

**The Influence of Renaissance Art on the Decoration of 16–18th
Century Icons in Transylvania and Maramureș**

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Abstract

With the theoretical premise of stylistic interferences as a starting point, the present study wishes to answer the following question: Why and how did Renaissance art influence the icons of Transylvania and the Land of Maramureș in the 16–18th centuries? Analyzing the icons of this period I shall demonstrate that the reception of Renaissance art was manifest in the field of decorations, due to the nature and characteristics of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine painting. I shall also indicate the models and sources of inspiration coming from different directions. Studying thoroughly the reception phenomenon, I tried to explain how the Renaissance plastic repertoire was assimilated by the religious painting of these regions. The elements taken over were reformulated according to local necessities, and in time these elements became traditional, being preserved also in the 18th century icons.

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Motto: “The history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowing”¹

Edward Said

Edward Said’s concise statement introduces us to the wider context of the problem which I intend to discuss in this study. Starting from this theoretical premise of stylistic interferences, I wish to answer two questions: Why and how did Renaissance art influence the icons of Transylvania and the Land of Maramureş² in the 16–18th centuries? The fact that these regions exemplify interestingly the interpenetration of occidental and oriental art motivated me in choosing this subject.

In this study I shall try to demonstrate that the reception of Renaissance art³ by the 16–18th century icons was manifest in the field of

¹ Analyzing non-Western nationalism, Edward Said stated that cultures are not impermeable, and that “the history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowing”. In his opinion culture is never defined only by a notion of property and loan with absolute debtors and creditors, but rather by proximity and common experiences, and by all kinds of interdependences between different cultures. See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1994), 217.

² After the Battle of Mohács in 1526, a great part of the Hungarian Kingdom was occupied by the Ottomans and transformed into Pashalic. The autonomous principality of Transylvania was created under Ottoman suzerainty to which were also attached the western counties of the “Partium”, among them Maramureş. At the end of the 17th century Transylvania was occupied by the Habsburgs. Emperor Leopold’s Diploma issued in the year 1691 stated that Maramureş remained within the boundaries of Transylvania and it is there in the present as well. Following the defeat of the Rákóczi Uprising, in the Peace of Satu-Mare (1711) Transylvania preserved the boundaries of the old principality including the “Partium”. These boundaries, however, remained a continuous object of dispute, both Transylvania and Hungary claiming these territories. The 1732 decree regulated the situation by dividing the counties, Arad, Maramureş and half of Zarand being given to Hungary. See *Istoria României* (History of Romania), Vol. II., ed. Andrei Ţeţea (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, 1962), 801, *Istoria României* (History of Romania), Vol. III., ed. Andrei Ţeţea (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, 1964), 487.

³ Recent works try to discuss the issue of Renaissance art in a different manner. Peter Burke suggested a new interpretation of the Renaissance period, different from the traditional line. He attempted the “Europeanization of the Renaissance”. He tried to detect the phenomenon outside Italy by highlighting the way in which Renaissance was received by other centres and the peripheries. He concluded that

decorations, due to the nature and characteristics of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine painting. We shall begin our demonstration by describing the ornamentation of 16–17th century icons, afterwards indicating their models. The following analysis will show the inspirational sources which come from different directions. An important part of the study will demonstrate the way in which Renaissance art was assimilated, proving the fact that the received elements were reformulated according to local necessities. This having been discussed, the analysis of the icons painted in the following period will show that the Renaissance plastic elements became traditional in the course of time, being taken over by and maintained in the 18th century as well. Since the limited length of this study does not allow us to describe a considerable number of icons presenting decorative elements borrowed from the repertoire of western art, I am going to choose only a few works from among the most representative creations both for the 16–17th and for the 18th century. These artefacts were presented in syntheses and in different studies,¹ focusing mainly on the stylistic descriptions, highlighting each painter's peculiarities and presenting the main regional trends of religious painting. These works have already mentioned the presence of some

in other parts of Europe the analysis of this period must mean the investigation of the reception processes, the ways in which the Renaissance was re-contextualized, adapted to local demands. Thomas DaCosta Kaufman in his extensive study on Central European art raised questions regarding the way in which Renaissance art was reinterpreted and assimilated locally in different manners. See Peter Burke, "Introduction: Framing the Renaissance", in Idem, *The European Renaissance. Centres and Peripheries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 1–17, Idem, "Chapter 4. The Age of Variety: Late Renaissance" and "Chapter 5. The Domestication of the Renaissance", *ibid.*, 101–226; Idem, "Chapter 1. The Myth of the Renaissance", in Idem, *The Renaissance* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 1–6, Idem, "Chapter 3. The Renaissance Abroad: or the Uses of Italy", *ibid.*, 27–48; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Court, Cloister & City. The Art and Culture of Central Europe 1450–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), *passim*.

¹ See Corina Nicolescu, *Icoane vechi românești* (Old Romanian Icons) (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1973), Marius Porumb, *Pictura românească din Transilvania*, I. (sec. XIV–XVII) (Romanian Painting in Transylvania, I., 14–17th c.) (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1981), Idem, *Dicționar de pictură veche românească din Transilvania, sec. XIII–XVIII* (Dictionary of Old Romanian Painting in Transilvania) (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 1998), Idem, *Un veac de pictură românească din Transilvania, sec. XVIII* (A Century of Romanian Painting in Transilvania, the 18th c.) (Bucharest: Meridiane, 2003), Alexandru Efreimov, *Icoane românești* (Romanian Icons) (Bucharest: Meridiane, 2003).

decorative elements borrowed from Gothic, Renaissance or Baroque plastic art. Therefore, our use of the method of stylistic analysis in this study falls in line with the endeavours of former works in this scholarly field. However, the present study wishes to investigate more thoroughly the phenomenon of reception, trying to explain the way in which the Renaissance decorative repertoire was assimilated by the religious painting of Transylvania and Maramureş.

