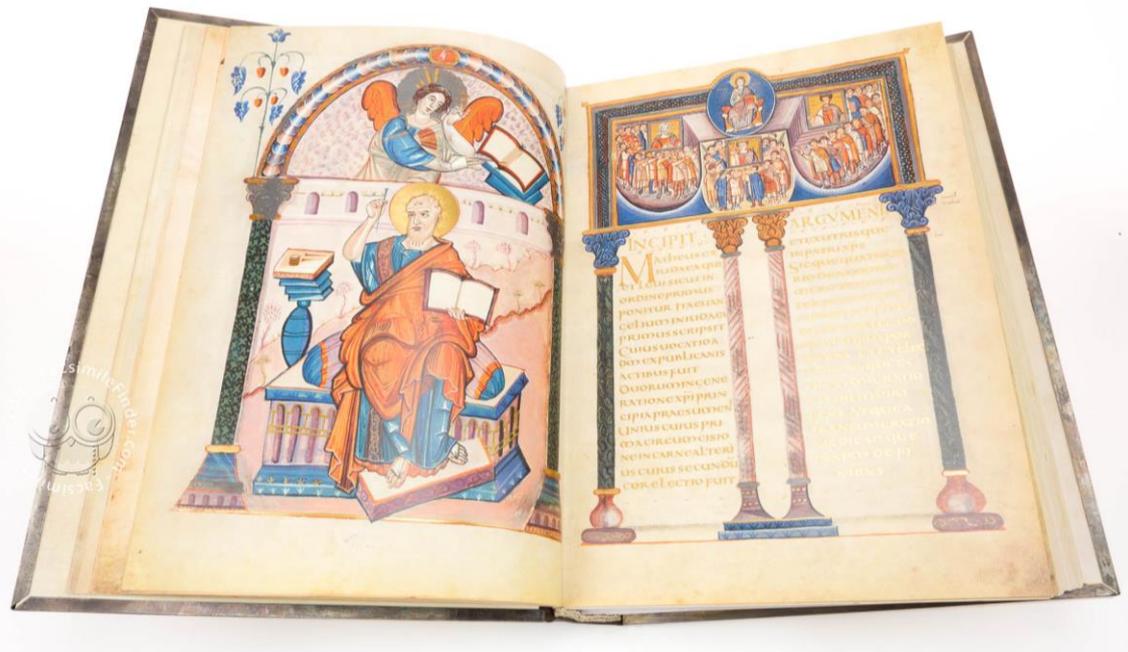


Fig. 2 - Illuminated page from the Codex Aureus, Saint Matthew the Evangelist (the angel)

Regarding the Codex Altemberger (Fig. 3) of the 14th century, most likely 1360, a second copyist, at the order of the Judge of Sibiu, executes the last two pages 182v and 183r. It was copied in the workshop of the painter Nicolaus in Prague for the Nuremberg community, and bought by Thomas Altemberger in 1481. (Preserved today in the MNIR collection). Executed on a calfskin parchment, wooden covers covered in leather. The volume is richly ornamented: borders with phytomorphic decorative elements and religious scenes, some illustrations occupy the entire page, initials and frames with real genre scenes, made with gold leaf and natural colours.



Fig. 3 - Codex Altemberger, collection of the National Museum of History of Romania
(Photo source: Carşote, et.al 2019)

In 1961 the codex was restored by Werner Bossert, mentioned on the fixed posterior forcing. The orange colour used mainly for the decoration of initials, as well as for the colouring of zoomorphic figures, is based on lead minion (Pb_3O_4) (Carşote, 2019, p. 120).

The XRF spectra of inks used to write the Altenberger Codex were: (a) and (b) metallologic black ink; (c) cinnabar-based red ink; (d) blue azure-based ink (Carşote, 2019, p. 120). The technique used is known since the Middle Ages, also found in other manuscripts preserved from this period. Gum Arabic gives viscosity to the ink, while helping to fix pigment particles on the substrate. In some cases, copper sulfate ($CuSO_4$), also called blue vitriol, is also added, and for color intensification, charcoal black.

The inks used to write on parchment were carbon-based made from carbon black or ground charcoal and mixed with a binder, either animal glue or gum Arabic. Although these categories of materials are vulnerable to moisture and instability to light and UV radiation, under optimal storage conditions they can be preserved over time and hundreds of years.

The famous collection of Latin manuscripts brought to Transylvania is still preserved today in the Batthyaneum library in Alba Iulia, and among the most valuable is the Codex Burgundus (Fig.4, Fig.5). The manuscript on parchment, also called the book of clocks (livre d'heures) is of French origin, dating from the 14th century.



Fig. 4 - Codex Burgundus, illuminated pages with painted decorations and gilded with gold

Fig. 5 - Miniature with Saint the Evangelist, red and blue colors predominate
(Photo source: <https://bibnat.ro/services/biblioteca-batthyaneum/>)

A peculiarity of *the Burgundian Codex* is the fulfilment of any surface left empty in the text with small ornaments that do not exceed the written line. They contribute to the lush richness of the painted graphics (Simionescu, 1975, p. 10), adorned with 55 superb miniatures. Each such image conveys, through the richness of the ornaments, characters projected on a golden background that imitates the mosaic (Simionescu, 1975, p. 10).

The Davidic Breviary (Fig. 6, Fig.7) is one of the most spectacular manuscripts in the Batthyaneum library in Alba Iulia. The circulation of medieval manuscripts brought them into the hands of the aristocracy, and in the Renaissance period they acquired a new splendour. As early as the 13th century, nobles were the people who had access to culture and thus were determined to order numerous copies of secular manuscripts. On the other hand, the cult manuscripts contained psalters, whether they were bibles or books of the classes.



Fig. 6 - Davidic Breviary Miniature and text in the basement with gold-plated latrines

Fig. 7 - Scenes painted with rough areas, gaps in the color film are observed

(Photo source: <https://bibnat.ro/services/biblioteca-batthyaneum/>)

Mary of Burgundy, also called Mary the Rich (1457-1482) was the heiress of the Burgundian domains in France, after the death of her father Charles I of Burgundy.

The manuscript in the collections of the Batthyaneum Library is very close to the luxury manuscripts commissioned during the Middle Ages. *The Breviarium calendario* (Bubble, 1978, p. 9) is also from the 15th century, also from Burgundy, with 13 pages with miniatures of remarkable beauty. The painted scenes were influenced by the beauty of easel painting combined with religious scenes that offer a complexity of the

composition. Each illuminated page was divided into two hypostases, the upper one in which either one or two borders with religious scenes appear and the lower part in which the text is rendered accompanied by a richly ornamented letter.

The oldest psalter in the Batthyaneum Library is from the 14th century. Following a French model, the manuscript is superbly ornamented, parchment with gold leaf and bright, paradisiacal colours. The text is written in lowercase Gothic letters (Papahagi, 2018, p. 98).

Psalterium Davidicum calendariuo (Figs. 8, 9) is the title of the manuscript quoted with Ms III-34 (Bica, 1977, p. 5) kept in the Batthyaneum Library in Alba Iulia and represents the oldest psalter preserved in this collection. The impressive, gilded decorations and ornate initials (Papahagi, 2018, p. 98) are accompanied by characters painted on a gold background that symbolizes divine light. The support on which the texts and thumbnails were laid is parchment. The name *con calendarium* offers the viewer a series of glimpses of the 12 months of the year. The splendid images provided by the miniatures for each month of the year confirm the talent and culture that the creator of the miniatures has acquired. The seasons are associated with man's activities throughout the year, treated more or less realistically. Arabesques represented by letters adorned with fantastic animals appear. It contains many scenes from nature represented symbolically, but not schematically (Bica, 1977, p. 7).

The gold leaf has been preserved almost entirely, proving the mastery with which, it was applied. The letters painted with the cobalt blue pigment are surrounded by other light pink colours and the gold background, without which they would not stand out so much. The presence of gold on many of these pages enriches the ornamentation and gives a greater value to the manuscript.

Another title that appears in *the 2018 Census* (Papahagi, 2018, p. 65) is *the Missale notatum calendarium a. u. Eccl. Pataviensis*. Obviously, it is the same manuscript on parchment with an luminum. The manuscript was written in Gothic minuscule in 1480 (Papahagi, 2018, p. 65).

Compared to other copies also from the Christoph Migazzi library, this missal stands out with grace and splendor through the compositional page of the Crucifixion of Jesus in which a gold background with punch decorations appears. As the great researcher in the medieval painting technique Daniel Thompson jr. stated thus:

"Before starting the painting, the medieval painter dealt with this excess gold, which was scraped off or covered, only then the gold primer was ornamented. In this ornamentation on gold, the finest skill of medieval art was employed." (Thompson, 2006, p. 261).

The scenes with the greatest emotional impact belong to the passion of Jesus, especially the Crucifixion. Probably for these reasons, it was chosen that the scene of the Crucifixion should occupy an entire page of the manuscript. The distribution of the three characters: Jesus, the Mother of God and St. John the Evangelist compose a balanced compositional triangle. The background of the gold comes in the warm-cold contrast of the green on the lower part and that of the vestment of St. John. The blue border that delimits the religious scene harmonizes with the blue of the Virgin Mary's

garment. On the outside of the border was painted a golden frame decorated with a garland of flowers and stylized leaves. The text pages are surrounded by a painted decoration consisting of trees, flowers, stylized leaves and birds. There are also large initials painted in blue or green, on a gold background and framed in frames, painted in pink.



Fig. 8 - Details with scenes or latrines from the Psalter of David, 15th century.

Fig. 9 - Scenes painted in square boxes with a gold-plated background

(Photo source <https://bibnat.ro/services/biblioteca-batthyaneum/>)

Three extremely valuable incunabula editions of the work *De consolatione philosophiae* (Figs. 12, 13) dated as follows 1495, 1489 and 1473 are preserved in the Batthyaneum Library. The oldest of these incunabula is authored by the German Anton Koberger (1440-1513). The text is bilingual, in German and Latin, decorated with numerous letters and floral-vegetal motifs. The habit of decorating the first letter of the chapter with a polychrome composed of pigments mixed with natural binders and gold leaf on red polish, was also perpetuated in the first edition of the *incunabus* in 1473. The erosion of gold foil and the use of bolus as a red polish, foil support, is observed.



Fig. 10 - Miniature with the Crucifixion of Jesus and ornament



Fig. 11 - Missale notatum cum calendarium a. u. Eccl. Pataviensis, dated 1480.
 (Photo source: Digital Tool, bibnat)



Fig. 12 - Incunabus with painted ornaments. Fig. 13 - Page printed and decorated with latrine.

Following the gilded and polychrome decorations, we bring to the attention of researchers the work of Titus Livius (59 a. Chr.-17 p. Chr.), *Historiae Romanae decades* (Figs. 14, 15), one of the oldest incunabula dated to 1469, in the Batthyaneum library. The edition preserved in this collection was edited by Giovanni Andrea Bussi (or Johannes Andreae), bishop of Aleria (1417–1475). Very important to mention is the fact that the incunabula was printed by Arnold Pannartz (d.1476) and Conrad Sweynghem (who apprenticed to Johannes Gutenberg).

The Historiae Romanae or *Ab urbe condita* is a basic work of the birth of Rome, from the legendary Aeneas to the emperor Augustus.

Similar to the incunabula mentioned above, there is also the 1479 printing of the work Eusebius of Caesarea (265-340 p. Chr.) called *Historia ecclesiastica*. It is known that it was printed in Mantua by Johannes Schallus, and the text was translated from Greek into Latin by Rufinus of Aquileia (340 p. Chr.-411 p. Chr.).

