

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10458992>

ON THE VOTIVE PAINTINGS IN THE PRINCELY CHURCH OF CURTEA DE ARGEȘ: DESCRIPTION, MEANINGS, AND INTERPRETATIONS

Gheorghița Daniela Giugea

Lecturer PhD, National University of Science and Technology Politehnica Bucharest,
Pitesti University Center, giugeafloriceldaniela@yahoo.com

Abstract

Votive paintings are part of the iconographic program of our churches and date back to the fifth century, being spread in the Byzantine art, which opened their way to our culture as well. They represent the image of the founder of a place, offering valuable information about the respective era, about its clothing style or relish, about the artistic influences or the painting technique, etc. The oldest votive paintings are considered to be the famous mosaics of Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora from San Vitale in Ravenna, which make a powerful impression thanks to the splendour and the decorative richness of the garments. In Romania, the votive picture was interpreted differently depending on each region, being influenced by the glamour and the ceremonial specific to Byzantine art, but also by Western or other influences.

Curtea de Argeș is the city that houses one of the most representative religious monuments in our country, with a special cultural significance, which reproduces the Romanian rulers that were the founders of this valuable work of art and culture, the Princely Church of Sfântul Nicolae. Two of the founders of the place, Nicolae Alexandru and Vladislav Vlaicu, are represented here. The two votive paintings that adorn the interior of the Princely Church, along with the other religious compositions, are considered particularly interesting, but also controversial. The latest research concluded that the repaintings but also the lack of inscriptions make it difficult to establish the exact identity of the characters, although, until now, most specialists in the field have claimed a precise identity. For this reason, the Argeș monument increases its scientific value, being permanently the object of new research and interpretation.

Keywords: founders, rulers, votive paintings, the Princely Church of Curtea de Argeș, Nicolae Alexandru, Vladislav Vlaicu, Byzantine art.

1. INTRODUCTION

The votive painting is an image that can be painted, embroidered, sculpted or engraved and represents the face of the donor or founder of a work of architecture or art being meant to highlight the latter's act of devotion (Drăguț, 1976, p. 294). It occupies an important place in the iconographic program (Gîrbea, 2019, pp.1087-1097) of any church and, in our country, it is to be found generally painted in the narthex or nave. Initially, the founders' portraits were represented in the main apse, on the vault, while holding a model of the church in their hands. They were painted in standing posture and were clothed in ceremonial costumes. The oldest representations of the founders can be considered those in the Church San Vitale in Ravenna, i.e. the portraits of Emperor Justinian with his imperial suite and of Empress Theodora with her suite. They date from the sixth century and can be considered famous mosaics of Byzantine art (I.D. Ștefănescu, 1973, p.162). I.

D. Ștefănescu provides information about the place votive paintings are located in Byzantine art. Thus, in Serbia, they were in the nave, in Athos they are found in the exonarthex, and in Bulgaria they are located in the narthex of churches. In Wallachia, by the seventeenth century, the theme appeared in the narthex, becoming more and more complex, with many characters, and represented the rulers accompanied by their families, alongside with boyars, merchants, peasants, as well as with the painters or craftsmen who authored the murals. The tradition was transmitted until the nineteenth century (I.D. Ștefănescu, 1973, pages 162-163).

The perspective on the portraits of the founders differs depending on the area, so if in Wallachia and Transylvania they are designed after the model of court ceremonies, with parade robes and the shrine of the church that is presented to Christ or the Virgin Mary, receiving their blessing, in Moldova the conception is modified by the fact that the founder is presented before the divinity under the form of a recommendation. A secondary deity, considered the protector of the believer, also appears. This secondary deity presents him to the main deity who receives him seated on the throne, with a tiara on his head. Such representations appear in Mesopotamia, but also in the West. A very interesting aspect is that in Maramures there are no portraits of the founders inside the churches, which proves that, with the passage of time, they begin to disappear (I.D. Ștefănescu, 1973, p. 164)



