

**BUCHAREST NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF ARTS  
I.O.S.U.D. DEPARTMENT**

**THE PhD THESIS ABSTRACT**

*Tradition and Modernity  
in the Romanian Religious Orthodox Painting,  
from the Brancovan Period until Contemporaneity*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Tradition and modernity, considered as individual concepts, but more as an antithetical structure, they have represented over the last two hundred years a fundamental theme of Romanian culture. The topic of my doctoral research has been, still is and will always be fashionable, because this territory where Romania is today, due to the way of thinking of its inhabitants and its leaders, will always be changing, transforming and looking for something new: whether it is legitimacy, freedom, political alliances, military and financial aid, honor or justification for something. Due to its strategic geographical position and the way of thinking of the inhabitants of this area, the Romanian Countries and from later on Romania they had most of the times in history the chance of a multiple choice. For this reason, Romania and its inhabitants sought their identity and constantly adjusted their vision of themselves depending on the context. So, we could say that the relationship between tradition and modernity is a traditional theme of Romanian culture. Who we are? What do we want to get? And, especially, what do we have to say and do to achieve our goal? These are the fundamental questions that Romanians have struggled to answer since they became a nation.

In historiography, the expression "tradition and modernity" with the variant "tradition and innovation", it is a common place of the literature of the humanities, starting with the interwar period and continuing, reaching its climax in the last three decades. Therefore, using it in the title of the thesis was an assumed gesture of exorcism of a hard and obsessive theme, but fundamental to our existence as a people and nation.

I became familiar with this subject for the first time during my bachelor's and master's dissertations, which dealt with 18th century painting in the area of Bucharest and Ilfov County and, in particular, with the issue of style, namely they followed the relationship between Brancovan and post-Brancovan style. Starting from that point, during my doctoral studies I set out to research in a much larger context, over several centuries, the avatars of religious art following the Byzantine tradition in the Romanian area and the paradoxical transformation of this conservative system of representation, because this kind of art, in spite of the fact that it remains the same, in theory, being constant and immutable in relation to its theological principles, has in fact periodically renewed its forms of expression over time.

The first important decision I had to make in the preliminary approach to the subject of the doctoral research was to decide some criteria and arguments related to certain characteristics of space and time, in order to delimit the material to be analyzed. I aspired for the thesis I am writing to make an original contribution to the researched subject, which, as I have already mentioned, is much debated in certain aspects, and, at the same time, to change through it, as much as possible, the bad consequences which the hyper specialization of researchers and their segregation according to the centuries and epochs they study (medieval, modern, contemporary) has on the discipline of art history. I also struggled to correct the outdated, contradictory or speculative information in the subject's bibliography, and to make up for the lack of interest of important past authors who did not bother to define and study the history of concepts or terms they used, because at that time they did not have a modern critical vision of their own discipline. Because I knew deeply the problems and theoretical needs in the field of medieval art and religious art and also because I found myself able to apply on modern and contemporary art the specific tools of the ancient art researcher (theological knowledge, paleography, classical languages, experience in the study of iconography, etc.), which I learned during my special training, for these reasons I realized that I can make a useful contribution to the unification of some disparate ways of thinking and I can reveal new perspectives by placing myself in a kind of *in*

*between* position. The practice of my research has become that of the interval or intersection between worlds, a point where, swinging between one identity and another, I tried to reach that ineffable point where things turn remarkably and irreversibly and a new era is born. Because we have already had the exercise of balancing between the early modern period and the first stage of modernity, I decided to push further my limits and the boundaries of the art history conventions and to fully address the manifestations in the field of religious art from the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century.