In the context of medieval culture, scribes and copyists occupied an essential place in the process of transmitting and preserving knowledge. They were not simple executors, but artisans and artists at the same time, whose activity required rigorous training, a high degree of specialization and a deep understanding of the religious, literary and artistic symbolism of the time. As artisans, these copyists invented new graphic forms, contributing to the development of writing styles – from Carolingian to Gothic, to Bastard. As artists, they actively participated in the process of ornamenting the texts, by making elaborate miniatures, decorative borders, ornate initials and other visual elements that transformed the book into an object of cultural and aesthetic value. The medieval miniature is more than just an illustration of the written text. It is a

complex form of artistic expression, with multiple functions: explanatory, meditative, symbolic and sometimes narrative. Beginning in the late Middle Ages, painting inserted into parchment manuscripts became an integral part of visual communication and collective memory. These images not only reflected literary content, but also actively participated in the history of written literature, painting and, more broadly, in the cultural history of the medieval world. Scribes and miniaturists worked in monastic centres or, later, in specialized urban workshops (*scriptoria*), where work was meticulously organized. The process began with the preparation of the support – the parchment – which was cut, cleaned, stretched and sanded to obtain a uniform surface suitable for writing and drawing. Then the page was lined, the text fields were marked and the spaces reserved for illustrations or decorative initials. The scribes transcribed the text with a reed or metal nib, using inks made from natural compounds such as iron sulphate, vegetable tannin, or carbon black. These inks, applied precisely to the parchment, required excellent pressure control and a careful rhythm of writing. Mistakes were corrected with the help of a small knife with which the ink was scraped off the surface of the parchment. After the copying phase was completed, the miniaturist who could sometimes be the same person as the scribe intervened, making the preparatory drawing of the miniatures. This stage was crucial, as it fixed the composition, characters and scenography, with meticulous attention to proportions, gestures, expressions and symbols. The sketches were drawn with a metal stylus or a very fine nib, sometimes directly on parchment, sometimes with the help of models (so-called model books), which contained standardized figures for saints, biblical scenes or decorative elements (Bomford, 1990).



Fig. 14 - Gilded latrine and painted ornament Fig. 15 - Printed letters very close to the painting



Fig. 16 - *Historiae Romanae decades, incunabul VI 17*, dated 1469.

Author: Titus Livius. One can see the decorations painted over the printed texts; letters gilded with plough. The polychrome is special and competes with those painted in manuscripts

Gold, a precious metal of great prestige, has been widely used in mural painting, on panels, in manuscripts, etc. (Istudor, 2011, p. 164). Its application could be done either in liquid form, known as *shell gold*, or in solid form, through extremely thin sheets of beaten metal (*gold leaf*).

In the case of gold leaf, it was usually applied over a preparatory base layer, consisting in most cases of gypsum and a red clay known as "Armenian red" (*bole*). In certain situations, calcium compounds could substitute for gypsum, and vermilion was sometimes used to colour this red layer. Preparatory layers of other colours blue, grey, black, white or yellow are less often attested and are usually characteristic of specific time periods or geographical spaces.

The extreme thinness of gold foil meant that the hue of the base layer subtly influenced the final visual appearance, altering the intensity and tone of the gold's reflections. The choice of a certain colour for the preparatory layer was not accidental, but was part of the aesthetic intention of the illuminator, which aimed to amplify the decorative and symbolic effect of gold within the composition.

Thus, the use of gold in manuscripts not only emphasized the material and spiritual value of the object, but also reflected the technical refinement of the artists, capable of

combining expensive resources with subtle chromatic effects, adapted to both the iconographic and cultural context.

The materials used by artists in the making of illuminated manuscripts reflect both the technological limits of the era and the creative ingenuity of pre-modern societies. Natural pigments, such as red, yellow and brown ochres, are among the first dyes used by man, their existence being attested since prehistoric art (Mansuelli, 1978, p. 47). Throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, these earth pigments continued to play a fundamental role in the illumination of manuscripts due to their availability, stability, and varied colour gamut. Pigments have been classified into the categories of mineral, natural or artificial pigments (Mora, 1986, p. 80).

Before the rapid industrialization of the twentieth century, the colour palette of artists was relatively narrow compared to modern standards. Most pigments came either from inorganic sources especially earths and minerals (Mora, 1986, p. 80), or from organic sources of biological origin, such as plants or insects. However, certain synthetic pigments (Mora, 1986, p. 80), obtained by relatively simple chemical or thermal processes, were already known and appreciated in medieval workshops, representing a first form of intersection between artistic practice and knowledge of chemical composition.

In addition to pigments, precious metals, such as gold and silver, were widely used to enrich the decoration of manuscripts. These were applied either in powder form (Travers, 2016, p. 13), mixed with binders to produce an exceptional shine, or in the form of extremely thin metal sheets (“sheets”), carefully applied to parchment to create luminous accents.

The generous use of such costly materials not only enhanced the aesthetic impact of the manuscript but also served as a visible sign of the wealth, prestige, and devotion of the patron. Watercolour painting is one of the oldest genres of manuscript illumination. Paintings executed in the watercolour technique can already be found in early Russian manuscripts dating from the 10th to 12th centuries; the manuscripts that are illustrated with miniatures were painted in watercolour. (Vinner, 1956, p. 41).

To transform the powdered pigments into a usable pictorial medium, they had to be mixed with an organic binder — the film-forming substance responsible for fixing the pictorial layer to the substrate. Medieval and Renaissance illuminators used a variety of natural binders: vegetable gums (such as gum Arabic), glues of animal origin obtained by the extraction of collagen and egg derivatives. Watercolour, as a genre of painting, was executed on paper, parchment, ivory and is composed of very fine pigments and mixed with binders such as: gum Arabic, egg white, honey. (Popescu, 1995, p. 11).

Regardless of the pigment source, the key element that guaranteed the adhesion and durability of the pigments was the binder. It had the function of binding the pigment particles together and fixing them to the surface of the parchment. (Reed, 1982, pp. 114-123) In the Middle Ages, the most common binder used was gum Arabic, a natural polysaccharide extracted from trees of the species *Acacia arabica*. It dissolves easily in water and forms a viscous solution, ideal for mixing with solid pigments. Its adhesive and film-forming properties made it indispensable in the illumination of manuscripts, contributing to the stability of the colour layer. In addition to gum Arabic, other types of vegetable glues were also used, such as those extracted from cherry or almond, which

had similar properties, but were preferred in certain recipes for their increased clarity or elasticity. Unlike gum Arabic, these glues had a faster initial adhesion, which made them useful in jobs that required multiple applications or colour overlaps. Another essential binder was beaten egg white, known in traditional recipes as "glaira". It was used as a protein binder with excellent stretching and transparency qualities.

White, known as *glair* (Vinner, 1956, p. 20), was particularly prized for its transparency and glossy appearance, while yolk conferred superior opacity and flexibility. The choice of binder influenced not only the application properties of the colors, but also its long-term stability, which is why the study of the binders of painting is an essential component of the technical analysis of manuscripts.

The painting of Romanesque miniatures presented an unnatural coloring, invented colors and the strident polychromy of the miniaturists (Alpatov, 1966, p. 335). As a rule, they use pure, natural pigments, without reducing their saturation by mixing them with any other pigment.

Conclusions

The study of manuscript miniatures is very similar to the study of mural paintings in art history and especially the influences that icons have had over time. They seem to flow a good part of the evolution of man in the Middle Ages and constitute a huge source of historical data.

Scientific research on manuscript miniatures can be in the form of visual analysis, scientific laboratory analysis, and the reproduction of execution techniques by making faithful copies of them. The investigation of the binders with which the pigments were linked, research on the support or other interventions carried out in various stages involves a laborious and long-term work. Many researchers in our country have looked at manuscript miniatures only from the point of view of historical, artistic, religious, palaeographic study and less of the technique of their execution. Being a movable patrimony, it suffered more due to transactions and transfer from one place to another, causing degradation or even total loss.

The study of the materials and techniques used by medieval and Renaissance illuminators highlights the complexity of the manuscript production process, as well as the interdependence between natural resources, technical knowledge and artistic expression. Mineral, metallic or organic pigments, along with binders of plant and animal origin, were ingeniously adapted and combined to meet both the aesthetic and symbolic requirements of the time. Precious metals, such as gold and silver, but also expensive pigments such as ultramarine, reflected the social status of the patrons, while more accessible pigments, such as ochres or verdigris, illustrate artistic pragmatism and adaptation to available resources.

At the same time, the diversity of techniques from preparatory drawing and modelling of drapes, to painting in *grisaille* or the application of gold leaf demonstrates the high level of specialization and experimental character of the illuminators.

The transmission of knowledge through treatises, collections of recipes and, above all, through workshop practice, has contributed to the consolidation of an artistic tradition that has managed to combine craftsmanship with innovation.

Modern scientific analyses (spectroscopic, microscopic and imaging) have made a fundamental contribution to the reconstruction of these practices, providing information on the chemical composition of materials, their origin and alteration processes. Thus, the heritage of the illuminated manuscripts is no longer regarded only as an expression of medieval spirituality and aesthetics, but also as a document of technical knowledge and economic and cultural circulation in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

In conclusion, interdisciplinary research on illuminated manuscripts confirms their status as "total artifacts", in which art, science and history meet. These works represent not only visual testimonies of an era, but also bridges between artistic tradition, technological innovation and European cultural memory.

The evolution of the manuscripts has made the materials put in place to change from one regime to another and to bring a lot of knowledge to our history. Today's industrialization and digitalization leave behind manufacturing and craftsmanship dissolved hundreds of years ago throughout the Middle Ages.

The old techniques of manuscript making consist of the parchment processing technique, which today is almost lost, the technique of colour preparation and pigment extraction and the gold polishing technique and obviously its processing.

The technique of gold polishing on parchment pages is extremely expensive and involves many materials, the most precious and extremely expensive of which is gold. Even utensils that help with gold polishing (cutting knife, cushion, agate stone for sanding, brushes for bolus) are extremely expensive. But the result is noble and worth all the effort, as long as traditional recipes are respected, they also have a good state of preservation over time.

It is necessary to carry out scientific research through methods of instrumental analysis of medieval Latin manuscripts in Romanian collections and to publish them for global access. Future studies will consider the knowledge of the composition of the materials and the methods of applying them on the surface of the support, thus helping to reproduce the execution techniques of medieval manuscripts.

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GARMENT AS AN IDENTITY DISCOURSE: POWER, FAITH, AND REPRESENTATION IN VOTIVE PORTRAITURE FROM LESSER WALLACHIA (18th–19th CENTURIES)

VESTUÁRIO COMO DISCURSO DE IDENTIDADE: PODER, FÉ, E REPRESENTAÇÃO NA RETRATÍSTICA VOTIVA DA PEQUENA VALÁQUIA (SÉCULOS XVIII-XIX)

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Abstract

This paper reconceptualizes scientific restoration as a methodological imperative for safeguarding community memory, essential for preserving the historical data embedded in the mural layers. Starting from the theories of Cesare Brandi and applying Alois Riegl's framework for interpreting monument values, with a particular focus on "age value" and "memorial-historical value", the paper emphasizes the importance of preserving the visual integrity of the votive portrait in Lesser Wallachia (Oltenia) during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

From this conservative perspective, mural painting is examined not merely as an aesthetic object, but as a fundamental sociological document that bears witness to the phenomenon known as the "democratization of patronage". The study demonstrates how emerging local elites, including the lower ranks of the boyar class and the clergy, as well as merchants and craftsmen, employed the sacred space of the narthex to encode both social status and political aspirations. In this light, the depicted garment becomes the ultimate marker of identity, mirroring the stylistic transition from Eastern to Western influences. Preserving it is vital for transmitting this living archive of Romanian elite modernization to future generations.

Keywords: founders, identity discourse, fresco, mural painting, votive portraits, restoration, garment.