Fig. 1 Justinian with his suite. San Vitale of Ravenna

2. THE OLDEST VOTIVE PAINTINGS

2.1. Emperor Justinian with his suite

Appreciated as famous mosaics by art historians, the representations at San Vitale in Ravenna are also considered the oldest votive paintings. In the sixth century, Ravenna was one of the famous centres for the creation of parietal mosaics, the workshops here continuing the tradition of making such mosaics according to the ceremonial pattern of the court, thus showing a preference for solemnity, the use of richly ornamented clothing, fabrics and precious stones (Lazarev, 1980, vol I, p. 164.) The painting that represents the emperor Justinian with his imperial suite, as well as that of the empress Theodora, constitute a commemoration of the offering of the paten and the golden chalice by the two sovereigns to the church on the occasion of its consecration by Maximianus. The emperor appears in the middle of the scene, represented from the front, wearing a white tunic and purple flamingo with a gold-plated plank. He is surrounded by three characters, high rulers, members of the senatorial order, as can be seen from the decoration of the white mantles with a purple tablion and a gold brooch on the right shoulder. Along with Justinian, Bishop Maximianus also appears, the two being represented in front of the other characters represented in the form of a procession. Maximianus is at the forefront of the composition, as the emperor's delegate, recommended by him, to be accepted by the community that had chosen another bishop. In addition to being a masterpiece of Byzantine art, the mosaic is also considered an act of propaganda, suggesting the power of the emperor and of his ally, the bishop (Delvoe, 1976, vol. I, pages 128-129).

2.2. Empress Theodora with her suite

Empress Theodora appears accompanied by seven bridesmaids, with a chalice, decorated with precious stones, in her hand. To her right there are two governors, one raising the curtain at the entrance to the church. The tunics and cloaks decorated with precious ornaments in a rich chromatic, with shades of purple, gold, bright red, green, grey tones, pearls, etc., attract one's attention. The two paintings exude solemnity, luxury and spirituality (Delvoye, 1976, vol. I, pp. 129-130).



Fig. 2 Empress Theodora with her suite.

San Vitale of Ravenna

The empress's head is surrounded by a halo and she is wearing a precious tiara, whilst a necklace is adorning her shoulders. On the mantle, at the bottom, the faces of the three magicians bringing gifts, as an allusion to the gift made by Theodora, appear embroidered in gold thread. Victor Lazarev considers the colours much more refined in this portrait than in the emperor's portrait. A shell-shaped vault appears above her head, detaching her from the rest of the group. The female characters accompanying the queen's procession are led by the daughter and wife of General Belisarius (Lazarev, 1980, p. 175).

The mosaic craftsmen probably managed to invent precious colour solutions thanks to the luxury of the characters' clothes, which gives the composition refinement and elegance.

3. THE PRINCELY CHURCH OF CURTEA DE ARGES

3.1. The votive portraits of the founders

Votive paintings began to appear in Rome as early as the fifth century, then spread to Byzantine art and reached the Romanian space.

In Curtea de Arges there is a church considered to be the oldest monument of Byzantine tradition, dating from the fourteenth century, the Princely Church of Sfântul Nicolae. Here there are three layers of painting from three different eras, but also rare compositions, inspired by paleological painting (Giugea, 2016, pages 366-375). The church preserves two votive paintings of special value and with special significance. Because it was built by Basarab I, then continued by his successors Nicolae Alexandru and Vladislav Vlaicu, in this particular case there is not a single one, but rather two paintings of the rulers who contributed to the completion of the works of the shrine.

3.1.1. *Deisis*

The first votive painting is located in the narthex of the church and represents the ruler Nicolae Alexandru, according to most researchers' opinions. This is part of the *Deisis* scene, above the entrance to the nave, where, painted in the lower right, the Romanian voivode appears whilst kneeling before Christ seated on the throne, with the Mother of God and St. Nicholas on each side, St. Nicholas replacing John the Baptist because the patron saint of the shrine is St. Nicholas. The Saviour holds a book in His left hand and blesses with His right.

There are many studies, researches and interpretations related to the identification of the character in this scene. He is associated with either Nicolae Alexandru, Vladislav Vlaicu or Radu Negru, but most of them leaned towards the version of Nicolae Alexandru, who appears represented without his wife, Clara, who was a Catholic (Chihaiia, 1974, p.131). Daniel Barbu also carried out detailed research on the meanings of the portrait of the voivode of Muntenia, considering that the ruler appears in a *typical image of his conversion*. However, he is contradicted by the historian Radu Stefan Vergatti, who claims that the rulers of Wallachia were Christians of the Orthodox faith, and the representation of the ruler as a humble character in the Deisis scene is considered natural (Vergatti, 2011, pages 15-22). However, the ideas presented by Daniel Barbu may be the subject of another research endeavour (Barbu, 1986, p. 21). The interpretations of the specialists are based primarily on the lack of inscription. More recent studies also lean towards the representation of Nicolae Alexandru in the Deisis scene (Florea, 2007, p. 78). Mohanu presents the mentions of Tafrali, who considers that Deisis is the only scene that did not undergo transformations during the interventions of the nineteenth century, being exempted from incisive retouching, “like a precious document that had to cross the centuries” (Dan Mohanu, 2011, pages 73-74).



Fig. 3 Deisis. The Narthex. The Princely Church of Curtea de Argeș.