Regarding the framing in the geographical space, given that the conceptual core of the thesis is the survival of Brancovsn art forms, I decided that in the first chapters I will deal exclusively with the space of Wallachia, in which the style used by Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu was fully manifested. In this first part I made only a few brief references to southern Transylvania and I deliberately bypassed Moldova, where the evolution of the arts in the period I am analyzing had a very distinct evolution. Referring to the 19th century, I also kept my eyes mainly on the Wallachian space for reasons of consistency and coherence, as the two provinces that made up the Romanian Principalities and later the Kingdom of Romania, although they became a union at one point, however, they evolved distinctly into the field of religious art because of their different historical heritage. Only from the moment of the Great Union of 1918 I extended the area of research to the entire territory of today's Romania, as was normal, following the way in which the neo-Byzantine style was programmatically implemented in all historical provinces of the new country. At the beginning of the 21st century, following Romania's integration into the European Union and the phenomenon of Romanian migration to Western countries, the institutional structures of the Romanian Orthodox Church and church painters quickly adapted to the international context, and the idea of territorial delimitation soon became irrelevant, it soon became irrelevant because many Romanian churches have been set up in all Western states.

Combining theoretical research with the practical experience of field investigations, I came to the conclusion that, in order to follow the changes of a visual representation system, it is necessary to use certain judgment criteria, like quantifiable parameters whose transformation is decisive for highlighting the transition from one state to another, from old to new, from *tradition* to *modernity*. Speaking of religious painting, I considered that the most important indicators of change are *iconography* and *style*, and these, together with research of archive documents of the guild of painters and writings left by artists, are the only ones that can outline a complete picture of the history of church

painting. To define the basic concepts of my research, in general and particularly applied to the Romanian space, I analyzed the origin, the significance and the way how these concepts have been used over time in the bibliography. This inevitably led me to authorship question, since the individual or collective author of religious painting (craftsman, painter or artist) together with the donor and the iconographer are the strongest agents that determine the way of doing, the content of the painting and the way it is integrated into the ecclesial space. The changes in the social status and mentality of those involved in the process of creating sacred art are decisive in the choice of certain stylistic options, for example some closer to the Byzantine-Balkan tradition or on the contrary something inspired by Western fashion. That is why I considered it necessary that the chronological structure of the chapters that synthesize the phenomena be doubled by at least one case study of monographic type for each epoch, so that a history of artistic mentalities can be reconstructed at least in part. Also, in the background, by linking disparate mentions in the content of the synthesis chapters, I tried to reconstruct a micro-history of the of restoration and heritage protection in the Romanian space.

Understanding the relationship between tradition and modernity, between old and new, not as a hiatus, but as a permanent, constant and cyclical dynamic, I set out to identify, during the three hundred years I analyzed, the existence of repetitive stylistic sequences, which would determine a specific model of orthodox sacred art in the Romanian space, regardless of the particularities of each of the historical epochs. I consider that the recovery of tradition in modernity and the current reception of modern art as a form of tradition, from the perspective of a century-old history, are defining phenomena for the evolution of religious art in our country. The dynamics of this process, as it is perceived from a contemporary perspective, is also dictated by the impact of the discourse on art, which the cultural and political context of the last two centuries has generated. Therefore, another important aspect of the research is the analysis of the writings on religious art produced by intellectuals and the artistic metadiscourse produced by the artists themselves, both contemporary to the artifact and later historical ones.

I was also concerned with the conditions and possibilities of the image to exist in the Orthodox space, which are dictated by canons, the writings of the Holy Fathers and the Holy Tradition. In this context, I highlighted a fundamental distinction between three types of reception of the religious image according to the paradigm of thinking in each era: *the watching image* (which protects) for the medieval and early modern era, *the impressive image* (which excites) for the first part of modernity and