Can cultures develop in vacuum, under a bell jar? The anthropological, historical, philosophical and sociological investigations of the 20th century paid special attention to the evolution of cultures, to cultural contacts and interferences. Lucian Blaga stated that “in the history of mankind one could hardly show stylistic fields which have been preserved without any stylistic interference”,¹ and Fernand Braudel declared that “for a civilization to live means being able to give, to receive, to borrow at the same time”.² Itamar Even-Zohar analyzes the laws of cultural interference and concludes that this type of relations have always belonged to the historical existence of human societies, the interaction being rather the rule than an exception. Research has shown that probably every system we know was formed, developed and survived due to the interferences which played an important role.³

Romanian icon painters in Transylvania and Maramureş learned their art in the 16–17th centuries in the local monasteries or in different centres of tradition in the monasteries of Walachia and Moldavia.⁴ Byzantine and Post-Byzantine art is religious art which is therefore characterized by a well-defined aesthetics outlining its stylistic features. Byzantine aesthetics is not autonomous, since art is the integrant part of the complex theological system.⁵ On a material-artistic level, the Church

¹ Lucian Blaga, *Ființa istorică* (The Historical Being) (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1977), 151.

² “Pour une civilisation, vivre c’est à la fois être capable de donner, de recevoir, d’emprunter”. Fernand Braudel apud Peter Burke, *Kultureller Austausch* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), 9.

³ Itamar Even-Zohar, “Laws of Cultural Interference” in Itamar Even-Zohar, *Papers in Culture Research* (Tel Aviv: Porter Chair of Semiotics, 2005), 1–2. Electronic version accessible at: <http://www.tau.ac.il/~itamarez/works/papers/papers/laws-of-cultural-interference.pdf>

⁴ Marius Porumb, *Icoane din Maramureş* (Icons in Maramureş) (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1975), 16.

⁵ Victor Lazarev, *Istoria picturii bizantine* (The History of Byzantine Painting), Vol. I, (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1980), 64.

claimed control over the “artistic image”.¹ Creating their works, the painters tried to respect tradition, the norms and precepts registered in church regulations, in the acts of Ecumenical Councils.² Due to the monastic environment they lived in and the control exercised by the Church, the contact of these painters with the novelties and reforms of the age, with the fashion of the day was rather limited. However, despite the closed environment in which the painters worked, despite this orientation which we may call “rigid”, the religious painting in Transylvania and Maramureș received some influences.

The analysis I am going to effectuate regarding the icons painted in Transylvania and Maramureș in this period will reveal that their themes and way of representation belong mainly to the Post-Byzantine period, the influence of western art being present mainly in the ornamentation. What is the cause of this fact, this orientation? The way in which a new element is integrated into a culture is influenced of course by its nature “which can go in the same or in the opposite direction as the internal evolution, sensibility and availability to change of the receiving cultural configuration”.³ From this perspective we can clearly deduce the fact that the decorative elements are easier to accept by a religious art with a well-defined aesthetics and tradition. The iconography of western religious painting differed from the eastern one with regard to the way of conceiving the themes and the modality in which the personages were represented.⁴ In the case of Byzantine and

¹ Konrad Onasch and Annemarie Schnieper, *Ikonen. Faszination und Wirklichkeit* (München: Bassermann Verlag, 2007), 275.

² Pavel Florenski, *Iconostasul* (The Iconostas) (Bucharest: Fundația Anastasia, 1994), 169.

³ Anca Pop-Bratu, *Pictura murală maramureșeană* (Mural Painting in Maramureș) (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1982), 11.

⁴ The characteristics of Byzantine aesthetics, its specific features have been presented by different studies, such as: Gervase Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics* (London: John Murray, 1963), 1–11, Victor Lazarev, “Chapter 2. Estetica Bizantină (Byzantine Aesthetics)”, in Lazarev, *Istoria picturii bizantine*, 64–82, Onasch and Schnieper, *Ikonen. Faszination und Wirklichkeit*, 101–217, 261–288, Arne Effenberg, *Kunst und Alltag in Byzanz*, in *Byzant. Das Licht aus dem Osten. Kult und Alltag im Byzantinischen Reich vom 4. bis 15. Jahrhundert*, ed. Christoph Stiegemann (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern Verlag, 2001), 33, 71–72. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, analyzing the influence of Renaissance art on the Russian artistic production in the 15–16th centuries described the differences between the tradition of Italian painting and the Russian religious painting, the

Post-Byzantine painting, “since the ideal prototypes of the phenomena were represented, iconography had to be characterized by a great stability.¹ Taking into consideration that the painters were trained within the institutional frame of monasteries, where doctrinal accuracy was respected by following the imposed iconographic models and canons, the artists were bound by tradition, they could not follow freely their imagination. Due to this fact the iconographic and stylistic influences were more limited in this period and they appeared mainly in the 18th and 19th century. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann stated that the ornament is the domain where the contrasts and rules of culture and society are not as strictly applied as elsewhere, in his opinion decoration being the real field of the Renaissance in Central-European art.²

Towards the end of the 1500s, and mainly in the following century painters were preoccupied especially with the background and the frame of icons, paying special attention to the creation of these elements.³ Starting with this period Renaissance plastic elements are to be found in the decoration of icons in Maramureş and Transylvania.

