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DOI: 10.55159/tri.2023.0104.09



The Image of *The Last Judgment* on the West Wall of the Church in Voroneț – Genesis and Message

Abstract

The article undertakes an analysis of the depiction of *The Last Judgment* on the western wall of St. George's Orthodox Church in Voroneț, northern Romania. The composition is part of a larger artistic issue related to the phenomenon of painted churches of northern Moldova, created in its essential core in the 16th century. The objectives established in the title, that is, to determine the genesis and meaning of the composition, encourage tracing several aspects of the fresco. First, it is necessary to outline the possible directions of the influx of inspiration, artists and cultural influences. Next, the sources of the very way of depicting the Day of Judgment and the pictorial formulas used (iconography) should be examined. The message of the work is also directly linked to the functions the fresco has performed over the centuries, reflecting the radical change in the optics of perception depending on the historical and cultural situation. As a whole, it reveals the complex meaning of the image, which invariably makes for an interesting research topic.

Szcześniak M. (2023). The Image of The Last Judgment on the West Wall of the Church in Voroneț - Genesis and Message. *Trimarium. The History and Literature of Central and Eastern European Countries*, 4(4), 229–244.

DOI: 10.55159/tri.2023.0104.09

Submitted: 06.11.2023 / Accepted: 04.12.2023

Keywords

Voroneț, painted churches of Bukovina, northern Moldova, Last Judgment, cultural study

In the former ancient Dacia, whose conquest is commemorated on Trajan's Roman column, the historic territories of Northern Moldova, and present-day Romania, there is a unique complex of Orthodox churches. They amaze with the picturesqueness of their location and the richness of their fresco decoration. Their uniqueness is evidenced by the presence of paintings perfectly preserved not only in the interior of the building, but also on its exterior. One of Bukovina's more famous monasteries is the Monastery Church of St. George in Voroneț. On its western facade is a monumental depiction of the *Last Judgment* dating from 1547–1550, the analysis of which is the subject of this paper.

State of Research

The phenomenon of painted monasteries of Bukovina (or Northern Moldova) is an interesting research problem for a number of reasons. The present work focuses on artistic themes, necessarily marginalizing other interesting issues, such as the anthropological perspective, brilliantly developed by the Polish researcher E. Kocój (2006).

One of the key issues is the still unresolved genesis of the exterior polychrome. Indeed, the decoration of 15th-century churches in the area was limited to alternating rows of brick, often enameled in green, yellow, red or blue, and stone (Ștefănescu, 1928). Painted decoration appears in Moldova in the 16th century, and there are several hypotheses about its origin.

J. Strzygowski argues for an oriental genesis. He believes that the transcendental Old Iranian religion of Mazdayasna played an important role in the formation of Christian art. According to him, the origin of the exterior polychrome can be traced back to the custom of Iranian and Syrian origin. Byzantine and Armenian art, as well as Ruthenian art, would play an important role in the

transmission of this tradition. The fundamental downside of this hypothesis, however, is the lack of surviving artworks from Iranian and Syrian sites that can serve as irrefutable proof of the above conjecture (Kocój, 2006).

G. Bałș and P. Henry (Iorga, Bałș, 1922 and Henry, 1930) point to Balkan influences (the latter sees them first in the forms of architecture).¹ However, A. Grabar (1933) by shifting the examples given as proof of the truth of this thesis to a later date thus disproved this assumption. He pointed out that it is likely that the facade of the church of Mary Peribleptos in Constantinople had painted decoration and this, according to him, was the main source of inspiration for the Moldovan Orthodox churches (Grabar, 1968). He notes the iconographic similarities with the polychrome of the Orthodox churches of Macedonia and Serbia. He thus agrees on the commonalities with Balkan decorations, but does not think the similarities are unusual given the prevailing canon.