*the speaking image* (which informs) for the second part of modernity and for the contemporaneity. Also, in the same chapter, I questioned the status of religious painting, which oscillates between art (craft) and "writing" with images (theologizing), wondering how legitimate it is to consider religious painting just a form of art and judge it in relation to its aesthetic or historical value, disregarding the precise religious purpose for which it was originally intended. Also, certain chapters of the thesis have constantly touched on the issue of museification of religious art and the ethics of restoration, debating several popular and current sub-topics such as the discord between the archaeological (historical) method and the aesthetic method in restoration, the conflict between the two visions: the church as a living space, dedicated to the cult needs of the faithful and the church as a museum, focused on preserving memory, or the dilemma between removing or preserving the repaintings and overlapping layers of mural painting. The relationship between high art (fine art) and folk art (vernacular craft) is another aspect that I had in mind, in conjunction with the authorship and the becoming process from master to painter. I was particularly interested in this part in dismantling the myth of the anonymous author of medieval painting and rediscovering the forgotten history of monastic painting schools, as well as the authority and importance of apprenticeship, a custom that is probably the most significant aspect common to all epochs addressed in this paper. The status of religious painting, which involves both holiness / divine grace and craft / technique, places the painter of religious art (zoographos) somewhere between a genius and a craftsman, between an artist and a master. Also, his so-called "style" oscillates between the rigidity of the canon of Byzantine art and an original way of doing, identified as his personal "hand".

For the 19th century art, the theme of religious painting has so far been treated only from the perspective of the monographs of several artists, but now I proposed to read the dynamics between tradition and modernity, which is very evident in the quick succession of stylistic and iconographic transformations produced in the interval 1820-1870, by bringing together the numerous and varied case studies on some canonical artists, and applying to them a comparative grid with some common points, such as westernization, studies abroad, turning point in career, founding a school and training disciples etc.

From the very beginning I was fully aware of the precautions required by a longitudinal study made on the concept of style in religious art in the Romanian cultural space, over an highly extended chronological interval, especially considering that such theoretical foundation have not been the subject of art history synthesis studies so far. There are indeed many passages or chapters in volumes



and also articles that deal with the subject, but they relate only to a monument, an author (painter), an area or a short chronological interval. These disparate discourses are in many cases contradictory, marked by ideological theses and political stakes and almost never self-reflective about the methodology and terminology they use. One of the great challenges for my research endeavor was to cope with the abundance of varied textual sources, both primary and secondary, which I had to go through in order to be able to reach a general conclusion about the changes in the Romanian religious art over three centuries. The second major challenge was the large number of monuments I had to visit, over 200, a representative selection from a much larger number that exists in Romania.

From the methodological point of view, the research involves two main directions, a theoretical one and also a practical one, which it is necessary to combine in order to obtain objective and significant results. I have therefore chosen a research strategy that involves indexing and interpreting factual realities, objectively recorded through archival and field studies, on the one hand, and critical analysis of discourse, both primary and secondary, on the other. The organization of field research and library reading was based on a set of pre-formulated themes and questions, however some of the case studies were selected subjectively for purely practical, financial or logistical reasons, and others proved to be accidental revelations or lucky encounters. After seven years of research, my thesis gave up the claim of completeness in favor of a more flexible and mobile structure, in which the role of personal interpretation is more important and assumed than I initially imagined.

On a theoretical basis, I first aimed to analyze the local discourse on religious art as it was produced in the contemporary period of the studied artifacts, using, as far as possible, archive sources, manuscripts, painters' contracts, testimonies or travel impressions, descriptions of the painting made by foreign witnesses and travelers, painters' notebooks, painters' manuals, theoretical texts elaborated by the painters themselves, carved and painted inscriptions and press articles reflecting the reception of donors, priests or hierarchs. I was careful, whenever possible, to personally transcribe these texts according to the original source, or, when this was not possible, I at least tried to follow them until their first printed edition, and consequently the conclusions drawn from the confrontation with other versions, published by various authors, have often been spectacular. Secondly, I had in mind to analyze the historical discourse about the religious art locally produced in a period subsequent to the creation of the artifact, which includes the text of art history and art theory, repertoires, iconographic plans, architectural plans, etc. Obviously, where possible, the analysis of the local discourse was permanently

correlated with the recent bibliography from Western and Eastern countries. Thirdly, I used as theoretical sources the theological writings about the icon and about the religious representation in general, written especially by Russian, Greek but also by Romanian authors.