At this point of the discussion it is necessary to describe briefly the characteristics specific to the ornamentation of the Renaissance art. The classical orders, Doric, Ionic and Corinthian, as well as other elements of antique art such as the pediment and the cornice were borrowed by Renaissance artists, and the pointed arch characteristic to Gothic constructions was replaced in this period by the semicircular arch. Vegetal ornamental elements, such as the garland, the palmette and the acanthus also came from the antique repertory. These architectural elements and their plastic decoration lead to the outlining of the Renaissance artistic aesthetics based on concepts such as harmony, symmetry and proportion.⁴

continuator of Byzantine art. See DaCosta Kaufmann *Court, Cloister & City*, 34–35.

¹ Lazarev, *Istoria picturii bizantine*, 76.

² DaCosta Kaufmann *Court, Cloister & City*, 38.

³ Nicolescu, *Icoane vechi românești*, 21.

⁴ See Peter and Linda Murray, *The Art of the Renaissance* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 56–62, 267, *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Italian Renaissance*, Edited by J. R. Hale (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 29–30, 341–342, Gérard Legrand, *Arta Renașterii* (The Art of the Renaissance) (Bucharest: Meridiane, 2000), 6–18, 36–90, Peter Burke, “Chapter 1. The Age of Rediscovery: Early Renaissance”, in Idem, *The European Renaissance*, 18–46, Idem, *The Renaissance*, 7–8.

For the 16th century the icons *Mother of God with Child* and *Saint Nicolas*, (Fig. 1) in the Saint Archangels wooden church in Urisiu de Jos (Mureș County) are representative with regard to our discussion. These works are dated by donation inscriptions to the year 1593 and were made by a painter trained in the painting schools of Moldavia.¹ The artist respected the iconographic tradition, but he placed the sacred personages under trefoil arches supported by colonettes with floral capitals and he decorated the gilded background with a network of rhombuses formed by stylized cruciform geometrical elements. The “ring-shaped” halos² are beautifully decorated with foliage scrolls constituted from floral ornaments and spherical buttons in relief. These icons are characterized by the gilded background which is worked on a thicker preparation layer and in which, besides the Gothic elements, Renaissance vegetal motifs were also engraved.³ In this way these creations show “a clear innovative tendency manifest in the adaptation to a certain affinity for late Gothic and Renaissance painting shown by Transylvanian patrons.”⁴ The Renaissance decorative elements present on these icons and on the icons of the Moldavian monasteries, which show similar features, prove that they penetrated earlier the Romanian art, already in the 15th century and the first half of the 16th.⁵

In what regards the influences of the Renaissance during the 17th century, the most important examples are from the region of Maramureș. The valuable “painting school” developed in Maramureș in this period,⁶ offers revealing examples. The painters of Moisei Monastery placed the scenes of the icons *The Dormition of the Mother of God* and *Saint Nicolas* under sculpted semicircular arches supported by pilasters. The arcades are decorated with the motif of the egg and dart pattern painted in red, thus endowing the composition with an effect of rhythmicality and harmony. The decorative element of the egg and dart pattern was

¹ See Porumb, *Pictura românească din Transilvania, I.*, 60–61, Idem, “Icoanele moldovenești ale bisericii de lemn din Urisiu de Jos, Județul Mureș” (The Moldavian Icons of the Wooden Church in Urisiu de Jos, Mureș County), *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai*, Seria Historia, Fasciculus 2, (1973): 39, Efremov, *Icoane românești*, 121–126.

² Porumb, *Pictura românească din Transilvania, I.*, 60.

³ Nicolescu, *Icoane vechi românești*, 22.

⁴ Efremov, *Icoane românești*, 124.

⁵ Porumb, *Pictura românească din Transilvania, I.*, 62.

⁶ Idem, *Un veac de pictură românească...*, 93.

borrowed by Renaissance artists from classical Greek architecture.¹ In the case of the icon *The Dormition of the Mother of God* the pilasters end upwards in capitals composed from simple forms. Marius Porumb stated that this ornament type belonging to the characteristically Renaissance plastic decoration appeared for the first time at the beginning of the 17th century at this group of icons, becoming during this and the following century a characteristics of the wood painting of Maramureș.²

The *Jesus Pantocrator* icon (Fig. 4) in the wooden church of Desești, Maramureș is undated and unsigned, nevertheless, some stylistic features, such as the preservation of some archaic Post-Byzantine elements, the decoration and the Slavonic inscription on the Gospel allow us to date it in the second half of the 17th century. The *Jesus Pantocrator* icon is stylistically related to the icons *Entry to Jerusalem* (Fig. 3) and *The Ascension of Jesus* in the wooden church of Hărnicеști.³ We encounter the same “graphic decorative spirit with a synthetic, pregnant and expressive drawing..., the figures stylized in a certain type”,⁴ and the Renaissance decorative elements sculpted in relief are almost identical. These icons “are among the paintings from Maramureș in whose style the presence of a western component can be felt, superposed on the traditional Orthodox background.”⁵ It is characteristic to them that the scenes and characters are placed under arches decorated with the egg and dart pattern.⁶ The arch is supported by pilasters having at their upper end

¹ *Dicționar de artă: forme, tehnici, stiluri artistice* (Dictionary of Art: Forms, Techniques, Artistic Styles), Vol. 2: N–Z, ed. Mircea Popescu (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1998), 26.

² Porumb, *Dicționar de pictură veche românească...*, 245.

³ Marius Porumb dates the icons in the wooden church of Hărnicеști in the second half of the 17th century. Alexandru Efremov places them in the first decades of the 18th century, resorting to the analogy with the icon *Jesus Pantocrator*, in the pronaos of the same church, on the frame of which in the upper side the year 1728 is inscribed. See Porumb, *Icoane din Maramureș*, 17, 45; Efremov, *Icoane românești*, 142, fig. 277, 278. In my opinion the two icons were made in the second half of the 17th century, this dating being supported, as in the case of the icon in Desești Church, by the presence of some archaic Post-Byzantine elements, as well as the way in which garment folds are represented by using some linear light accents and by the characters’ hieratic postures.