INTRODUCTION

The understanding of mural painting goes beyond mere aesthetic analysis, calling for a multivalent approach in which the “epidermis” of the sacred building is acknowledged as a crossroads of art, science, theology, history, and sociology. Whereas for Cesare Brandi or Alois Riegl the monument is conceived as a carrier of memorial values that must be transmitted to the future in an unaltered state, for the art historian and the visual anthropologist the frescoes of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Oltenia function as an elaborate form of public communication, effectively constituting the *mass media* of the premodern age.

The Vâlcea region, described by Academician Răzvan Theodorescu as the territory with the highest density of foundations in Wallachia, becomes during this period the stage for a unique cultural phenomenon, namely the “democratization of patronage” (Barcan, 2008, p. 24). Against a background marked by a vacuum of central authority and by local economic effervescence, the privilege of church building descends from the ruler to the “third estate” (Theodorescu, 2009, p. 10). Consequently, the walls of the narthex are transformed into a medium of expression for a new elite, from lesser boyars and local bailiffs to priests and merchants, all driven by a pressing need to legitimate their social standing through visual representation.

This undertaking aims to decode the visual language of these votive representations, focusing on the garment as the ultimate marker of identity. In a society shaped by ritual and visual codes, clothing is never random; it operates as a strict system, a “uniform” of power and belonging. Our analysis will examine how fresco painting preserves this socio-cultural dynamic, effectively turning the church into a living archive of Romanian identity positioned between Eastern and Western influences.

The “Epidermis” of the Sacred Edifice: Between Scientific Practice, Theology, Commemorative Value, and Identity Discourse

The aesthetic value of mural painting largely depends on its state of preservation and the interpretive lens applied to the alterations caused by time and human intervention. The physical integrity of the work must therefore take precedence, as it constitutes the medium through which the image comes into being, enabling its preservation for the future and ensuring its reception within human awareness. In this regard, Cesare Brandi defines restoration as “[...]the methodological moment of recognition of the work of art, in its physical consistency and in its dual aesthetic and historical polarity, with a view to its transmission to the future” (Brandi, 1996, p. 37).

In *The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origins*, Alois Riegl, one of the foremost theorists in the field, not only clarified the distinction between intentional and unintentional monuments (the latter being historical monuments), but also explored the monument’s complex identity as a historical witness that embodies not one, but multiple, overlapping values. These values, as Riegl defines them, include commemorative values

(such as age value, historical value, and intentional commemorative value), as well as contemporary values (Riegl, 1999, p. 2).

The fragile "epidermis" of the wall, from basic finishing plasters to the support for complex iconographic ensembles, was at times relegated to the realm of the minor by admirers of pure architectural form. A defining feature of restoration practices in the first half of the 20th century was the marked discrepancy between the importance given to the conservation and restoration of architecture, and that given to mural painting (Popa, 2013, p. 10).

What distinguishes mural painting from other art forms is its close relationship with architecture, serving to enhance and reveal the structure of the building. While a painting requires a frame, in the case of mural art, the "frame" is the architecture itself, which the viewer is physically immersed in. As such:

"Not only do the material conditions of its execution differ, but, along with the context, the very nature of the image changes, or rather, its ontological status as a reality. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the issue of the frame, of delimitation. Unlike an easel painting, mural painting does not require a frame to integrate it into the architecture: its 'frame' is the architecture itself, which also contains the viewer. When a border appears within a mural decor, it either serves to separate the various scenes of a narrative cycle unfolding across the wall, or imitates, in trompe-l'œil, the frame of a painting. The frame of a mural is therefore always either the architecture itself, or a self-imposed fictive frame. Once this organic connection is lost, mural painting becomes a kind of tapestry or wallpaper." (Mora, 1986, p. 270).

The organic bond between mural painting and architecture is articulated through two fundamental aspects: the iconographic-liturgical aspect and the formal, or aesthetic, one.

Within places of worship, the icon and architecture alike are expressions of sacred art, their aims being fundamentally identical. The church interior is designed to provide the liturgical setting necessary for the performance of religious services. Sacred art must therefore be interpreted in relation to its liturgical function. Liturgy, architecture, and iconography must therefore be approached as a unified whole rather than as separate elements. Due to its place within the broader field of art, sacred art is often studied and contemplated strictly through the lens of art criticism, focusing especially on its pedagogical and aesthetic dimensions (Palade, 2004, pp. 190–191). Although at first glance the artistic techniques used in sacred and secular art appear similar, drawing on roughly the same materials for construction and painting, what fundamentally distinguishes them is their intended *purpose*.

While the Roman architect Vitruvius, writing in the 1st century BC, claimed that an architectural work must meet three core criteria, durability, functionality, and beauty (Vitruvius, 1964, p. 46), in sacred art, the selection of artistic tools has been shaped by cultic function. This, in turn, seemingly hindered the progress of Byzantine art in comparison to Western art.

By extending Riegl's value system from architecture to the "epidermis" of buildings, namely, mural painting, we find that in the case of votive portraits in the narthex, the

memorial-historical component becomes critically important, amplifying the ensemble's artistic and technical significance.

Mural painting, and particularly votive portraits, are not merely works of religious art, but crucial sociological and ethno-historical documents that preserve and convey fundamental elements of rural cultural identity: social hierarchy, traditional garment (folk dress), connection to the sacred, and local memory.

In the rural world, the church has long been, and in many cases remains, the principal venue for artistic creation and visual education. Its frescoes narrate sacred history while subtly anchoring it in the fabric of local life.

Mural painting (iconography) ensures the continuity of faith, while the inclusion of local elements (clothing, landscapes, local figures), also preserves cultural identity. These portraits break the boundary between the sacred and the profane, weaving the image of the community (its founders and patrons) into the narrative of sanctity.

Garment functions as more than adornment, it becomes a coded language, articulating social position, geographical origin, and ethnocultural affiliation.

Within a cultural landscape shaped by Orthodox spiritual tradition, where monumental sculpture was canonically prohibited and secular portraiture was both late and rare, the church wall emerged as the central medium for preserving collective memory. To both art historians and visual anthropologists, the mural painting of 18th- and 19th-century Oltenia represents not only a religious act but also a sophisticated form of public discourse.

In the Romanian Principalities, particularly in Oltenia, the notion of "ktitor" (church founder) was fundamentally redefined in the period following the Brâncoveanu era. While in previous centuries, the act of founding a church was an exclusive prerogative of the Prince (the "Anointed of God") (Fig.1), the weakening of central authority and the rise of intermediate social classes gradually democratized this privilege. The votive image thus became a visual "contract" with a dual recipient: the Divine (whose mercy was sought in exchange for the donation) and to the Community, whose acknowledgment of the founder's status was implicitly claimed.

The central argument of this study holds that in the culturally intersecting space of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Lesser Wallachia (Oltenia), mural painting, especially the votive portrait, moved beyond its liturgical and decorative role to become the primary means of social communication (functioning as the "mass media" of the premodern world).



Fig. 1 - Votive painting - Ruler Constantin Brâncoveanu, Lady Maria, and their children - mural painting, Hurezi Monastery, Romania

The garment depicted in these images is not an incidental feature, but a codified message of identity, a “social skin” that traces the emergence of new elites (lesser nobility, clergy, merchants) within the broader process of “democratization of patronage”. Consequently, preserving these visual layers through restoration is not merely an aesthetic intervention, but an ethical imperative to safeguard a vital sociological archive, in keeping with Alois Riegl’s principles of “age value” and “commemorative-historical value.”

Historical and Cultural Background: “Lesser Wallachia” Between Empires

Known historically as “Lesser Wallachia,” Oltenia stood as a transitional zone between the centralized rigidity of the Ottoman Empire and the administrative rigor of the Habsburgs.

A pivotal episode in the region’s cultural formation was the Austrian occupation (from 1718 to 1739), a short but impactful period. The Habsburgs introduced a strict

fiscal and administrative framework, which sparked a consolidation of local consciousness. The Oltenia boyars, traditionally enjoying a certain autonomy, responded with a cultural and religious assertion of identity.

A particularly distinctive feature of this region, as noted by recent historians (Barcan, 2018, p.54), is the emergence of what has been termed the “democratization of patronage.” With the central authority weakened due to the intermittent presence of Phanariot rulers, a diverse and active social class gained ground. This included lesser nobility, local bailiffs, secular clergy, and merchants involved in cross-border trade (Barcan, 2018, p.209).

Wary of excessive taxation or Ottoman confiscations, these emerging elites often refrained from investing in grand residences and instead directed their resources toward church construction. This shift in patronage led, by the 1840s, to a flourishing of religious art and a transformation in collective consciousness, spurred by widespread communal participation.

As a result, the villages of Vâlcea and northern Gorj saw the emergence of small churches, not decorated by celebrated court painters, but rather by local or itinerant artists. The international relevance of this phenomenon is remarkable: this cultural momentum can be likened to the rise of the bourgeoisie in Italian or Flemish cities. However, unlike the merchant in Antwerp who commissioned a canvas portrait for his dining room, the merchant from Hurezi or Ocnele Mari had his family painted in the church’s narthex. This was a form of “Orthodox bourgeoisie,” one that validated its economic rise through post-Byzantine visual instruments. (Fig.2)



Fig.2 – Votive portraits in the narthex of Hurezi Monastery – Cantacuzino Family.



Fig.3 - Western narthex, votive portraits of boyars: Ștefan the bailiff with his wife Ilina and their sons, Vătășești Church, Vâlcea County, Romania



Fig. 4 - Northern wall of the narthex - votive painting



Fig.5 – Votive portraits, Vătășești, Vâlcea

A telling case is the Vătășești Church in Vâlcea, where a large group of donors (Bălan, 2005, p. 1000) is painted on the entire lower west wall, flanking the entrance to the monument. These figures are separated by the painted founders' inscription added in 1937. Only two of the names remain inscribed: Stanca and Preda. The figures appear to the left of the doorway. C. Bălan notes that the names in the votive portraits were rewritten during the 1937 restoration.

Another example is the Church dedicated to the Entry of the Mother of God into the Church and to St. John the Baptist the Prophet, in Horezu, Vâlcea. The church was erected with the financial support of the founding patron, local bailiff Ion Urșanu, who, together with his family, is portrayed in garments of Oriental inspiration on the eastern wall of the narthex.

A more pronounced transition to local specificity is visible in the Church of Horezu-Târg (1807). Here, the founders were merchants and craftsmen, and their clothing reflects their guild status:

- Lady Stanca wears a red fez (a Balkan influence), tied with a *funta* (a headscarf), and garments with red and yellow stripes, a decorative motif typical of local weaving.
- Particularly noteworthy is the inscription on Lady Maria's ornate metal clasps, reading: "*Nicolo the clothmaker.*" This not only identifies the artisan responsible, but also dates the object (circa 1820–1840) and connects the depiction to the wool-cloth makers' guild.



Fig.6 - Votive portraits, Vătășești, Vâlcea



Fig.7 - Western wall of the narthex, Horezu-Târg Church - votive portraits

Thus, the fresco becomes both a symbolic “deed of ownership” and a testament to the prosperity of the emerging middle class.

As Alexianu writes in *Mode și veșminte din trecut, cinci secole de istorie costumară românească* (*Fashions and Garments of the Past. Five Centuries of Romanian Costume History*): “[...] the Oriental costume, which had been adopted by the Hungarians, Poles, and Russians as well, remained prevalent in our lands [...] from the late 16th century until the early decades of the 19th century...” (Alexianu, 1971, p.12).



Fig.8 – Votive portraits, northern wall – portraits of noble founders, mural painting from 1807

The northern wall features “Master Constandin, brother of the treasurer,” in a fur-lined brown *anteri* and a diagonally striped blue caftan; “Mistress Maria,” with a white veil flowing down her shoulders, secured by a *testemel* (traditional Balkan headscarf), a reddish wide-sleeved *anteri*, and a floral *caftan* (long, flowing outer robe or coat) with red and yellow stripes. Also recorded are: “Master Demetrius, deacon; John, his brother; Master John, son of the deacon; Constantin Slăvescu. Master Pârvu, his brother; and Master Florea, his brother” (Fig.8).