There is also a western hypothesis, originated by Ph. Schweinfurth, according to which West Tyrol played a decisive role in the genesis of the external polychromes (Kocój, 2006). However, painting of all exterior walls has never occurred in those area. Evidence supporting this thesis would be the depiction of St. Christopher, a saint popular in the painting of Tyrolean churches, on the Arbore church. Exterior decoration is also sometimes traced back to Transylvanian sites. V. Drăguț believes that the *al fresco* decoration around the portals of churches played a stimulating role. The depiction of the *Last Judgment* was particularly common in this area (Kocój, 2006). Nor can we exclude the influence of indigenous folk culture, which, after all, already manifests tendencies to decorate its products on its own.

A clear determination of the influences evident in the paintings could help resolve this issue, but, as one can easily guess, this too is a matter of dispute.

In the 16th century there was a resurgence of painting in Mount Athon frescoes (including the Protaton), so it would be logical to see

1 E. Kocój also cites the Romanian researcher I. D. Ștefănescu, who, despite tracing the influences present in the churches of Bukovina, argues stubbornly for the independence and uniqueness of Moldovan solutions, both iconographic and technological aspects (Ștefănescu, 1928).

connections with the flourishing of wall decoration in Bukovina at the same time. According to W. Podlacha, the mediating factor in the expansion of miniature and fresco painting was primarily monasteries (1912). *The Last Judgment* in the Bukovina frescoes shows iconographic similarities with Athonian but also Ruthenian works, the most notable of which is the Church of the Savior (Spas) on Neredita in Novgorod with a composition from the 12th century, in which all the essential elements of the depiction of this theme are present. Also V. Florea (1989) draws attention to the Byzantine orientation, considering Ruthenia, specifically the Duchy of Galicia, as an intermediary in the transfer of influence. I. D. Ștefănescu (1928) sees the Ruthenian influence only from 1580 onward and notes the multitude of details that differentiate the Moldovan depictions from the ones at Mount Athos, e.g., the clouds surrounding the chosen ones do not appear in the Moldovan redaction. He also has a different take on the Wallachian influence. He believes that W. Podlacha cited too few sources to support his theory.

According to A. Grabar (1968), the Moldovan paintings adapted an iconographic program that corresponds at the most essential points to Western Romanesque facades. The difference in techniques should not be an exclusionary factor here. Balkan influence has already been mentioned in connection with the genesis of the exterior polychrome. Local qualities also appear in the frescoes: attempts to dramatize the action and highlight the mental state (Podlacha, 1912).

The issue of authorship of the decoration also remains unresolved. W. Podlacha (1912) although he admits that there are no sources that can clarify the matter unequivocally, he leans towards the authorship of Greek or Wallachian masters, perhaps monks. He believes that Bukovina did not have the conditions to produce painting schools or art centers.

I. D. Ștefănescu (1928) believes that an art school was nevertheless born in Moldova, but does not consider this equivalent to attributing authorship exclusively to local masters. In the 16th century, artists came from Galicia and Transylvania to the Moldovan territories, admittedly mainly architects and sculptors, but I. D. Ștefănescu speculates that painters may also have been among them. He also

cites the fact of the Russian Tsar's complaint against the action of Stephen the Great, who stopped the Italian painters on their way to Moscow. There are parallels with Mediterranean art in the depiction of *The Last Judgment*, such as the depiction of the personification of the sea as a woman on two fish (Kruk, 2000). However, this may be due to a general familiarity with the works and motifs, and not necessarily to the artists' alleged Italian background.

Close ties with Poland and Transylvania in the 16th century allow us to assume that masters from there also took part in the work. There were claims that the painters could not come from Poland or Hungary due to religious differences. But after all, it should not be forgotten that there were Eastern Rite Orthodox churches in the eastern borderlands of the Commonwealth. To support his theses, I. D. Ștefănescu (1928) cites a painter's name, rare in Bukovina – Marc – which appears in Voroneț. However, based on restoration work carried out in 1960, it turned out that the painter was a deacon – a certain Ionașco Chiril (Kocój, 2006), which, however, does not necessarily refute the views of I. D. Ștefănescu.