⁴ Porumb, *Icoane din Maramureș*, 17.

⁵ Porumb, *Dicționar de pictură veche românească...*, 158.

⁶ The *Deesis* icon in the wooden church of Șieu, Maramureș County dated to the 17th century shows a similar arch decorated with the egg and dart pattern

a capital formed by an abacus and an echinus, the constituting elements of the Doric capital.¹ On the pilasters and the lower part of the frame round and ovoid buttons are sculpted in relief imitating encrusted precious stones.² Between the buttons different foliage scrolls and stylized flowers are painted. The field between the arch and the frame of the three icons is decorated with two floral motifs made in relief which frame the semicircular arch symmetrically. The interior of the arches, in the case of the *Jesus Pantocrator* icon from Desești Church, and the halo are decorated with foliage scrolls in which the half-palmette motif is dominant and which belongs to the Renaissance plastic vocabulary.³

The icons *The Ascension of the Lord*, *Mother of God with Child*, *Hodegetria* and *Deesis* in the church of Susenii Bârgăului in Bistrița Năsăud County painted by an anonymous painter in 1646 according to the inscriptions⁴ also belong to the group of icons influenced by Renaissance decorations. The icon *Deesis* (Fig. 5) has a silver background in which floral motifs were incised, especially foliage scrolls formed of half-palmettes. The frame is decorated with round and oblong sculpted buttons in the four corners and in the middle of the two sides. Around these elements in relief, in this case, in contrast with the simpler decoration of the above described icons, the anonymous artist painted in white different models of scrollworks and flowers, wishing to suggest the metallic setting of precious stones.⁵ These decorative motifs create from a chromatic point of view an interesting dark-light contrast, giving the entire icon a harmonious and symmetrical aspect. Such frames appeared, as we have stated above, beginning with the first half of the 17th century

supported by pilasters. See Porumb *Dicționar de pictură veche românească...*, 397.

¹ See *Dicționar de artă: forme, tehnici, stiluri artistice* (Dictionary of Art: Forms, Techniques, Artistic Styles), Vol. 1: A–M, ed. Mircea Popescu (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1995), 157.

² Similarly, the *The Supper in Mamvri* icon from Maramureș made in 1644 which is now in the Museum of the Oltenian Diocese – Jitianu Monastery presents a frame decorated with buttons and foliage scrolls. See Efremov, *Icoane românești*, fig. 248.

³ *Dicționar de artă*, Vol. II, 121.

⁴ Porumb *Dicționar de pictură veche românească...*, 393.

⁵ Analogies to this type of decoration are also to be found in the icons originating from the territory of present day Slovakia. See Heinz Skrobucha, *Ikonen aus der Tschechoslowakei*, (Hanau/M: Verlag Werner Dausien), 1971, 46.

on Transylvanian and Moldavian icons, “the prototype originating from the Halychian area of the Carpathians”.¹

Can those who study the works of these painters discover today which their exact inspiration sources were? The analysis we are going to make will show that the inspiration sources came from several directions, from the fields of sculpture, architecture and painting alike.

The birth of interferences is preceded by the contact of several cultures. The contact between cultures can be defined as a relationship where a certain culture, A, called the “culture of origin”, can become a direct or indirect source of transfer for another culture, B, called the “host culture”. Therefore, interference is a procedure that happens in the medium of the contact where a transfer takes place, no matter whether it is unilateral or multilateral.² Through the transmission channel the message is transferred from the sending culture to the receiving culture.³ These itinerant painters who often wandered all over the villages in order to find new orders met on their way artistic monuments with different typologies. Due to the contact with this western art, the icon painters received influences in the field of decoration.

The Renaissance elements were introduced in Maramureş region via Poland and Slovakia, these countries being in the past direct neighbours of Maramureş. The already mentioned icons from Maramureş, in Moisei, Deseşti and Hărniceşti, from a stylistic point of view and especially in what regards decoration, are very close to the icons from South-Western Ukraine, Eastern Slovakia and Southern Poland.⁴ These similarities prove the existence in the mentioned

¹ Porumb, *Dicţionar de pictură veche românească...*, 429.

² Even-Zohar, “Laws of Cultural Interference”, 1.

³ Abraham A. Moles, *Sociodinamica culturii* (The Social Dynamics of Culture) (Bucharest: Editura Ştiinţifică, 1974), 140.

⁴ Some icons from the specified regions have similar frames decorated with floral heads and buttons, incised backgrounds with vegetal motifs as well as the Renaissance semicircular arch. For Ukraine I should like to mention two examples: *Mother of God with Child* from Chernihiv region made in the 17th century and *Saint Peter Apostle* originating from Rivnes region dated to the 17th century. See Dmytro Stepovyk, *A History of Ukrainian Icon in the 10th – 20th Centuries* (Kyiv: <Lybid`>, 1996), 250, 252. In the Slovakian region there is a great number of icons with Renaissance decorations, the most important works being *Saint Nicolas* dated to the end of the 17th century, displayed in the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava, *Mother of God–Hodegetria* created in the year 1654, coming from the wooden church of Lukov-Venecia, *Christ, the Teacher*, 17th century, icon kept in the wooden church of Krajné Čierne, the icon *Saint*

territories of a group of stylistically related icons which have been named in the specialist literature Carpathian icons.¹

As we have observed, the icons in Transylvania and also in Moldavia had gilded or silvered backgrounds engraved with Renaissance floral and vegetal motifs already during the 16th and especially in the following century. In Corina Nicolescu's opinion "they appeared under the influence of the western altars extant in Transylvania and Poland".² Several altarpieces from Transylvania such as those of Șaeș, Sibiu (Fig. 6), Moșna, Sebeș and Armășeni are decorated in Renaissance style,³ their images being integrated in a Renaissance plastic and architectural décor. The predella of the polyptych in Sibiu made in the first half of the 16th century has a strong cornice formed of several rows of plastic motifs inspired by Antiquity, dentils and the egg and dart pattern. The upper part ends in a row of floral elements almost identical in form with the floral buttons which decorate the free space between the arch and the frame on the icons of Desești and Hărnițești. Therefore, in this period icon painters were impressed by the classical repertoire of the representations made in Renaissance style.