The prince from the Argeș votive painting is wearing a *pourpoint* closed in front and decorated with gallons. Other gallons that Pavel Chihaiia considers conventional are also tied to the one around his neck, with the observation that they did not really exist, but were employed only to harmonize the clothes worn by the founders with those of the saints painted on the church walls (Chihaiia, 1974, p. 133). Another representative element of the founder's clothing is the knight's belt, provided with a circular buckle, similar to the one worn by Mircea the Elder in the votive portrait from Coziei's infirmary (Chihaiia, 1974, p. 133). The crown on his head is considered the oldest image of a wreath in Wallachia worn by a ruler, being adorned with lily flowers (Văetiși, 2019, p. 209). It is noticed that the ruler has long hair and a beard. The clothes are painted in shades of cinnabar red, gold and blue. At the bottom, the scene is damaged, the existence of the gap being visible. The lower part of the ruler's feet is also affected, as is the pedestal under the Saviour's feet and there is a crack in this area which has been reconstituted (Mohanu, pages 294-295).

3.1.2. The votive painting in the nave

The votive painting in the nave is supposed to represent the figure of the ruler Vladislav Vlaicu and of his wife, Lady Ana, carrying the model of the church in their hands. This painting was unfortunately restored in the 19th century by the painter Pantelimon (Drăguț, 2000, p. 100). The action of the painter Pantelimon is the third intervention on the painting from the Princely Church, compared to the first one, from the fourteenth century, which is the oldest, but also the most valuable, made under the influence of Byzantine-paleological art. The 18th century intervention was made by Radu Zugravu, the author of the model book in which he

made authentic copies of the church frescoes (Voinescu, 1978, p.17). I. Mihail considers that Pantelimon's painting from the Princely Church shows the decadence of this art (Mihail, 1917-1923, pages 172, 187). He also considers that Radu Zugravu's painting, in Brancoveanu style (Grecu, 2016), is specific to that style, an important role belonging to the ornaments that adorn the clothes or window frames (Mihail, p. 187). Most of those who studied the painting of this place appreciate the work of Radu Zugravu as an evolution in the Romanian religious painting, giving an important role to the model notebook. There were other repaintings, later than those belonging to Pantelimon, but considered as lacking in value (Mohanu, 2011, pages 87-88).

Along with the painting made by Pantelimon in 1827, the inscription accompanying the votive painting in the nave was also covered with plaster, but it was discovered during the restoration works in 1920 (Constantinescu, 2010, p. 30). However, some researchers believe that it was added at a later moment. N. Constantinescu is of the opinion that the original inscription was above the two characters, under Christ giving His blessing, even trying to reconstruct it, supporting the identity of Vladislav and of Lady Ana (Constantinescu, 2010, p. 40). He also establishes connections with the icon of Saint Athanasius, the voivode's donation to the Great Lavra from Athos, the inscription of which was, he considers, taken over (Constantinescu, p. 30) from the nave of the royal church, based on the fact that the inscriptions were damaged and considers the use of special lights for their correct analysis as a favourable solution (Mohanu, 2011, p. 276). Most of the historians and specialists who have studied the problem so far are of the opinion that the voivode is either Vladislav Vlaicu or Radu I. It is up to them to establish the exact origin of the two characters. So far, the arguments are in favour of Vladislav Vlaicu and Lady Ana.



Fig. 4 The votive painting in the nave.

The Princely Church

Alexandru Alexianu observes that the ruler from the votive painting in the nave kept the old appearance of the voivode depicted in the narthex of the church. Thus, he is wearing the same tunic decorated with gold ribbons, pants - stockings moulded on the leg, knee-high boots as well as the crown which here is taller than that of Nicolae Alexandru and richly decorated with lily flowers (Alexianu, 1987, p. 49). The ruler's wife is the first lady of the country, whose face has been preserved on the walls of a church, with quite an impressive outfit. She is wearing an expensive, richly decorated coat, in the Byzantine fashion, a crown adorned with the same lily flowers as the ruler, and she has large, round earrings in her ears. Her white hat is also impressive, a fashionable object at that time both in the east and in the West. The two are holding in their hands the model of the church to whose construction the sovereign had an important contribution and which is being offered to the Saviour (Alexianu, p. 52).

Răzvan Theodorescu likens the tunics worn by the Romanian rulers, the Arges founders, to the western costumes that came to us through the Hungarians, mentioning the similarities with the western knightly costumes. The Italian, French and German influences are due to the existence of ties with the Angevin

kingdom and Transylvania as well as to the Italian trade on the Black Sea and the Lower Danube (Theodorescu, 1974, pages 322-323).