The High Nobility and the “Venetian Luxury” in Craiova

A fascinating case study is the Domnească Church of Saint Demetrius in Craiova, a monument that directly links the Wallachian elite with the European luxury trade.

Though the original 17th-century frescoes were destroyed during the extensive 19th-century restoration works directed by French architect André Lecomte du Nouÿ, their visual memory survived thanks to sketches made by the painter Émile Menpiot (Fig.9 and Fig.10).

These drawings offer critical insight into the cosmopolitan nature of the Romanian elite. Founders such as the Obedeanu and Cantacuzino families appear dressed not only in Ottoman-style garments but also in “Venetian silk” robes with gold-thread embroidery (Fig.9). For example, Lady Stanca Obedeanu (18th century) is depicted wearing a fine *borangic* (*very fine silk fabric*) headscarf, earrings, and an impressive necklace of large gold coins, a clear marker of the family’s liquid wealth.

In the article “„Portretele Ctitorilor de la Biserica Domnească „Sf. Dumitru” din Craiova, demolată între 1887-1888” (The Founders’ Portraits of the St. Demetrius Princely Church in Craiova, demolished between 1887–1888), Rodica Ciocan-Ivănescu and Father D. Bălașa describe the scene as follows in the *Mitropolia Olteniei* magazine:

“Pan Milcu, the cup-bearer, is shown in period dress, bareheaded, with short hair and a short-trimmed moustache. The palm of his right hand is missing, for the reasons already mentioned. His young and beautiful wife is shown with a *borangic* veil wrapped around her shoulders, allowing the outline of her outfit to show through. She wears earrings and a necklace of large gold coins. Her open sheepskin vest reveals *paftale*, heavy metal clasps used to fasten her belt.” (Iovănescu, Bălașa, 1972, p.528).

The detail of the *paftale* (massive metal clasps) used to fasten the richly decorated *cojoc* (sheepskin vest) suggests access to a luxury goldsmithing market blending Balkan and Western European techniques. These details illustrate that despite the Romanian Lands’ formal subordination to the Ottoman Empire, their elite (Great Boyars) maintained access to European luxury trends, especially through Venetian trade channels.

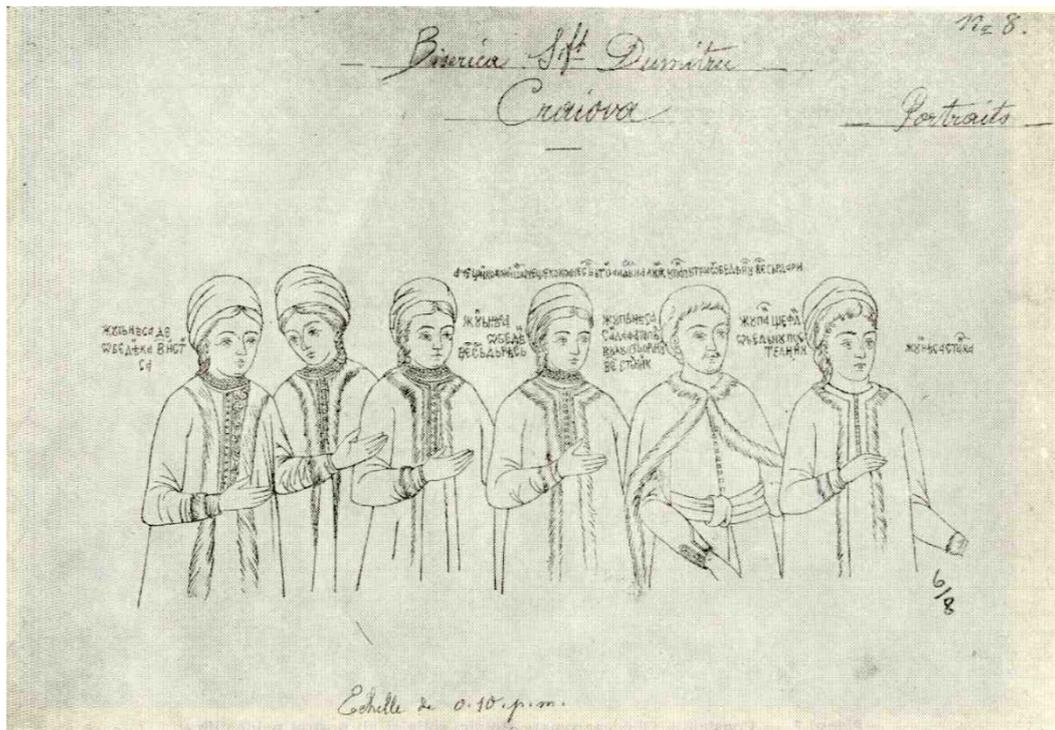


Fig.9 - Members of the Obedeau family. Sketch by French painter Émile Menpiot, 1888, made prior to the demolition of the old St. Demetrius Church in Craiova

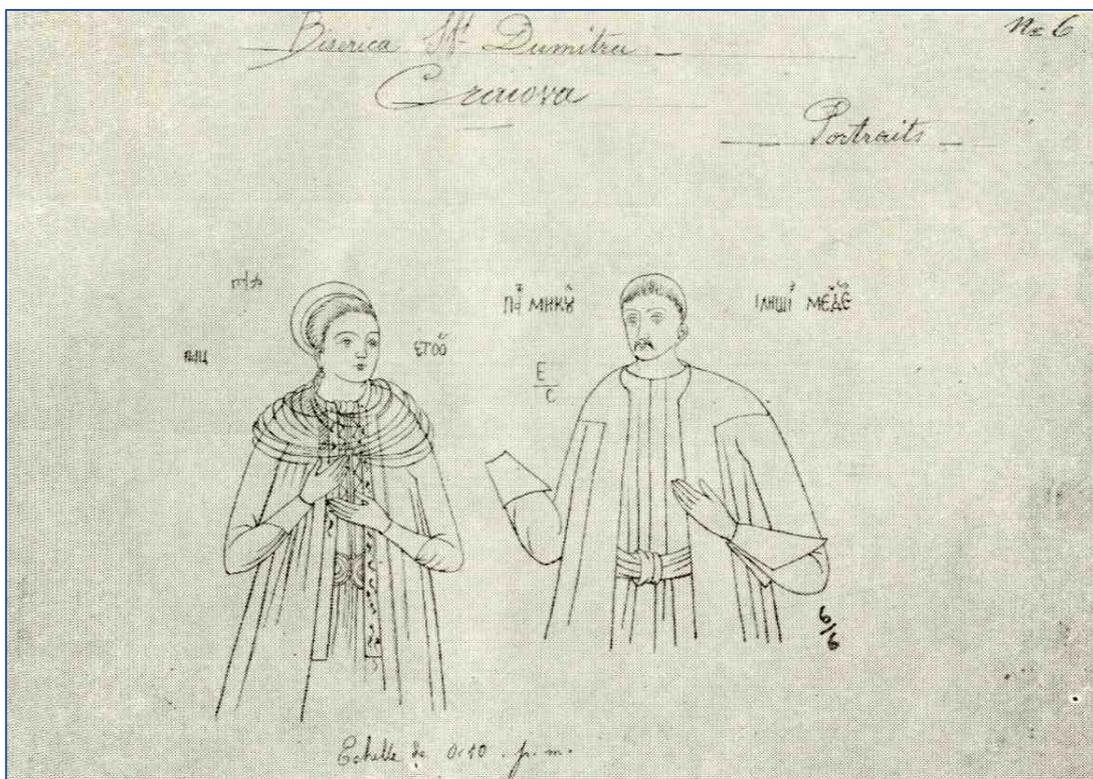


Fig. 10 - Members of the Obedeau family. Sketch by French painter Émile Menpiot, 1888, made prior to the demolition of the old St. Demetrius Church in Craiova

The Clergy and their Representation in Votive Portraits

Within the visual structure of votive portraits in Little Wallachia, the 18th century brought increased visibility to a distinct group: the clergy. While the nobility displayed their status through the *ișlic* (fur hat) and *caftan* (long robe), the secular and monastic clergy introduced a different form of authority into the frescoes: spiritual power, unexpectedly paired with social and economic strength. According to academician Răzvan Theodorescu, priests emerged, together with merchants and the lower nobility, as “actors in a distinct cultural phenomenon” (Theodorescu, 2009, p.1), transitioning from simple officiants to genuine founders of places of worship.

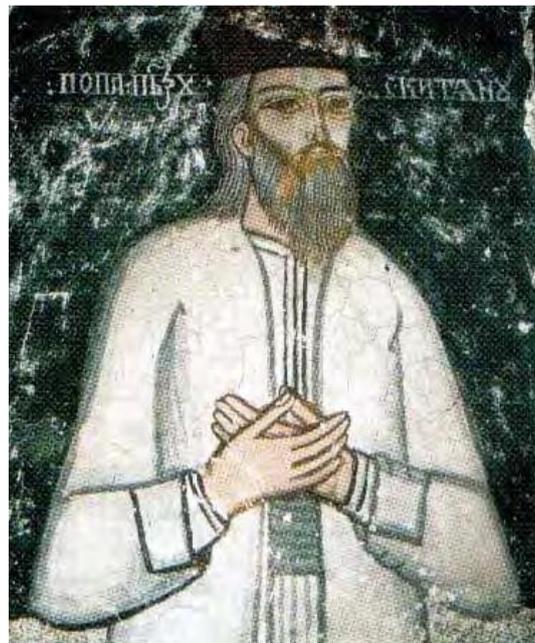


Fig.11 - Hermitage of the 44 Springs Costești. Priest Pătru Schiteanu

Priests appear in votive paintings not by chance, but as a reflection of the social mobility of their class. Wealthy protopopes such as Șerban Copăceanu (depicted in 1804 in the narthex of the church in Copăceni), as well as humble priests and hiero-deacons (Theodorescu, 2009, p. 2), capitalized on their privileged status. Exempt from taxes except during the Habsburg administration, they had the means to engage in church patronage.



Fig.12 – The Church of Viorești, Gorunești, Slătioara – Priest and his Wife

A portrait of a bishop appears in the lower section of the narthex walls in the church of Vătășești, Vâlcea. This is the image of Bishop Climent of Râmnic, whose name also features in the founders' inscription as "Beizadea" (Bulat, 1926, p.124), a term introduced in the early 18th century.



Fig.13 – Bishop Climent – votive portrait, Church of Vătășești, Vâlcea



Fig.14 - Votive painting on the south wall of the porch, Chiciora-Păușești Măglași Church



Fig.15 - Votive painting on the west wall of the porch, Cheia Church

In these votive portraits, their garments reveal a balance between humility and clerical dignity. Unlike the richly adorned ladies, the priest-founder affirms his moral authority through the restrained elegance of his liturgical or ordinary clothing, serving as a visual marker of his spiritual role. However, this contrast is not always clear-cut (Theodorescu, 2009, p.2); the portraits often include figures referred to by Nicolae Iorga as “peasant-priests”, who, despite officiating in *opinci* (traditional peasant footwear), managed through collective will to raise lasting places of worship.

Guild Solidarity and the Democratization of the Fresco.

What sets the visual discourse of the clergy in Wallachia Minor apart is the phenomenon of group solidarity.

Toward the end of the 18th century, clerical patronage rose hand in hand with the growth of the clergy itself. Frescoes captured this transformation, showing priests, deacons, and monks alongside small landowners and even free peasants (*moșneni*), united in a “brotherhood of building” that challenged rigid class divides.