It is difficult to trace the routes by which the numerous influences visible in the paintings reached Moldova, and it is also difficult to clearly identify their authors. The genesis of the exterior polychrome thus remains a mystery for now.

History

Moldova flourished in the 15th and 16th centuries. Domestic strength and successful wars with neighbors were achieved thanks to the then-reigning *hospodar*, Stephen the Great (1457–1504). He founded the brick monastery church of St. George in Voroneț, in 1488, on the site of an earlier wooden church. This is confirmed by a stone tablet above the original entrance. Between 1547 and 1550, Metropolitan Grigorije Roșka added an enclosed porch to the church. It was also at this time that it was covered with paintings from the outside, which Archbishop Theophanes contributed to (Florea, 1989). The paintings are the work of several pairs of hands and one of the most outstanding monuments of wall painting in Bukovina. At the end of the 18th century, they underwent restoration work (Ștefănescu,

1928), and similarly in 1960 (Kocój, 2006). In 1993, Moldova's Orthodox churches were added to the UNESCO World Heritage List. Their state of preservation is so good that the 2013 Convention Concerning The Protection Of The World Cultural And Natural Heritage marks the satisfactory condition of the monuments².

Description

The composition of *The Last Judgment* covers the entire western wall and two buttresses. It is played out in five horizontal fields.

In the center of the highest field, in a circular *gloria* formed by the angelic choirs of the highest triad, there is a bust of the Ancient of Days with silvery hair, dressed in a white robe, making a blessing gesture with his right hand, holding a scroll in his left. This bust is flanked by two angels that open a door placed on either side of the *gloria*. Behind them stretches the sky depicted as a scroll, the ends of which are rolled by two groups of angels. The sky shows representations of the zodiac signs, sun, moon and stars.

In the second field, Christ the Judge sits on a rainbow in the center, with his right arm slightly raised, his left arm lowered and inverted, surrounded by a circular halo, with a representation of spinning Thrones at his feet and angels all around. On the sides of Christ are depictions of Mary in the type of Hagiosoritissa and St. John Prodromos standing on low footstools. Further away are long benches provided with backrests and footrests. On each side six Apostles are seated holding books or scrolls, while behind them numerous angels wielding spears can be seen.

In the third field, axially, is the throne of Hetoimasia with the Gospel placed on a red cushion and blue covering, on which the Holy Spirit is visible in the form of a dove. The whole is topped with a cross. On the sides of the throne kneel the aged Adam and Eve, extending their hands toward Hetoimasia. Eve additionally has her hands covered.

² Convention Concerning The Protection Of The World Cultural And Natural Heritage 2013, <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/2012/whc13-37com-20inf.pdf> (25.10.2023).

Behind Adam, four groups of the Elect are visible: the Old Testament prophets and kings, the Church Fathers, believers and saints. They look and extend their hands toward Christ.

By the Chosen Ones is St. Paul, the codifier of Christ's teachings, with a roll unfolding. To the condemned placed on the opposite side – Jews, Turks, Latins, Armenians and Arabs (Saracens?) – their iniquity is pointed out by Moses. These characters are visibly more agitated.

At the bottom of the throne of Hetoimasia is a bowl with four nails standing on a footstool, from which directly emerges the *manus Dei* holding the scales of justice – thus moving us to the next field.

On the scales are rolls of good and bad deeds, in the center – the soul of a righteous man waiting for the result. Devils try to tip the balance to their side, but have to retreat pushed back by angelic spears. Behind the angels are a multitude of the Saved – because their fate is already sealed – they all have golden auras. Based on the costumes, or lack thereof, one can distinguish between St. Onuphrius – naked, with only a loincloth, the priests of the Eastern Church or Holy Virgins. This procession is heading to the gate of Paradise depicted below as a door with a visible lock. It is headed by St. Peter with a key, leading the first of the saints, probably St. Paul. Above the door is a representation of a Seraphim guarding it with two swords. In Paradise, against a white background with vegetation visible, sits the Mother of God, surrounded by angels adoring her and the Good Thief in a loincloth holding a cross. Further on one can see the three patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, holding the souls of the Righteous in scarves in their bosom.