The richness of sculpted backgrounds and frames must be connected to the general development this kind of sculpture went through in Moldavian art in the last years of the 16th century and in the following

Nicolas painted in the second half of the 17th century for the wooden church of Ladomírová or the icon *Saint Michael Archangel* in Bratislava Gallery. See Heinz Skrobucha, *Ikonen aus der Tschechoslowakei*, fig. 43, 45, 46, 53; Štefan Tkáč, *Ikony na Slovensku* (Bratislava: Slovenská Národná Galéria, 1968), fig. 45. For the Polish region the 17th century icon *The Birth of the Lord* from the collection of the National Museum of Krakow is remarkable. See *Ikonen aus Polen. Ikonen aus Polen. Ikonenmuseum Recklinghausen, 12. Juni bis 31. Juli 1966*, ed. Museen der Stadt Recklinghausen, (Recklinghausen: Ikonenmuseum Recklinghausen, 1966), fig 27, 68.

¹ Janina Klosińska, *Ikony*, (Cracow: Muzeum Narodowe e Krakowie, 1973), passim.

² Nicolescu, *Icoane vechi românești*, 21.

³ See Ciprian Firea, "Altar sau retablu? O reconsiderare a problematicii poliptycelor medievale din Transilvania" (Altarpiece or Altarpiece? A Survey of the Medieval Transylvanian Polyptychs), *Ars Transsilvaniae XIV–XV* (2004–2005): 121–142, fig. 1, 5, 6, 12; Gisela und Otmar Richter, *Siebenbürgische Flügelaltare*, (Thaur bei Innsbruck: Wort und Welt Verlag, 1992), 140–152, 224–231.

century,¹ a process observable in Maramureș and Northern Transylvania where the influence of Moldavian painting was strong.

The Renaissance ecclesiastic and civil architecture in Transylvania should also be analyzed. This gained more and more importance beginning with the 16th century, some Italian artists being present on this region.² The Renaissance portals and window frames show decorative elements which, as we have observed, were used in decorating icon backgrounds and frames. An example to this effect is the Lázó Chapel (Fig. 8), built in 1512 on the northern side of the Cathedral of Alba Iulia.³ The interior portal of the chapel is particularly richly decorated. Above the architrave there is a frieze decorated with grotesques and a cornice decorated with egg and dart moulding and dentils. The crowning is formed from an aedicule flanked by volutes decorated with rosettes in floral form, very similar to the buttons in the ornamentation of the already analyzed icons. The plastic décor of the three-light window on the façade looking to the courtyard of the Episcopal Palace of Alba Iulia dated to 1630–1639⁴ (Fig. 10) is a clear proof of the fact that Renaissance ornamentation influenced the decorative repertoire of the icons from Transylvania and Maramureș. The field between the semicircular arches is decorated with floral rosettes in relief,⁵ the same arrangement of the ornamentation being taken over by

¹ Nicolescu, *Icoane vechi românești*, 22.

² See Răzvan Theodorescu, *Civilizația românilor între medieval și modern* (Romanian Civilization between Medieval and Modern), vol. I (Bucharest: Ed. Meridiane, 1987), 14–15, A. Kovács, M. Țoca, “Arhitecți italieni în Transilvania în cursul secolelor al XVI-lea și al XVII-lea” (Italian Architects in Transylvania in the 16th and 17th Centuries), *Studia Universitatis Babeș Bolyai*, Series Historia, Fasciculus 2, (1973): 19–36.

³ See András Kovács, *Épületek emlékezete, nevezetes épületek Erdélyben* (The Memory of Buildings, Famous Buildings in Transylvania) (Budapest: L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2007), 18–19, Gh. Sebestyén, V. Sebestyén, *Arhitectura Renașterii în Transilvania* (Renaissance Architecture in Transylvania) (Bucharest: Editura Academiei R.P.R., 1963), 35.

⁴ András Kovács, *Késő reneszánsz építészet Erdélyben. 1540–1720* (Late Renaissance Architecture in Transylvania. 1540–1720) (Budapest–Köln: Tekei László Alapítvány–Polis Könyvkiadó, 2002), 80–81, fig. 113.

⁵ The same decorative motif can be found on the frame of Gheorghe Martinuzzi's castle in Vințul de Jos made in the first half of the 16th century and the stalls made by Johannes Begler in the year 1516 in the Dominican monastery of Bistrița. See Gh. Sebestyén, V. Sebestyén, *Arhitectura Renașterii în Transilvania*, plate 56; Adrian Andrei Rusu, *Gotic și Renaștere la Vințul de Jos*

the icon painters. In Cluj-Napoca the portal of a house in the Town Square dated at 1597 (Fig. 9) can be mentioned. On this a series of dentils and string-courses decorated with foliage scrolls such as acanthus leaves and half-palmettes are sculpted in the decoration of the entablature. The frames of the Wolphard-Kakas House in Cluj-Napoca (Fig. 7) made in the second half of the 16th century shows new types, such as the pointed cornices, triangular pediments doubled by a far richer decoration.¹

Another point of view presented by the specialist literature was formulated by Marius Porumb. Analyzing the icons of Moisei Monastery, he stated that the sculpted decorative motifs form Renaissance frames which were infiltrated “by means of the manuscripts and prints from the Romanian cultural environment.”²

The painters knew that the works taken for models were made by people belonging to other religions and other ethnical communities, but could these differences be an impediment? Could they deny that which was beautiful; could they avoid such clear forms which assailed them, which were omnipresent? Of course not. Even if these styles occurred somewhat later than in Western Europe, they became innovative, fashionable elements in Transylvania and Maramureș. They were decorative models which attracted attention which could be integrated by the icon painters to the “stylistic matrix”,³ without changing its basis, foundation.