At the Church in Drăgășani (1793) and at the one in Aninoasa–Glăvile, priests are depicted in the votive portraits alongside merchants (“Dinu the food vendor”) or craftsmen (“Radu the cloth maker”), reflecting the democratization of the sacred space (Theodorescu, 2009, p.9). The church wall ceases to be the exclusive domain of princely elites and becomes, through the clergy, a repository of local memory. The priest is no longer painted solely as a spiritual figure, but as a member of the “third estate” (Barcan, 2018, p.5), endorsing, through his image, the upward aspirations of a transitional social class caught between the traditional countryside and early modernity.



Fig.16 – “Annunciation” Church, Copăceni. Dumitrache the parish priest, Protopope Pietraru, Maria the priest’s wife, Master Nicolae Oteș, Bălașa the master’s son, Lady Ilinca.

The votive portrait of the Vâlcean priest thus goes beyond self-commemoration. It is a historical testimony to the clergy's function as a cultural engine and a unifying force within a rapidly transforming society, evolving from the Brâncoveanu court model to the modern realities of the 19th century.



The start of the 19th century marks a significant shift in Romanian values toward Western European cultural and institutional models, a shift commonly described in historiography as “westernisation.” Though emblematic of the 19th century, its origins trace back to earlier stages of development in the 17th century. This transition was led by a progressive elite — high clergy, rulers, and boyars educated abroad — who served as bridges between Romanian society and the wider European cultural movement (Theodorescu and Porumb, 2018, p.225).

The effects of these social shifts are accurately mirrored in the visual realm, particularly in the depiction of founders in votive portraits. Within art-historical discourse, Westernization denotes the adoption of plastic language, technical innovations, and canonical genres characteristic of the Western cultural space, from Renaissance masters to the proponents of Academicism. Within this framework, the painted garment assumes the role of the chief visual testimony to the shift from the rigidity of the medieval canon to modern portraiture.

A direct consequence of Western influences on nineteenth-century mural painting is the adoption of new technical practices, with votive portraits now executed mainly in oil. In a period when, as Victor Neumann underlines, it was “inconceivable for an elite to emerge without an understanding of European spiritual and cultural values” (Neumann, 2022, p. 253), the modernization of religious painting through the integration of Western elements became an inevitable development.

The transformation of painting centres in the southern and western regions of Romania illustrates this syncretic dynamic. Elements of Western origin were integrated into an established local tradition, shaped both by the stylistic tendencies of the era and by the educational background of the painters. The involvement of Romanian artists in Western academic circles, combined with the activity of foreign artists within Romania, demonstrates sustained contact with European values from the eighteenth century onward and delineates a decisive course toward modernity in religious art.



Fig.17, 18 – Founders, 19th century, Călui Church, Olt;

The Anatomy of Garments: The Semiotics of Power and Elegance

An analysis of the frescoes in the churches of Vâlcea reveals that painters devoted more attention to *textile anatomy* than to physical anatomy. While the bodies often appear two-dimensional, the fabrics are depicted with a tactile meticulousness that underscores the material's preciousness.

2. Male Attire – The Geometry of Power

The central item is the *caftan* or *anteri*. Long and imposing, fashioned from heavy materials such as velvet and brocade, it effaces the contours of the body, creating a pyramidal volume that conveys stability and authority.

- **The *Ișlic* and the *Calpac*:** The defining element is the headgear. The size of the *ișlic* in votive paintings (a large fur or felt hat) visually marks one's social standing. A large, spherical or trapezoidal *ishlic* signals a high-ranking boyar (vel-boyar), while more modest headwear denotes a minor noble or merchant. The *calpac* acts as a visual crown, symbolizing political authority.

- **Functional accessories:** Regional bailiffs are shown wearing a sword at the hip, a sign of their military and public order responsibilities. Chancellors wear an inkwell (*calemgiu*) at the belt, symbolizing literacy and administrative function. These objects are not decorative, but rather serve as visual "badges" of office.

2. Female Elegance – Between East and West

The lady's portrait (the founder's wife) provides an opportunity to display the family's prosperity. Women become visual "showcases" of their husband's wealth.

- The attire consists of layered gowns, often featuring slit sleeves (hanging sleeves) that reveal the expensive silk of the inner blouse.

- Sable and ermine adorn collars and cuffs.
- The jewellery is lavish: strings of pearls, oversized *paftale* (clasps) in silver or gold, and rings on multiple fingers. The head is covered by a *marama* (*headscarf*) or a feminine turban (a Phanariot influence), styled to frame the face without fully concealing it, allowing for a subtle vanity, even in a sacred space.

It is precisely this meticulous rendering of textile details, the fine embroidery and the texture of furs, that makes the cleaning of the pictorial layer, within mural painting conservation and restoration operations, a critical intervention. Excessive cleaning risks removing the final glazes that define the material's preciousness, thereby erasing information related to the founder's social rank.

Collective Identity versus Individual Identity

A particularly fascinating feature of these frescoes is the tension established between the individual and the collective.

The founder's family is organized into a "static procession". Men are consistently placed on the right-hand side, facing the altar, or on the southern side, perceived as the luminous and honourable side. Women occupy the left, or northern, side. Such spatial ordering mirrors the patriarchal structure of society.

Children are depicted in ascending order of height and are frequently dressed in garments identical to those of their parents. Boys appear as small boyars wearing diminutive caftans, while girls are portrayed as young ladies. In pictorial terms, children are not granted individual psychological depth. Instead, they function as symbols of dynastic continuity.

A careful reading of the founders' faces reveals a strong degree of typification. Almond-shaped eyes, straight noses, and solemn, humble expressions prevail. Individual physical features (defects, asymmetries) are rarely emphasized. Identity is not anchored in facial likeness but in the "uniform". Contemporary viewers recognized the figures by "reading" their garment: fox fur denoted one rank, sable another, while the red colour of the *anteri* served as a clear sign of power.

By the mid-nineteenth century (approaching 1848), the frescoes capture a striking phenomenon often described as the "transfiguration of Romania". In late votive paintings, alongside elderly figures dressed in Oriental caftans, their sons appear dressed in German-style fashion, wearing tailcoats, frock coats, and narrow trousers. This stylistic juxtaposition on the same church wall visually encapsulates the passage from East to West and signals the modernization and Europeanization of the Romanian elites.

CONCLUSIONS:

The Fresco as a Living Archive and the Imperative of Restoration

The analysis of the votive portrait in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Oltenia demonstrates that the “epidermis” of sacred buildings in this region represents far more than mere ecclesiastical decoration. It constitutes an irreplaceable visual archive of a society shaped at the intersection of empires and historical phases. In a permeable frontier zone, where Ottoman forms encountered Habsburg order and were later reshaped by Western modernity, the church wall became the setting in which the “third estate” defined and stabilized its identity.

The locally specific phenomenon of the “democratization of patronage” transformed the narthex into a social gallery where priests, merchants (cloth makers, fur and sheepskin artisans), and members of the lesser nobility displayed their rank through a carefully articulated “textile anatomy”. Although the physical anatomy of the figures was often rendered schematically, the anatomy of dress, from spherical *işlic* headgear and Oriental *caftans* to the Western tailcoats appearing around 1848, was depicted with documentary rigor, functioning as a strict code of authority and belonging. This visual evolution, moving from the “Venetian luxury” of the great boyar houses to clerical austerity or the practical attire of an emergent middle class, offers the international scholar a distinctive view of an “Orthodox bourgeoisie” that affirmed its social mobility through post-Byzantine visual instruments.

Against this background, restoration emerges as a matter of critical importance that surpasses purely technical concerns. As theorized by Cesare Brandi and Alois Rieg, the monument is as a carrier of memorial values that must be transmitted to the future in an unaltered state. Intervention in the mural painting of Lesser Wallachia thus becomes an act of rescuing communal memory. The erasure of “age value” or the distortion of garment details caused by poorly executed restoration would amount to deleting vital fragments of Southeastern Europe’s social history.

Consequently, safeguarding the visual integrity of these mural ensembles is the only means of keeping alive the bond between the founder of the past and the contemporary viewer. It is only by scientifically preserving this painted “social skin” that we can maintain a captivating intercultural dialogue, revealing that even in a rural church in Vâlcea or Gorj, the sweeping changes of European history are inscribed in pigments and textiles.

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ECCLESIAL SCULPTURE AND POLYCHROMY: FROM ROMANIAN HERITAGE TO EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES

ESCULTURA RELIGIOSA E POLICROMIA: DO PATRIMÓNIO ROMENO ÀS PERSPECTIVAS EUROPEIAS

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Abstract

This study explores the role of polychromy in ecclesiastical sculpture, focusing on its theological, artistic, and technical dimensions within the Romanian and European contexts. Polychromy—defined as the stratigraphic ensemble of ground, metallic leaf, pigments, and varnishes applied to carved wood—emerges as not merely a decorative addition, but as a constitutive element of sacred imagery. The research highlights the iconostasis as the privileged support of polychromy in Orthodox liturgical space, where colour and gilding articulate iconographic registers and convey theological symbolism. Comparative analysis reveals the continuity of polychrome traditions in the Orthodox East, particularly in Athonite and Meteora workshops, and the shifting perceptions in Western Europe, where medieval sculpture was originally painted but later valued for the “purity of marble.”

Methodologically, the study examines traditional techniques including egg tempera, gesso preparation, bole application, and water and oil-based gilding, alongside the use of natural pigments and emulsions. It also addresses conservation challenges, as well as the fragility of polychrome layers, the instability of wooden supports, and ethical dilemmas in restoration between preserving patina and reconstructing original appearance. The Brâncovenesc period is recognized as the pinnacle of Romanian polychrome sculpture, where Byzantine heritage is synthesized with Western influences.

Ultimately, the research demonstrates that polychromy in ecclesial sculpture constitutes a complex cultural phenomenon, integrating matter, symbolism, and liturgical function. It reflects a theology of visual transfiguration, where colour and gold embody divine presence and spiritual communion. Conservation and restoration of this fragile heritage remain both a challenge and a responsibility, as the loss of polychromy signifies not only material degradation but the disappearance of an entire universe of symbols and beliefs.

Keywords: polychromy, iconostasis, gilding, tempera, materiality, conservation-restoration

Introduction

Polychromy—understood as the ensemble of ground layers, metallic leaf, pigments, and varnishes applied to a carved support—is a structural component of the liturgical image. In the Christian tradition, colour does not merely serve a decorative role, but is part of a language meant to express divine reality, shaping the believer's relationship with the ecclesial space (Sendler, 2005, p.158).

Thus, in Orthodox ecclesial art, polychromy should not be regarded as a simple decorative addition, but as a constitutive part of the sacred image. *“Iconography depicts in colours what the word affirms in writing”*—a testimony of the Byzantine tradition, which constantly emphasized the correspondence between visual and theological language. In Orthodox dogmatic and iconographic tradition, these two dimensions cannot be separated; they complement each other insofar as they express the same revealed reality (Uspensky & Lossky, 2003, pp.27–28).

From a methodological perspective, polychromy—derived from the Greek *polys* (many) and *chroma* (colour)—designates the ensemble of techniques through which a sculpted or painted surface receives successive layers (Mircea Popescu, 1998, p. 61). In specialized literature, this has been metaphorically called *“a sculpture's second skin”* (Dias; et. al., 2015), referring not only to its protective role but also to its function of integrating the material into sculpture. Dilara Ucar Sariyildiz argues in her thesis that without the polychrome layer, sculpture remains incomplete, and its visual and theological message is diminished (Sariyildiz, 2021, pp.33–45, 64). In the West, archaeological and laboratory research in recent decades has radically changed perceptions of medieval sculpture. Dilara Ucar Sariyildiz demonstrated that statues considered for centuries to be white were originally fully painted. Analyses at Chartres Cathedral (Victoir, 2015, pp.125–127) or the Parthenon sculptures (Verri et al., 2023, p.1173) reveal clear traces of pigments, confirming the polychrome character of these works.