Regarding the field study, the main objective of my research was to make extensive photographic documentations at churches, museums, exhibitions, workshops and restoration sites. Using these numerous photographs I was able to make the comparative iconographic and stylistic analysis of the chosen examples and case studies. A second objective in my field research, was to conduct interviews or apply questionnaires to contemporary painters, who were selected as case studies in the project, as a method of analyzing the primary discourse on contemporary religious art. Unfortunately, this goal, that I planned because of strategic reasons in the final stage of the research, was impossible to achieve in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic that disrupted us all in 2020 and banned any face-to-face contact between people and long-term trips. In result I had to adapt my research to the possibilities in the crisis situation, so I was forced to restructure the content of the last chapter of my thesis.

In conclusion, from the perspective of the more than three centuries of history pursued in the thesis, I am convinced that tradition can take many forms and can be embodied in various realities depending on what an artist, politician or theorist wants or needs in a certain context. There is a tradition of object-related concrete forms and a tradition of process-related practices and concepts, and they are almost always in a strange and incomprehensible desynchronization.

After investigating the relationship between tradition and modernity over such a long period, I was able to clearly identify two patterns of interaction, one of cohabitation and slow transition, and another of quick succession. The first of these models occurs in the archaic type of thinking, with no conceptual awareness of individuals, and involves a state of equilibrium by mutual surrender between the two forces. In other words, in a slowly but steadily way something new appears, while most of the ancient structures are still preserved, so that the individual receives this exchange as a natural, almost imperceptible transition. This path can be identified in the Romanian religious art, for instance in the process of transition from the Brancovan to the post-Brancoveanu era or from the interwar to the communist period.

For the second pattern, tradition and modernity are two hemispheres of civilization that replace each other cyclically and radically, a change of which individuals are fully aware. That makes this revolutionary movement eagerly desired by some, while others, more conservative, assimilate it by

force of circumstances. For example, this path can be identified in the time of transition from the art of the Byzantine tradition to the Westernizing fashion, or from Academism to Modernism. However, no matter how radical and abrupt the change may seem in the latter case, there are permanently small fragments of the past that still remain, remnants of the surviving tradition, usually ignored. From my point of view, they constitute the core of the true Tradition, as in spirit, not in form, which is never lost, but adapts and transforms every time. The pattern of the alternative succession between tradition and modernity is based on a simple fact, of an organic nature: anything modern becomes at some point, over time, historical, so it becomes part of tradition and must be automatically succeeded, according to this logic, by a new change, a new modernization. It can be a completely fresh one, but it can also take the form of a revival, because, most of the times, the radical changes produce nostalgia and a diffuse desire to return to a long-lost or unspent tradition, to that paradisiacal state of being before the Fall. This explains, for example, Olga Greceanu's critique for the "century of disorientation" and the efforts to restore the lost genuineness of Byzantine art made by contemporary retro-Byzantines. Of course, once transformed, no organic reality can return to its original state, so, as in a kind of reverse psychology, what is ardently claimed to be a recovered tradition, is in fact fundamentally or a form of modernity.

Once lost, the tradition cannot be recovered in its full, original form, only a simulacrum of it, an image, a form, a picture can be reconstructed. From this point of view, none of the current traditionalist painters is part of the Tradition, no matter how faithful they remain to the Byzantine iconographic models, because the modernity installed at the end of the 19th century can no longer be canceled, hidden and refused, but must be assumed as such.

In my opinion, the truth of Byzantine painting is not hidden in a form, as the generation of interwar neo-Byzantine painters believed and as contemporary retro-Byzantines also do, but in process, in practice and conception. The essence of orthodoxy lies not in the lines and colors, in the lack of perspective and in decorative motifs, but in the way the painter relates to his work, to his guild and to the Church. From this point of view, we could say that Tattarescu was more attached to old traditions than Olga Greceanu or Nina Arbore, and Arsenie Boca can be considered as innovative as Pârvu Mutu.

Somehow, some of the old traditions have survived and will always survive, as long as church painting continues to be practiced and all these authors I wrote about in my thesis will continue to climb the scaffolding of the churches again or to sit down to work on the wooden panels as their forerunners did, hundreds of years ago.