(Gothic and Renaissance in Vințu de Jos) (Cluj-Napoca – Satu Mare: Editura Muzeului Sătmărean, 1998), 8–10, Gheorghe Mândrescu, *Arhitectura în stil Renaștere la Bistrița* (Renaissance Architecture in Bistrița), (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 1999), 84–85, fig. 117, 118.

¹ András Kovács, *Késő reneszánsz építészet Erdélyben*, 201, fig. 31–41.

² Marius Porumb, *Dicționar de pictură veche...*, 245.

³ According to Lucian Blaga's view, cultural products are characterized by two features. Besides the revelatory and metaphoric function, cultural products have a “stylistic matrix”, a particular physiognomy which differentiates them from other works, the “stylistic field” being formed from several unconscious factors which intervene in the shaping of the cultural product. See Lucian Blaga, *Trilogia culturii* (The Trilogy of Culture) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1994), passim; Idem, *Ființa istorică*, 150, Ion Mihail Popescu, *O perspectivă românească asupra teoriei culturii și valorilor. (Bazele teoriei culturii și valorilor în sistemul lui Lucian Blaga)* [A Romanian Perspective upon the Theory of Culture and Values. (The Bases of the Theory of Culture and Values in Lucian Blaga's System)] (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1980), 242–246. Blaga applied his conception regarding the metaphysics of style, the concept of “stylistic matrix”, to the

After this concrete analysis of the western type ornamentation conveyed on the icons, the nature of this influence must be discussed. The elements borrowed from the outside can be integrated in different ways by the receiving culture. The influence can be merely formal, if the borrowed elements are not integrated in the stylistic matrix of the receiving culture. Another possibility is the acceptance of the new cultural element by an assimilation and reformulation process, the new component being integrated in the social cultural system it entered.¹ Peter Burke outlined several alternatives regarding the wide range of cultural exchange. The idea of imitation can be interpreted in a positive or negative sense, depending on the inclusion of imitation into a creative process, or its implication in a phenomenon which consists of a servile copying of models. Another level is the one characterized by the term of acquisition, which is a selective acquisition in some cases. Another alternative is to define cultural exchange by means of some terms such as accommodation and adaptation. The author also stated the possibility of syncretism, of bricolage, and as an alternative to syncretism he pointed out the metaphor of hybridization.² In my opinion the influence of Renaissance art on the icons of Transylvania and Maramureș represents a process of selection and at the same time of reformulation, which implies an accommodation, a bending of the already constituted stylistic matrix. As we have seen from the analysis made on the 16th and 17th century icons and as we are going to observe in the case of 18th century icons as well, all of them preserve the characteristics of Post-Byzantine religious painting. The factors which confer their specificity and determine their cultic character – the iconography, the importance of light and the specific way this is rendered, inverse perspective, the characters' hieratic

particular case of Romanian national culture, wishing to discover the specificity of the national spiritual basis. I am using this concept, though I am in full awareness of the fact that it was created by Blaga in the interwar period, an era characterized by an active cultural policy with a powerful national ideological character. See Vasile Muscă, "Specificul creației culturale naționale în concepția lui Lucian Blaga" (The Specificity of the National Cultural Creation in Lucian Blaga's view), in Idem, *Filosofia ideii naționale la Lucian Blaga și D. D. Roșca* (The Philosophy of the National Idea at Lucian Blaga and D. D. Roșca) (Cluj: Biblioteca Apostrof, 1996), 19–42; Irina Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism în România Mare 1918–1930* (Culture and Nationalism in Greater Romania 1918–1930) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1998), passim.

¹ Robert Lowie, *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1940), apud Pop-Bratu, *Pictura murală maramureșeană*, 11.

² Burke, *Kultureller Austausch*, 17–21.

posture, as well as the typology of the face – were not touched. Those elements were selected which would not modify the message Post-Byzantine painting wished to express, taking place thus a re-contextualization, an integration depending on local necessities.

Did the Renaissance elements which had appeared in the religious painting of this region survive on a long run? Itamar Even-Zohar believes that we have a clear case of interference only if the transferred goods are converted into generative models, namely in active components of the domestic repertoire.¹

In my opinion the presence of the stylistic field of western origin in the Romanian icons of Transylvania and Maramureș in the 16–17th century represents according to Itamar Even-Zohar's words "a clear case of interference". We are going to analyze the icons of the following period, since "the integration degree of new cultural elements can be checked if we follow their persistence in the historical process in which some are preserved and others are lost."² The icons made in the 18th century in Transylvania and Maramureș preserve through an exceptional attention the ornamentation used in the previous period, due to the cultural tendency of repeating traditional and familiar elements.³ The painters of this period drew inspiration from older works,⁴ considering them models worth following.