Within liturgical architecture, wooden sculpture occupies a privileged place, including elements such as the iconostasis, choir stalls, episcopal thrones, baldachins, or royal doors. The iconostasis represents a central example, evolving from the simple Byzantine templon with columns and architrave to the monumental icon screens of the 17th–18th centuries, where carved wood was consistently completed with polychromy and gilding, thus constructing a visual theology of the liturgical space.

The polychromy of iconostases reflects not only the artistic skills of the time but also a profound spiritual symbolism. Bright colours and gilded details were used to underline the importance and sacredness of the liturgical space. The 19th century was a period of transformation and modernization, in which Romania began to open itself to Western influences, through new elements introduced in working styles and artistic visions. Styles and painting techniques varied—some influenced by Byzantine traditions, others by new European artistic currents, shaped by the social and cultural context of the era. *“Iconostases created in the 19th century do not belong to a pure style, since their decorative repertoire includes combinations of Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, and Neoclassical elements”* (Cojocar et al., 2017, pp.12–14).



Fig.1 - Column from the imperial register of the Church of Maica Precista in Ploiești, Prahova County

Theoretical and Methodological Approach

In the Romanian context, the iconostasis—a sculptural and pictorial wooden ensemble that separates the nave from the altar—became the privileged support of polychromy, being constantly present in churches (Drăguț, 2000, p.361).

For the Romanian space, Brâncovenesc art utilized polychromy as an instrument for emphasizing ornamental detail and hierarchizing iconographic registers, employing alternations of gilding, lazurite, and saturated colours on limewood or oak sculpture. Polychromy thus became a fundamental element in defining ecclesiastical art. Vasile Drăguț observed that Romanian art of the 17th–18th centuries cannot be understood without the symbiosis between sculpture, painting, and gilding, all united in a coherent visual program (Drăguț, 1971, pp.15–22). In the same direction, Vasile Florea underlined that polychromy is part of the visual horizon of Romanian civilization, marking the transition from the medieval era to early modernity through a combination of Byzantine tradition and Western influences (Florea, 2007, pp.299–300).

Recent theoretical reflections on materiality add a new dimension to the discussion. Daniel Miller affirms that „there will be a link between the practical engagement with materiality and the beliefs or philosophy that emerged at that time” (Miller, 2005, p.11). Applied to polychromy, this framework shows that wood, pigment, and gold together form a visual language in which each layer may have symbolic and theological significance.



Fig.2 - The iconostasis of the Monastery of Sitaru Balamuci, Ilfov County,

Theoretical concepts about polychromy find their roots in medieval and Renaissance treatises on painting techniques. Cennino Cennini, in his *Treatise on Painting*, emphasized the importance of preparing the wooden support, using gesso, applying gold leaf, and fixing natural pigments in a system that was not merely technical but spiritually charged (Cennini, 1977, p.37).

Modern technical treatises, such as Ralph Mayer's *The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques*, clearly state that the materiality of polychrome sculpture requires detailed knowledge of supports, pigment behaviour, and the relationship between medium (oil, tempera, glue) and wooden surface (Mayer, 1970, p.138). In the

same register, the *Pigment Compendium* documents not only the provenance and composition of traditional pigments (vermilion, azurite, malachite, red ochre, etc.), but also conservation issues generated by their chemical reactions with binders or air (Eastaugh et al., 2008, pp.7–9).

The conservation of polychrome wood today involves not only physical restoration but also the reconstitution of the original concept of polychromy as theological and artistic integration. Restorers face a dilemma: whether to return the object to its original state or to preserve the patina and historical alterations.

Therefore, polychromy in ecclesial sculpture cannot be treated merely as a decorative addition, but as a constitutive component involving tradition, technique, symbolism, and liturgical function. The following chapter will analyse this evolution in the Romanian space. Ultimately, the research aims to demonstrate that sculptural polychromy in religious art is not a simple decorative addition, but an essential dimension of Orthodox visual theology.

Thus, polychromy presents itself not only as an aesthetic theme but as a complex cultural phenomenon, reflecting the synthesis between tradition and innovation, between matter and symbolism. Its full understanding requires an interdisciplinary analysis, and this study aims to contribute to clarifying this theme through a historical, comparative, and theological approach.

In the Balkan and Greek space, the tradition of sculptural polychromy was maintained with greater continuity. The Athonite and Meteora workshops transmitted a model of connection between polychrome sculpture and painting, a model that directly influenced the Wallachian and Moldavian workshops. Thus, the Romanian space is inscribed in this network of the Orthodox East, but with its own adaptations, visible especially in local ornamentation (Dumitrescu, 2006, pp.210–216).

By comparison, Western Europe followed a different trajectory. In the Middle Ages, the sculpture of Gothic cathedrals was intensely polychromed, as demonstrated by the research of Dilara Ucar Sariyildiz, who shows that “medieval images, today perceived as white, were originally entirely covered with colour” (Sariyildiz, 2021, pp.33–45). However, beginning with the Italian Renaissance, the interest in the “purity of marble” reduced the role of polychromy, which was preserved only fragmentarily, especially in Spanish and Portuguese Baroque art. Tiago Dias describes the *estofado* technique, in which the layer of colour was scratched to reveal the gold beneath, considering it “an expression of an aesthetics of light and movement” (Dias, et al., 2015, pp.35–51).

The Role of Polychromy in the Iconographic Program and Working Technique

In the Eastern tradition, egg tempera is not merely “one technique among others,” but the method that best responds to the liturgical meaning of the icon. It developed through a multi-secular continuity (from Antiquity, through Byzantium) and

came to function as a traditional technical system, transmitted almost unchanged until today (Uspensky & Lossky, 2003, p.80).

This “stability” does not mean rigidity, but rather rules of work that ensure a coherent result: preparation of the support (uniform white ground), incision of contours, gilding of necessary areas before colour, and then painting in successive layers (proplasma, redrawing, modelling, and glazes). The key to polychromy in tempera is the egg yolk binder (yolk + water, with a little vinegar), which binds mineral and organic pigments. It is not a purely technical option, but one that determines the matte, stable aspect of colors and, implicitly, their theological “voice” in the icon. The yolk/pigment ratio is decisive: too much yolk → gloss and cracking; too little → easy erasure; the correct proportion yields a matte, durable film, remarkably resistant over time and to light (Uspensky & Lossky, 2003, pp. 82-84).

On the palette, tradition prefers mineral pigments (earth colours) and natural organics; artificial colours appear only as supplements. Chromatic choice does not pursue decorative effects, but fundamental symbolic requirements (especially in vestments) and historical truth. Beyond this, the icon painter has freedom of nuance and combination—explaining why polychromy remains “traditional” in principle, yet personal in execution (Uspensky & Lossky, 2003).

Chevalier and Gheerbrant emphasize that gold is the sign of eternity and transcendence, while blue expresses cosmic dimensions. Red signifies sacrifice and martyrdom, blue symbolizes heaven and the kingdom, and green represents life and renewal. Thus, each colour in the polychromy of the iconostasis and ecclesial furniture conveyed a precise theological dimension (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 2009, pp.58, 116, 792, 1001).

In the iconostasis, polychromy plays the role of articulating iconographic registers. The iconostasis both separates and unites the nave and the altar; through color and gold, it becomes a visual bridge between the two worlds (Uspensky & Lossky, 2003, pp.92–100). For example, the imperial register, decorated with intense gilding, was emphasized in relation to the upper registers, where the chromatics of icons dominated. Thus, polychromy not only completed sculpture but also organized the entire visual message hierarchically.

Theological Function

Polychromy was not intended merely to beautify the liturgical object, but had a theological function. Leonid Uspensky and Vladimir Lossky explain that the icon is not painted for the pleasure of the eye, but to transmit the transfigured reality of the world; colours participate in the revelation of this reality (Uspensky & Lossky, 2003, pp.50–51). Gold, as a symbol of uncreated light, made divine glory visible. Red was the colour of sacrifice, blue signified heaven, and green symbolized life and renewal. Through polychromy, theology was expressed visually.

The icon is not a simple visual reproduction, but a form of personal presence: it does not depict an impersonal “nature,” but the incarnate Divine Person.

This connection ensures that veneration offered to the image passes to the prototype, not stopping at matter. The icon thus opens a relationship with the One represented, which is why it constitutes—together with theology in words—a single expression of Revelation. In the tradition of the Church, “theology” and “image” are so closely united through the Incarnation that “theology of the image” becomes almost a pleonasm (Uspensky, 2006, pp.58, 141).

This Christological foundation is clearly reflected in Canon 82 of the Trullan Council, which requires the direct image of Christ the Man (not a symbol), indicating that mere representation of the historical fact is insufficient: the manner of representation must allow the glory of the Incarnate Word to shine through. Therefore, the icon does not “represent the Divinity,” inaccessible to sight, but indicates human participation in divine life, faithfully preserving the historical reality of the prototype while making visible the “likeness” to God to which humanity is called (Uspensky, 2006, pp.41, 80).



Fig.3 - The iconostasis of Alecu Bagdad Church in Râmnicu Sărat, Buzău County

Consequently, the icon has a pedagogical role: it not only shows the transfigured universe but also allows participation in it. Icons are placed as markers of holiness, meant to sanctify the world and orient the life of believers (Uspensky, 2006, pp.90, 149). The experience of uncreated light, the classic theme of the Eastern Tradition, is translated into the language of the image: the one who participates in divine energy becomes, in a certain sense, light; the halo and the way of painting the face indicate

precisely this illumination. Thus, the icon is not merely an image, but participation—a path of knowledge and communion, integrated into liturgical life and the teaching of the Church.

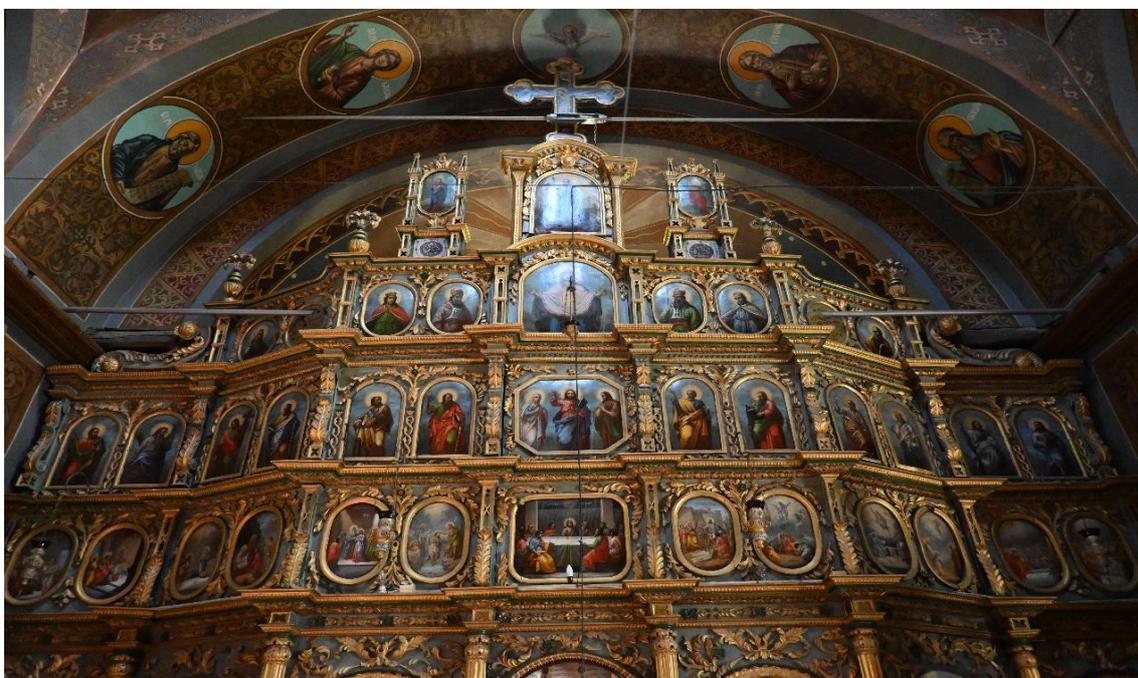


Fig.4 - The iconostasis of the Church of the Holy Angels in the city of Buzău, Buzău County.

