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The Iconography of the Moldavian Churches Between the 15th and 16th Centuries. The Program of the Naos

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ABSTRACT

The research topic proposed as part of my doctoral project aims to achieve a detailed and comparative analysis directed towards a specific segment of the iconographic program of the Moldavian churches, which is the naos. The research begins with the first mural ensemble painted in the reign of Ștefan cel Mare, the church of Pătrăuți (1487), and follows the development of the Moldavian mural painting until the half of the 16th century when, after the reign of prince Petru Rareș, a first cycle in its evolution comes to an end. The research deals both with the artistic development of the Moldavian programs in their local context, and with their place in the wider context of late Byzantine and post-Byzantine art.

The visual material uncovered by restoration projects, including in the later years important fresco ensembles, required a renewed research of the Moldavian mural programs, which outlined distinctions that their previous state of conservation would not have allowed.

Methodologically the research I undertook followed the example of several important art historical studies, engaged in an analysis of a particular *topos* of the sacred space, which considers the relationship of the iconographic program with the architecture and the liturgical rite which takes place inside the church.

By adopting the central planning in place of the basilical one, the Christian Byzantine church was adapting to a liturgical ritual composed of a series of exits and entrances from the sanctuary - where the most important liturgical actions take place - to the central space of the naos, covered by the dome. The naos precedes the sanctuary along the East-West axis of the church, but is, at the same time, marked by a vertical axis along which the iconographic program is read, descending from the dome and high arches to the lower areas of the naos.

Instead of being the place with the fewest iconographic variations, the dome area proves itself, in the considered monuments, a highly diversified segment in terms of iconographic subjects and their compositional arrangement. The main examples discussed in the first chapter of the thesis are (a) the representation of the Pantocrator in the Moldavian cupolas of the 15th and 16th centuries - an image belonging to a typology rather foreign to Byzantine domes, the possible sources and meaning of which are analysed in detail, and (b) the cycle of the prophets and their message in the drum of St. George's church in Suceava, where I focused on the transcription, translation and identification of the origin of the inscriptions and of the possible examples that

served as models for the representation and selection of Old Testament prophets in the unique program of the former metropolitan cathedral in Suceava.

The second chapter of the study examines the representations of the Great Feasts cycle in the Moldavian mural painting at the end of the fifteenth century and in the first half of the sixteenth century. In the case of the Moldavian churches, the program of the naos is linked to the iconographic development in the dome and drum areas in a particular and concrete manner, thanks to the superposed pairs of double arches meant to narrow the diameter of the drum, and consequently that of the dome, harmonizing its proportion to that of the naos. Applied to all triconch churches with a dome raised on a drum, as well as to churches without drum (Humor), or to mixed type churches, with apses in the thickness of the wall (Arbore, Părthăușii or Baia), this vaulting system, specific to Moldavian religious architecture, generates the four tympana under the pendentives and supporting arches, which provide a first register for the representation of the Great Feasts, disposed ringlike at the base of the drum, or at the base of the dome itself, where the drum is missing.

One of the few studies approaching the problem of the Moldavian mural painting and its contacts with the contemporary artistic centers, active in the Balkan Peninsula in the 15th and 16th centuries is included in the extensive work of Miltiades Garidis (*La peinture murale dans le monde orthodoxe après la chute de Byzance (1450-1600) et dans les pays sous domination étrangère*, 1989), who brings to the fore a series of evidences advocating for the presence of Greek painters and for the employment of models belonging to the same Balkan environment in the Moldavian mural painting, especially at the end of the 15th century. The monography dedicated by Evangelia N. Georgitsoyanni to the old catholicon of the monastery of the Transfiguration at Meteora (Athens, 199) could also be mentioned, as it deals in a separate section with the influence of the art practiced in the monastic center of Meteora over the Moldavian artists at the end of the 15th century and in the first half of the 16th century.

This phenomenon is, however, barely recorded by written sources. Therefore my research, that is build largely on new visual material, will follow the path traced by previous researchers, pursuing the influences received by the Moldavian artistic environment from the art practiced at Mount Athos and Meteora, as well as from centers such as Ohrid or Castoria, by means of the iconographic and stylistic evidences preserved in the frescoes of the Moldavian churches in the period between the end of the 15th century and the first half of the 16th century.

The increasing number of scientific contributions dedicated in recent years to the monuments of post-Byzantine art generated a particular interest among the scholars to synchronise their research methodology and to define the concepts of this field of study: the notion of "post-Byzantine art" in relation to "Byzantine art", or the issue of "regional schools of painting" in Orthodox provinces under Ottoman rule.

Therefore, the topic of this project was, at the same time, a pretext of returning, in the third chapter of the study, to the main theories concerning the beginning and the evolution of the religious mural painting in the Moldavian churches (the south-Slavic path, the Byzantine path, as well as the post-Byzantine character of the Moldavian mural painting), and of establishing its place in the broader context of post-Byzantine artistic world of the Balkan Peninsula.