It can be stated that we are dealing with two of the oldest votive paintings in our Romanian art, in which the first Basarabi, state and church founders, as they were called by historians, are represented.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The two votive paintings in the Princely Church attract attention primarily by the lack of concrete information that clearly proves who the painted characters are, namely by the lack of inscriptions. For this reason, they arouse the interest of researchers and contribute to the emergence of new studies and interpretations in this regard, thus increasing the scientific value of the painting and of the entire collection as a whole. Nicolae Alexandru from Deisis was compared to Teodor Metohites of Chora, who, in his turn, appears with the model of the church, and also in greater proportions, compared to the founder from Arges. Pavel Chihaia considers that the image of the ruler from Campulung was used to reproduce the face of Nicolae Alexandru from Arges (Chihaia, p. 242). He connects the faces of these rulers with their representations in the churches of Arges (Chihaia, p. 244). The same researcher also claims that the appearance of Nicolae Alexandru in the Deisis scene, but without the model of the church, being part of the Last Judgment, would be related to the great achievement of the voivode of Muntenia, the founding of the Mitropoly. Vladislav Vlaicu appears in the nave, together with Lady Ana, holding the model of the place, which can be used as an argument in support of the statement that he finalised the painting. If its repainting was carried out according to the model of the fourteenth century, this can only be established through new investigations, using modern equipment, the place being still under the attention of the specialists who investigated the problem.

The portraits of the Arges founders also impress thanks to the information they provide in connection with the clothes worn by the Romanian voivodes, strongly influenced by the western fashion, thus preserving their documentary value over the centuries.

The Princely Church remains, therefore, from a scientific point of view, a permanent object of research that facilitates the discovery of new, valuable information regarding the evolution of Romanian painting at that time, and not only.

REFERENCE LIST

- Alexianu, Alexandru, (1987), *Mode și veșminte din trecut*, vol. I, Meridiane, București.
- Barbu, Daniel, (1986), *Pictura murală în Țara Românească în secolul al XIV-lea*, Meridiane, București.
- Chihaia, Pavel, (1974), *Din cetățile de scaun ale Țării Românești*, Meridiane, București.
- Constantinescu, Nicolae, (2010), Basarab I și Vladislav I la Argeș.-Mărturii din Biserica Domnească "Sf. Nicolae" -1. Data executării grafitului cu știrea morții lui Basarab I. -2. Din nou despre Vlaicu Vodă- ctitor și donator la Athos, în ARGESSIS, *Studii și comunicări*, seria Istorie, TOM XIX, Ordessos, Pitești.
- Delvoye, Charles, (1976), *Arta bizantină*, Vol. I, Meridiane, București.
- Drăguț, Vasile, (1976) *Dicționar enciclopedic de artă medieval românească*, Științifică și Enciclopedică, București.
- Drăguț, Vasile, (2000), *Arta românească*, Vremea, București.
- Florea, Vasile, (2007), *Istoria Artei Românești*, Litera Internațional, București – Chișinău.
- Giugea, Daniela, (2016), The Frescoes Of Biserica Domnească In Curtea De Arges, A Reflection Of The Mosaics From Chora, Constantinople, pp. 366-375
- Gîrbea, Gheorghe, *The iconographic canon of orthodox churches: history, evolution, symbolism*, Proceedings of SOCIENT 2019-6th International Conference on Education Social Sciences and Humanities 24-26 June 2019- Istanbul, Turkey,
- Greco, Dorin, (2016), The Decorative Design In Brancovenian Painting (The Painting During The Reign of Constantin Brancoveanu), IJASOS- International E-Journal of Advances in Social Sciences, Vol.II, Issue 5.

- Lazarev, Viktor, (1980), *Istoria picturii bizantine*, Vol. I, Meridiane, București.
- Mihail.I., *Pictura Bisericii Domnești din Curtea de Argeș*, BCMI, anul X-XVI, 1917-1923.
- Mohanu, Dan, (2011), *Arheologia picturilor murale de la biserica Sf. Nicolae Domnesc din Curtea de Argeș*, A.R.A., București.
- Ștefănescu, I.D, (1973), *Iconografia artei bizantine și a picturii feudale românești*, Meridiane, București.
- Theodorescu, Răzvan, (1974), *Bizanț, Balcani, Occident la începuturile culturii medievale românești (secolele X-XIV)*, Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, București.
- Văetiși, Monahia, Atanasia, (2019), *Portretistica votivă a lui Neagoe Basarab*, <https://pdfcookie.com>
- Vergatti, Radu, Ștefan, (2011), *Biserica Ortodoxă și primii Basarabi, în 650 de ani de la înființarea Mitropoliei Ungrovlahiei Spiritualitate și istorice în Arhiepiscopia Argeșului și Muscelului*, Universității din Pitești, Pitești.
- Voinescu, Teodora, (1978), *Radu Zugravul*, Meridiane, București.