The Technique of Polychromy on Wood

The polychromy of wooden sculpture and icons is fundamentally based on the technique of tempera, transmitted from Antiquity through Byzantine treatises and consolidated in the Renaissance. Preparing the support was an essential process: boards of lime, poplar, or fir were carefully chosen, covered with canvas and successive layers of ground (a mixture of glue and chalk), meant to provide a smooth and resistant substrate for the application of painting (Thompson, 2004, pp.32–48).

In medieval Romanian art, the raw materials used by painters came predominantly from the natural environment, from the commerce of the time, or were obtained artisanally within their own workshops. Local resources such as linseed oil from native crops, lime from regional quarries, resin from coniferous forests, and eggs from local production were preferred due to accessibility and low cost. For black pigments, charcoal from vine or oak wood, bones, or resin was used; ochres, lime, and gypsum were extracted and processed from natural deposits. These practices reflect a local technical tradition adapted to available resources and the specific cultural context (Mihalcu, 1984, p.26).

Regarding the technique of polychromy (support, ground, binder, emulsions, gilding, stability), Ralph Mayer's *The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques* explains that polychromy on wood is applied over a white gesso ground: in classical tempera practice, the unincised panel is "on average" the most suitable, because it absorbs the binder without losing whiteness; however, thick strokes are not recommended at first, since excessive absorption can "steal" the binder, leaving pigment insufficiently bound (Mayer, 1957, p.299).

In the logic of the traditional workshop, polychromy relies on rigorous preparation of the support and a coherent technical chain (adhesive → ground → binder + pigments → chromatic films). Cennino Cennini indicates as "universal adhesive" the glue obtained from parchment scrapings, preferred for attaching gypsum (gesso) to panels and even as a binder for certain colours. As an alternative, he mentions casein glue with lime ("lime-cheese") for strong adhesion; all these operations lead to a surface suitable for gilding and painting (Cennini, 1912, pp.79-80).

An essential aspect is the preparation of the support. The wood was first covered with a layer of canvas and then with several layers of white ground (gesso), obtained by mixing chalk with animal glue. This smooth and white surface allowed the subsequent application of colours with maximum intensity and good durability of the pictorial layer (Thompson, 2004, pp.32-48).

C.Săndulescu-Verna distinguishes between weak (absorbent) ground and semi-fat ground (with glue-egg-oil emulsion), insisting on workshop diagnosis: a ground too thick or too loaded with glue cracks when bent, while one too poor in glue "absorbs" the oil from the paint and mattifies the film. Corrections are made through thin films of glue/shellac or by light isolation before painting. For semi-fat ground, the author recommends careful emulsification of egg yolk and/or a small amount of linseed oil in the glue solution, possibly aided by soap/bile as emulsifiers, with the golden rule: oil must not exceed the adhesive; excess is corrected by adding glue and water. In fat tempera, the emulsion (glue/egg + oil in fine dispersion) yields thin, resistant films with optical behaviour close to matte oil (Săndulescu-Verna, 2000, pp.228-229, 295, 297).

Polychromy, in the context of tempera painting, is not merely an aesthetic choice but an expression of technical rigor and refined craftsmanship. Daniel V. Thompson emphasizes that tempera painting involves careful stratification of colours, where each tone is built through subtle superpositions, avoiding direct mixing on the palette. This approach favours a clear, luminous, and durable polychromy, in contrast with the more spontaneous effects of oil painting (Thompson, 2004, pp.165-168).

The tempera technique required the use of natural pigments (mineral or organic), finely ground and mixed with egg emulsion. This combination offered colour transparency but also resistance over time. Colours were applied in thin, superimposed layers to obtain luminosity and depth. In sculptural polychromy, this procedure allowed the highlighting of volumes through subtle tonal transitions, approaching the effects of mural painting. In preparing colours, pigments were ground in distilled water (kept as a paste) and mixed immediately before use with egg emulsion (in equal volumes, as needed), which increased efficiency and consistency of the film; keeping colours ready-made directly "in egg" during the day usually led to alteration. Stratification followed the classical rule of gradation: in aqueous media, no upper layer should be less flexible

or have significantly greater adhesion than the one beneath, otherwise the film cracks or peels. For profiled or sculpted panels, tradition (Cennini) distinguishes between *gesso grosso* and *gesso sottile*, with practical observations regarding the (non)utility of canvas reinforcement and methods of isolating wood; casein solutions allow precise formulations (percentages of binder/pigment) (Cennini, 1912, pp.118–124).

Regarding emulsions (tempera with oil/waxes/resins), Mayer corrects a frequent misconception: an authentic emulsion cannot be “thinned” at will with both water and turpentine; it dilutes only with the solvent appropriate to the continuous phase (oil in water/water in oil), otherwise the structure destabilizes (Mayer, 1957, p.243).



Fig.5 - Detail of the Royal Doors of the iconostasis at Ciolanu Monastery, Buzău County.

A. Vinner adds operative recipes for casein tempera: oily casein emulsion (casein glue + linseed oil/fatty varnish) is obtained by gradually loading the glue with oil, then adjusting with water to the desired consistency; colors (finely ground) are mixed on the slab, resulting in a film that hardens quickly, becomes insoluble in water, and adheres well to prepared canvas/wood/cardboard. In the same vein, the author describes variants with copal varnish or poppy oil, useful for controlling tone and drying time (Vinner, 1956, pp.77–78).

Egg–oil emulsions can extend textural possibilities (semi-impasto), but are sensitive to small variations in recipe and conditions (phase separations, gummy drying, etc.), which requires testing and careful emulsification. Gum Arabic emulsions generate a film less resistant to water, requiring caution in reapplications to avoid “lifting” the underlying layer. In contrast, casein–oil emulsions are prone to rapid yellowing; Mayer recommends not using them for permanent works, and in casein-based grounds, not to introduce oil if whiteness is to be preserved. The simple test with zinc white exposed to light promptly reveals the tendency to yellow. A safe variant is casein–damar emulsion (also used in “plastic gesso” for repairs), but even here, additives (e.g., glycerine) increase solubility of the film; the general warning remains: oil in casein-based systems tends to yellow (Mayer, 1957, pp.232-233, 237, 243, 404).

Gilding as a Decorative Process and Compatibility of Pictorial Support Materials

Water gilding is carried out on a layer of bole made of ochre earth and/or clay bound with a protein adhesive (usually animal glue or egg white). The bole, moistened during the process, allows the gold leaf to be fixed; after drying, the gold can be polished with animal teeth or an agate stone, obtaining a very glossy finish. For this method, the wooden support must be prepared with a thick white ground capable of resisting the pressure of polishing. In southern Europe, this ground is usually calcium sulphate (gypsum/anhydrite, i.e., gesso), applied with a protein binder (Le Gac et al., 2009, p.425).



Fig.6 - Preparation of the bole for gilding, using the pestle on the marble slab

The poliment (a fine layer of Armenian bole over gesso) allows polishing to a “mirror” finish, but is strictly for interior use, since glue + bole do not resist humidity or freeze–thaw cycles. Cennini describes the same logic on canvas/taffeta: gesso, then bole in layers, gold leaf, and polishing for gloss; the procedure requires firm support beneath the fabric to avoid deforming the gold (Cennini, 1977, p.119; Săndulescu-Verna, 2000, pp.443–444).

Gilding is an integral part of polychromy: gold leaf is applied on gesso with specific adhesives; egg white functions better as an “isolator” for gold than as a painting binder, and gold is highly inert and stable (it does not oxidize or change color), which explains the longevity of gilded fields in polychrome decoration (Mayer, 1957, pp.237, 552).

Metal foils (Schlagmetall: bronze/brass, etc.) are not applied to poliment and cannot be polished like gold; they are glued with mordants or weak varnishes. In the practice of “false gilding,” a yellow varnish over silver/aluminium visually imitates gold, but requires protection since silver/aluminium oxidizes rapidly (Săndulescu-Verna, 2000, pp.450–453).

Oil gilding is carried out on *mixture*: a fatty layer based on siccative oil loaded with pigments rich in metallic oxides. The gold leaf is laid when this layer is nearly dry. The surface cannot be polished, which is why the technique is known as matte gilding; moreover, it requires less strict preparation and execution than water gilding. In both methods, the color of the underlying layers influences the perceived tone of the gold (Le Gac et al., 2009, p.425).

In the workshop, *mixture* is a mordant based on boiled/siccative linseed oil (historically with lead oxides), applied thinly, left to “set,” then the leaf is laid. It is a durable solution for exterior use, applied on wood, canvas, metal, glass, or even drywall. Cennini also describes an oily mordant recipe (boiled oil + lead white + verdigris) and emphasizes application with a very fine brush, the adhesion test (if it grips slightly to the fingertip), and laying the leaf (Cennini, 1977, p.109; Săndulescu-Verna, 2000, pp.438–439).

Recent studies reveal the composition of gold leaf from different periods, especially the Baroque. Analysis of the main altarpiece of the Old Cathedral of Coimbra (Portugal) shows that gilding functions as a stable stratigraphic system: water-based bole gilding for glossy finish and oil mordant gilding for matte surfaces, with extremely thin leaf ($\approx 0.24\text{--}0.45\ \mu\text{m}$). Between 1502 and 1685, very fine gold was used (up to 23–24 ct), while by 1900, a ternary alloy of about 20 carats appeared, linked to material economy, with effects on hue. Historically, raw material often came from minted coins, especially when high-purity gold was required (Le Gac et al., 2009, pp.423–429).

For Western Baroque altarpieces, physico-chemical studies showed that gold leaf followed a robust technical standard: gold of about 22–23 K, deposited on bole (over a well-prepared ground), with small variations of Ag/Cu that may suggest chronology or source. In contrast, traces of Pd, Pt, Te, etc., detected by SEM-EDS cannot alone substantiate attributions or provenance, which requires correlation of stratigraphy, major composition, and historical context for authentication or conservation-restoration decisions (Bidarra et al., 2009).

Until the 18th century, gold leaf was generally obtained from minted coins, not “virgin” gold. European treatises and sources explicitly mention this practice: Cennini (~1400), Vasari (1550), old Spanish *piastri* coins (Diderot & d’Alembert, 1752), or simply “gold coins.” Since some coins were nearly pure and others alloys, craftsmen producing leaf had to refine weaker batches, resorting to cupellation and separation to obtain gold suitable for gilding.



Fig.7 - Detail photograph illustrating the process of polychromy on a sculptural fragment (gesso, bole, gilding).

Compatibility of successive layers follows the rule “weak over strong.” In preparing supports and grounds, the basic rule remains: a layer with lower glue concentration over one with higher concentration, not the reverse. Grounds that are too thick or have too much glue they tend to crack; those that are too weak “absorb oil” and mattify the film. Correction is made with thin films of glue/emulsion/shellac, not by thick fatty layers. Moreover, oil grounds require long maturation (months) before painting; otherwise, contractions and fissures appear. For “mixed” superpositions, adhesion of oil over tempera is generally better than tempera over oil (where ox bile/soapy water is needed for adhesion). For the colour layer, the rule is reversed: “fat over lean,” in which pigments are mixed with fatty emulsions or oil, over a ground with lower glue concentration (Săndulescu-Verna, 2000, pp.438-444).