There are several icons from the 18th century made in Transylvania and Maramureș which introduce ornamental elements of Renaissance inspiration. I have chosen as an example the icon *Saint Paraskevi* (Fig. 11) made by the famous painter from Maramureș, Alexandru Ponehalschi in 1760 for the church of Sârbi.⁵ The frame of this icon is formed by a semicircular arch decorated with the egg and dart pattern supported by pilasters. The field between the arch and the frame is decorated with round buttons in relief and incised vegetal motifs, the very Renaissance motifs we have met on the icons made in the previous century. Another icon from Maramureș is *Mother of God with Child* (Fig. 12) made probably in the 18th century and preserved in the Ethnographic Museum of Maramureș, Sighetu Marmației. The characters are painted in this case under a semicircular arch, powerfully sculpted in relief.

¹ Even-Zohar, "Laws of Cultural Interference", 2.

² Pop-Bratu, *Pictura murală maramureșeană*, 11.

³ Marvin Harris, *Cultural Anthropology*, (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1995), 249.

⁴ Porumb, *Icoane din Maramureș*, 16.

⁵ Porumb, *Dicționar de pictură veche românească*, 298.

However, its typology is different from the icons analyzed so far, the arch being decorated with a foliage scroll of half-palmettes. The small colonettes supporting the arch have a graceful, elegant form, ending in the upper part in prismatic capitals. The upper corners of the icon were decorated with two rosettes in relief in floral form.

The third example chosen to represent the icons of Maramureș is *Saint Paraskevi* (Fig. 13) kept in the Ethnographic Museum of Maramureș as well.¹ The icon is undated and unsigned, but certain stylistic characteristics suggest that it might have been made in the 18th century, being, in my opinion, the work of the same painter, Alexandru Ponehalschi of Berbești.² The ornamentation of the icon is simpler; especially the frame is conspicuous being decorated in the corners and in the middle of the sides with round and egg-shaped buttons, in this case the buttons being painted in red and not sculpted. We can observe once again the presence of this motif which wishes to imitate the aspect of precious stones. The same frame is painted with foliage scrolls and stylized flowers.

The icons made by Andrei of Cornești, who activated in the first half of the 18th century in the Transylvanian Plain and Someș Valley, by means of their ornamentation prove the contact of the artist with the artistic environment of Maramureș.³ The icons *Mother of God with Child – Hodegetria* (Fig. 14) and *Jesus Enthroned* have a strong semicircular arch decorated with the egg and dart pattern. The arch is supported at the heads by two trapezoidal cornices. The painter found an ingenious solution for the decoration of the upper part of the works. The reduced space between the arch and the sculptural frame of the icon made him choose a triangular motif sculpted in relief, a much more simplified form than the models offered by the 17th century works. However, this ornamental motif moderates the lavish aspect of the frame which is constituted from colons in relief decorated with vegetal and floral meanders, this time of Baroque inspiration.

¹ I would like to thank the Museum of Maramureș in Sighetu Marmăției for the permission to publish the two icons kept in the collection of this institution.

² The attribution of this icon to the painter Alexandru Ponehalschi of Berbești is based on the presence of some features characteristic to his style: the typology of the face and the way in which garment folds are represented. Similarly, the background of the icon *Saint Paraskevi* in the Ethnographic Museum of Maramureș is almost identical with his other works, being incised with scrolls of oak leaves.

³ Porumb, *Dicționar de pictură veche românească...*, 18–20.

In the church of Șieu Sfântu (Bistrița Năsăud County) two icons dated to the 18th century have been preserved, *Mother of God with Child*¹ (Fig. 15) and *Jesus Enthroned*. The anonymous painter “had a deep sense of decoration”,² which is shown not only by the fact that he adapted Renaissance ornamental elements, which had already become traditional, but also by his taking over some new typologies, specific to the decoration of Baroque iconostases. The arch decorated with the egg and dart pattern often seen, characteristic to the Renaissance repertoire, was not identically copied, but greatly stylized, and reproduced in an overlarge size. The sculpted arch is no longer semicircular, but it is somewhat flattened, and the egg and dart pattern is painted in different colours, red and ultramarine blue, which confers a rhythmical and original aspect to the painting. The arch is supported by two rectangular consoles and it is flanked by two columns whose shafts and capitals are richly decorated with flowers. These last motifs confer the icon an even more lavish aspect characteristic to the Baroque style, a current received by the religious painting of Transylvania and Maramureș beginning with this age.

We can observe on the presented examples that the influences in the field of ornamentation which were produced with more difficulty at the beginning, become “however in time the values of the entire community”,³ the decorative elements being considered as part of tradition. They were preserved exactly because of the importance given to the respect for old models, for tradition in Byzantine⁴ and Post-Byzantine art. It can be said that these particular examples are arguments supporting the affirmation that culture is progressive, “cumulative”. The

¹ I would like to thank Professor Marius Porumb, member of the Romanian Academy for permitting me to re-publish the icons *The Dormition of the Mother of God* from Moisei, *Deesis* from Susenii Bârgăului, the icon *Saint Paraskevi* made by Alexandru Ponehalschi, the work *Jesus Enthroned* painted by Andrei of Cornești and the icon *Mother of God with Child* from the church of Șieu Sfântu, published in his book *Dicționar de pictură veche românească din Transilvania, sec. XIII–XVIII*.

² Porumb, *Dicționar de pictură veche românească*, 397.

³ Ana Dobjanschi, “Iconari transilvăneni din sec. al XVIII-lea” (Transylvanian Icon Makers in the 18th Century), *Revista muzeelor și monumentelor* (Journal of Museums and Monuments), Monumente istorice și de artă (Historical and Artistic Monuments), XII (1975), no. 3: 64.