On the opposite side of the fresco, the resurrection of bodies is shown. Against the backdrop of a rocky landscape, two angels blow their trumpets over the land and sea. In response, the dead wrapped in shrouds rise from their graves, and fantastic animals – naively conceived elephants or octopuses, spit out devoured limbs. At the top, on a stretched scarf, sits a personification of the Earth holding a tomb with a rising dead man. In the lower part, the personification of the Sea on two fish (dolphins?), holds a ship and a red-and-white flag. A fiery river spilling wide in the lower part of the composition originates at Christ's feet. The damned are being led there by the

devils. In the river, we can spot numerous figures, including Julian the Apostate and Caiaphas. The fiery river ends with a conventional depiction of Leviathan's maw.

There are also secondary elements in the composition, placed to the left of the river of fire. These include the death of a righteous man, whose guardian angel takes the soul clothed in white into his care; the depiction of David playing an instrument; and the death of a sinner whose soul is already awaited by devils.

The whole is characterized by elegant drawing and a rich color palette with numerous blues, yellows and reds. The composition is clear and thoughtful.

Analysis

In order to properly analyze and grasp the complex meaning of the representation, it is necessary to trace the development of the various motifs, to consider their creation in this particular case, as well as the question of the location of the composition itself.

Old Christian basilicas usually had an atrium on the west side, later transformed into an open courtyard, used for burying the dead.

Thus, the bodies of boyars, voivodes and prominent clerics were usually buried in the anteroom or vestibule. The placement of *The Last Judgment* composition on the west wall is understandable in this context (Podlacha, 1912). It is also important to remember the negative connotations of the west as a place where the sun "dies" every day, which brings associations with the realm of death and darkness. On the contrary, the Orient is the direction from which the day is invariably reborn giving new hope (Réau, 1946). Christ himself is also compared to the Sun rising from on high (Luke 1:78). The depiction of the end of the world or the west of life in this particular place is also a confirmation of the well-known and often quoted words of Maximus the Confessor: *It is a truly wonderful thing that in its smallness it [a church] can reflect the whole great world* (Dionysius of Furna, 2003, p. V – trans. KSD)

The composition of *The Last Judgment* was finally constituted in 11th-century paintings (two icons on Mount Sinai). Later, although it was enriched and slightly modified, its core remained the same

(Réau, 1956; Grabar, 1979). Characteristic of the depictions of *The Last Judgment* is the division into several parallel strips, which creates a structure of images placed one above the other. A. Grabar derives it from ancient triumphal representations on the bases of columns (Column of Arcadius), thus emphasizing its archaic nature. What distinguishes the content of the depiction of Judgment from other Byzantine iconographic formulas in the Middle Ages is the combination of various texts from the various books of Scripture in a single image. This is evidence of the theologians' initiative in this regard. There is a well-known 4th-century text by Ephrem the Syrian, which appears to be a description of a painterly composition of the *Last Judgment*. The existence of such an artwork in such an early period is by no means certain (and even highly doubtful), but the description itself suggests that the compilation of various texts on the final events occurred much earlier than the first pictorial representations that have survived to our time. The visions of St. Niphon of Constance and Ivan Peresvetov's *Complaint* were also relevant to the areas in question (Kocój, 2006).

The Voronež scenes do not follow each other in chronological order, some are simultaneous, some immediately precede each other (the judgment and the effect of the judgment), and some take place outside of time at all (Adam and Eve before the throne of Hetoimasia). The placement of images corresponds to an irrational space in which directions in themselves mean nothing, and the determinant of placement is the moral order defined by the hierarchy of virtues. The Judge is placed at the top of the composition, and it is to His right and His left that the various representations are situated – some of a narrative nature and these are accessible to all, while others are abstract and thus clear only to the initiated.