Regarding pigments, modern studies have identified both natural materials (cinnabar, azurite, malachite, ochre) and artificial substitutes, widely used after the 17th century. Modern compendia show that, for example, lead white and cinnabar were

highly valued but unstable in contact with humidity, which explains frequent discolorations in old icons (Eastaugh et al., 2008, pp.7-9).

Conservation and Restoration Issues of Wooden Polychromy

The conservation of polychromy applied to wood is among the most difficult tasks faced by heritage restorers. The fragility of the pictorial layer, combined with the instability of the wooden support, makes ecclesial ensembles—iconostases, choir stalls, episcopal thrones—among the most vulnerable heritage objects. Unlike mural painting, which benefits from direct fixation on a mineral support, painting on wood is constantly subject to the internal tensions of organic material. Wood changes with every fluctuation in temperature and humidity, leading to cracks, fissures, and losses of the polychrome layer.

Conservation problems begin with the choice of material. Although limewood was considered the most stable for sculpture and painting, it is not immune to attack by xylophagous insects or to seasonal contraction and expansion. Daniel V. Thompson notes that, applied to improperly prepared wood, even the best pigment cannot endure (Thompson, 2004, p.32).

Another issue is the gold leaf applied over the bole, which is extremely sensitive to mechanical shocks. In many churches today, areas of gilding are completely eroded, revealing the reddish bole beneath. This phenomenon is not only a material loss but also a symbolic one, since gold was theologically interpreted as a symbol of divine light. The restoration of gold raises ethical dilemmas: should a new leaf be applied, or should only the original fragments be preserved?

Analysing the conservation state of several 18th–19th century iconostases on which I had the opportunity to work, I observed a series of factors that contributed to the degradation of the polychrome layer over time. Starting from the environment with fluctuating humidity and seasonal temperature changes, the human factor played a major role in their deterioration through inappropriate interventions.



Fig.8 - Detail of polychromy on the iconostasis of the Chapel of St. John the Evangelist, Căldărușani Monastery, Ilfov County, showing erosions of the gold layer down to the bole

The contraction and swelling of wood fibres are the result of humidity and temperature variations, which, in the case of panels composed of multiple boards, can lead to detachment. These phenomena occur when wood undergoes humidity variations greater than 30%. Sudden and significant changes in these factors may cause material losses, creating gaps of various sizes. Water infiltration from the substrate creates optimal conditions for the development of biodeteriogens, which serve as indicators of the conservation state.

Wood, being a hygroscopic material, is sensitive to fluctuations in humidity and temperature. Dimensional differences are particularly evident in contact areas between two or more assembled boards, which, over time, have detached due to changes in their original dimensions.

Xylophagous attack can severely weaken the entire iconostasis, sometimes creating gaps of different sizes throughout the wooden mass. Certain areas were even completed with new wood, often in a coarse and unesthetic manner. Other interventions, carried out with an “aesthetic” purpose, consisted of covering polychrome elements damaged by xylophagous attack with a new layer of paint, intended to conceal these degradations (Postolache, ACS 2014, p.173).



Fig.9 - Frieze detail of the iconostasis of the Church of the Holy Voivodes, Baia de Aramă, Mehedinți County, showing losses of the polychrome layer as a result of xylophagous insect attack.

The preparation layer of polychromy is a mixture of solid matter and a binder that must provide adhesive capacity, flexibility to resist fibre movements, durability, moderate reaction to humidity variations, and neutrality toward pigments. The decomposition of the binder leads to loss of adhesion of the preparation layer, forming lacunae in the ground and consequently in the colour layer, as a result of humidity and temperature fluctuations. With higher mechanical inertia compared to wood fibres, which contract and expand more easily, the preparation layer forms so-called “roof-

slope detachments,” appearing when accumulated tensions seek release and equilibrium.

Between the pictorial layer and the preparation layer, there is a strong connection, and degradation of one can occur under the influence of the other. Excessive humidity, dryness, or temperature variations are the main causes of deterioration of the pictorial layer. One encounters micro-cracks in networks; fissures correlated with those transmitted from the ground.

The forms and conservation state are dictated by thickness, type of pigments, and binders used. Reacting more slowly to humidity than the support, which curves and expands, the paint film cracks and eventually transforms into lacunae. Fluctuations of temperature and humidity, technical flaws, loss of binder cohesion, and inappropriate human actions lead to exfoliation.



Fig.10 - Frieze detail of the iconostasis of the Church of the Holy Voivodes, Baia de Aramă, Mehedinți County, showing losses of the polychrome layer.

On the surface of the painting, various contaminants have been deposited—organic (wax, biological residues, textile fibres, etc.) or mineral (dust, soil, etc.). These degrade the surface by obstructing the image. Often, deposits disrupt the balance of the object through corrosive or oxidative actions, or by chemical interaction between degrading agents and original material.

The carved decoration of iconostases was often re-gilded with metallic leaf, later repainted with bronze. Through this stage, the entire sculpture was covered with a new golden layer. The main form of deterioration is the aesthetic barrier imposed over the

original colour layer, representing a later intervention meant to mask lacunae, erosions, and existing degradations.

The varnish, the final layer of the painting, is extremely vulnerable to humidity and temperature variations, gradually losing elasticity and becoming brittle. Exposure to light accelerates aging, causing yellowing and reduced transparency, which alters chromatic perception. Natural resin-based varnishes suffer evident degradation: they become powdery, friable, and lose protective capacity. Chemically, the main processes of alteration are polymer oxidations generated by interaction with oxygen and atmospheric pollutants. These reactions produce coloured compounds responsible for yellowing and loss of freshness in the pictorial layer. Consequently, varnish ceases to act as a protective barrier and becomes a factor of visual and material degradation (Istudor, 2011, p.226).



Fig.11 - Detail of the iconostasis of Bagdad Church in Râmnicu Sărat, Buzău County, showing varnish burnishing caused by aging

Additionally, some iconostases underwent structural modifications, with new constitutive elements added, new icons or registers replacing old ones, or components (doors, icons, etc.) being transferred from one iconostasis to another.

All these physical and chemical modifications contributed to the conservation of iconostases in different forms: some protected the original layer, others damaged it. Yet,

interventions carried out by restorers, if performed according to restoration principles, extend their lifespan.

In order to re-establish the function of an artwork, whether secular or ecclesial, the methodology of conservation-restoration requires detailed study and adaptation to the specific context of each object. Thus, restoring aesthetic appearance or functionality must not be achieved through major interventions that alter the original image.

Restoration must imperatively respect the principles of conservation to preserve the authenticity of the cultural asset. Restoration can have negative effects, such as damaging the original by introducing incompatible materials, or positive effects when ensuring continuity over time, improving the reading of the work by completing certain areas. Minimizing interventions is justified when they produce negative effects, and restoration must be seen as a compromise, with treatments that may have both positive and negative consequences (Brandi, 1996, pp.49-51).

The degradations of polychromy arise not only from natural causes but also from human interventions. In the 18th–19th centuries, many iconostases were repainted to match the taste of the era or to replace lost colours.

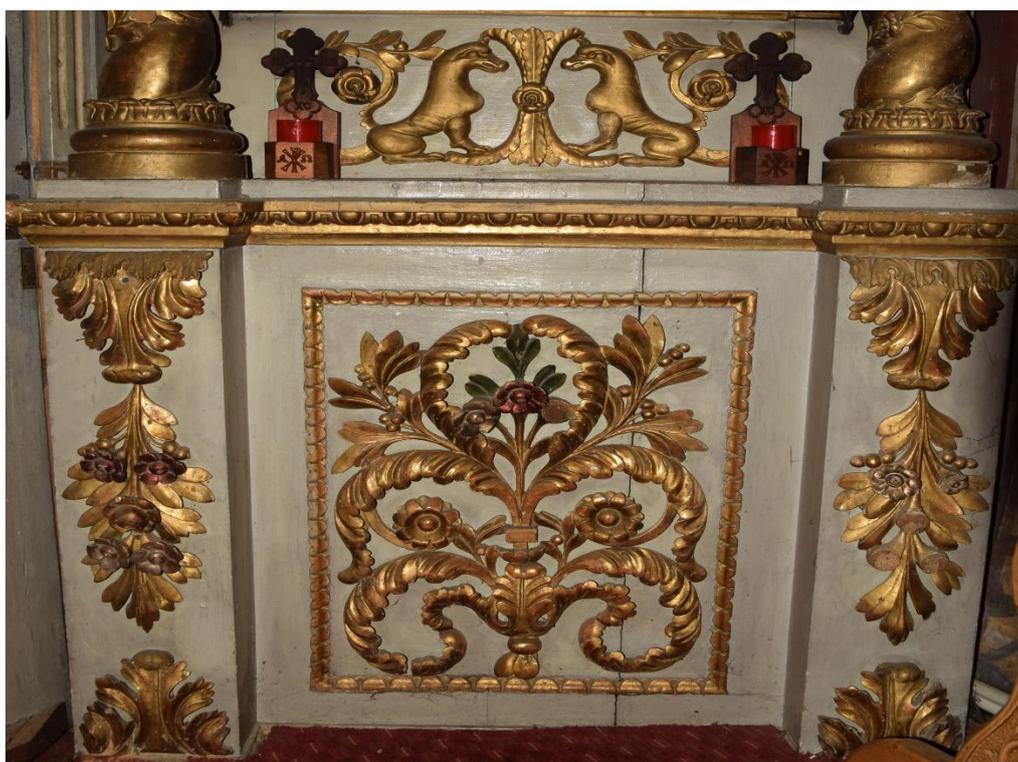


Fig.12 - Detail of the iconostasis of Vintilă Vodă Monastery, Buzău County, showing regilding and repainting interventions on the polychromy

From a heritage perspective, Françoise Choay emphasizes that the value of a work lies not only in its materiality but also in the cultural history it carries (Choay, 1992, p.45). In this sense, successive repainting also become historical documents, even if aesthetically debatable. The restorer must decide whether to preserve them or return to the original layer—a difficult choice that depends on each case.

Conclusions

The analysis of the evolution of polychromy in ecclesial sculpture has shown that this artistic phenomenon cannot be reduced to a mere ornamental addition, but constitutes a fundamental part of visual theology. Polychromy means not only pigment, gilding, or varnish, but the transfiguration of matter—a language through which sculpture and painting become instruments of the liturgical message. Leonid Uspensky emphasizes that the icon does not reproduce nature but transfigures it, a principle that applies equally to gilded and coloured sculptural ensembles in churches (Uspensky, 2006, p.58).

In Wallachia, the peak of polychrome sculpture was reached in the Brâncovenesc era, when decorative carving, gilding, and painting created a unified whole. In Moldavia, Byzantine-Slavic sobriety tempered chromatic exuberance but preserved gilding and the symbolic emphasis of colours.

The importance of polychromy is not only artistic but also liturgical. Colors and gold were not chosen arbitrarily: red as a sign of sacrifice, blue as a symbol of transcendence, green as renewal, and gold as divine light. Thus, polychromy was not intended to impress through opulence, but to construct an atmosphere of spiritual communion (Sendler, 2005, pp.162,170)

Current conservation problems confirm the fragility of this heritage. Polychrome layers are easily lost due to multiple causes, whether human or natural, and successive repainting complicate the legibility of the original layer.

In conclusion, sculptural polychromy in the Romanian space proves to be a complex and original phenomenon. It is the result of the encounter between Byzantine tradition, Balkan influences, and Western contributions, but above all, the expression of a visual theology that endowed matter with the power to become a language of sacredness. The conservation and restoration of this heritage remain both a challenge and a duty, for in the loss of polychromy disappears not only a layer of colour or history, but an entire universe of symbols and beliefs.

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