⁴ Ernst Hans Gombrich, “Chapter 6. A Parting of Ways. Rome and Byzantium, Fifth to Thirteenth Century”, Idem *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1975), 133–142.

process, as it can be observed in the case of the icons painted in the 16–18th century in Transylvania and Maramureș, does not consist of a simple mechanical accumulation, on the contrary, it represents the joining of substitutions and additions. The additions have an important role in the destiny and development of a society, since a community's store of values, namely "the tradition" is constituted and enriched exactly by these additions.¹

The icon painters integrated these decorative elements to the stylistic matrix, but they did not change its basis. As we have observed in the analysis of the icons chosen as examples, the Renaissance did not influence the iconography, the way in which the characters were represented; it did not impose a realistic style or the introduction of perspective. The chosen themes were in conformity with Byzantine art, the saints were continuously represented in a more hieratic posture, the garments are realized with the help of some abstract linear folds, and the typology of the face, though humanized, maintains the characteristics of Byzantine aesthetics. Due to the nature of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine art, the art of Renaissance was adapted, accommodated to local demands, to the new environment with which it came into contact. The elements of Renaissance plastic décor were not only juxtaposed, copied. They were given the suitable form and usage in conformity with the characteristics of Post-Byzantine paintings, generating thus a creative process. I believe that this phenomenon was motivated by the wish to confer to the icons a more accentuated aspect of luxury, richness and sumptuousness, and the elements necessary to create this décor pleasing to the eye were easiest to borrow from the immediate environment, from the surrounding world. If the transfer of these elements had been imposed on the painters, they would not have passed the test of time, they would have been abandoned and repudiated by the following eras. But on the contrary, the Renaissance decorative elements became traditional, the characteristic features of the icons in this region.

This analysis we have made weakens at the same time the old conceptions regarding the uniformity and monotony of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine art. Didron said "Neither the time, nor the place had any effect on Greek (Byzantine) art; in the 18th century the painter from Morea continued and copied the 10th century Venetians and the 5th or 6th

¹ Gheorghită Geană, *Antropologia culturală. Un profil epistemologic* (Cultural Anthropology. An Epistemological Profile) (Bucharest: Kriterion, 2005), 134.

century Athonian painter”¹. Nevertheless, the presented examples reveal the influence of time, place and the fashion of the respective age.

Translated by Ágnes Korondi

¹ Apud I. D. Ștefănescu, *Iconografia artei bizantine și a picturii feudale românești* (The Iconography of Byzantine Art and Romanian Feudal Painting) (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1973), 19.

Illustrations:

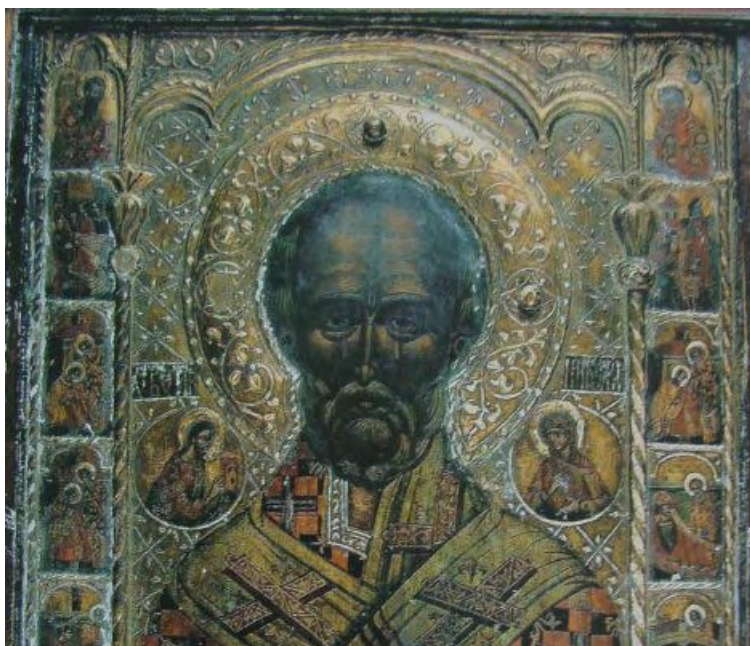


Fig. 1. Saint Nicolas, 1539, the wooden church of Urisiu de Jos (Mureş County) (Apud Alexandru Efremov)



Fig. 2. The Dormition of the Mother of God, Moisei (Maramureş County), 17th century, (Apud Marius Porumb)



Fig. 3. Entry to Jerusalem, the wooden church of Hărniciești, (Maramureș County), the second half of the 17th century, (Apud Alexandru Efremov)



*Fig. 4. **Jesus Pantocrator**, the wooden church of Desești (Maramureș County), the second half of the 17th century*



*Fig. 5. Deesis, Susenii Bârgăului (Bistrița Năsăud County)
1646, (Apud Marius Porumb)*



*Fig. 6. Detail of the predella, the polyptych in Sibiu,
first half of the 16th century*



*Fig. 7. Portal detail, Wolphard-Kakas House,
Cluj-Napoca, 1590-1592*



Fig. 8. The interior portal of the Lázó Chapel, Alba Iulia, 1512



Fig. 9. Renaissance portal, Cluj-Napoca, 1597



Fig. 10. Three-light window on the façade looking to the courtyard of the Episcopal Palace of Alba Iulia, 1630–1639



*Fig. 11. Alexandru Ponehalschi, **Saint Paraskevi**, the wooden church of Sârbi (Maramureş County), 17th century (Apud Marius Porumb)*



*Fig. 12. Mother of God with Child, 18th century
Ethnographic Museum of Maramureș, Sighetu Marmăției*



*Fig. 13. Saint Paraskevi, 18th century
Ethnographic Museum of Maramureș, Sighetu Marmăției*



*Fig. 14. Andrei of Cornești, **Jesus Enthroned**,
First half of the 18th century
(Apud Marius Porumb)*



*Fig. 15. **Mother of God with Child**, 18th century,
the church of Șieu Sfântu (Bistrița Năsăud County)
(Apud Marius Porumb)*