The composition of *The Last Judgment* is developing in the West in the direction of increasingly dramatizing the action and making the psychological features more visible. The opposite happens in the Byzantine area of influence – Christ remains a gentle judge who *sine furore et ira* separates the sheep from the goats – which is how He is portrayed in Voronež. The composition is dominated by the desire for an evangelical story – hence its narrative and epic nature (Podlacha, 1912).

In order to grasp the full meaning of the depiction, it is necessary to briefly analyze each scene. Angels rolling up the sky testify that time has been fulfilled. This is a motif taken from Isaiah (Isa 34:4) and Revelation (Rev 21:1). The image of the Ancient of Days corresponds to Daniel's dream vision (Dan 7:9-14), a foreshadowing of the Last Judgment. W. Podlacha wrongly equates the representation of the Ancient in the highest register with God the Father. Orthodox Eastern (Byzantine) art would never have ventured into this kind of equality sign. The only Person of the Trinity who became incarnate – who voluntarily assumed human form and thus (according to the post-iconoclastic interpretation) allowed His image in the fine arts – was the Son. It is also in Him that the fullness of the revelation about the Father takes place (John 14:6; John 10:30; Matt 11:26, etc.). He is the only acceptable and legitimate image of the Father. All representations of the First Person in art remain forbidden, while the epiphanies of the Old Testament are in fact epiphanies of the Son in His eternal being. This theologically only correct interpretation, the veracity of which is confirmed by numerous monuments, is shaken at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries on the ground of Ruthenian art (Szcześniak, 2023)³. In the icon from Novgorod (Tretyakov Gallery), for the first time, the figure of the Ancient of Days is identified with God the Father, and this is clearly evidenced by the inscription. From this point on, the blurring of the boundaries between the Father and the Ancient of Days from the prophetic vision slowly proceeds. It cannot be said with certainty that the Novgorod icon was the first work to blur this division. Tracing the origins of this new way of thinking, researchers often point to the Balkans as the area from which inspiration or specific representations of this type may have come. In the absence of conclusive evidence (artifacts), however, this concept remains only in the realm of hypotheses.⁴ With the increasing popularity

3 This issue, along with the relevant iconographic material and literature, is discussed in the listed bibliographic item. Here, not wishing to repeat myself, I will only refer to the most important conclusions.

4 The conclusive evidence cannot be the representation from the Tomić Psalter, because there the identification of the Father and the Ancient of Days does not take place.

of depictions of God the Father, the theme of *Fatherhood* (*Paternitas*) even gains a place in the monumental program of temple decoration, eventually becoming canonical and acceptable (the oldest example known to me dates to 1561).

Voroneț depiction of *The Last Judgment* has no signs of identifying the Ancient of Days with God the Father. The entire composition is in harmony with the description in the Book of Daniel, while the figure of interest is unambiguously signed with the monograms *IC XC* indicating the Second Person, in addition to the fortunately exquisitely preserved inscription *Vetkhyi denmy*, written with abbreviation (cf. the inscription on the depiction of the Ancient of Days in the apse of the Church of the Savior on Neredita in Novgorod). The unambiguous depiction of God the Father in such a significant composition, occupying the entire western wall of the church, would push back to an earlier time when this type of image appears in monumental painting (this scene in Voroneț dates to 1550). It could also indicate the direction of influence and contribute to the discussion of both the genesis of the Moldovan paintings and the emergence of representations of God the Father in the program of Orthodox church paintings. In the case of Voroneț, however, one cannot yet speak of assimilation or the emergence of this phenomenon. A review of other paintings of the Orthodox churches clearly shows the still respected interpretation about the epiphanies of the Son (motifs in the *Tree of Jesse* on the south wall of the church and the *Celestial Hierarchy* to the east).

It is different at the Church of the Resurrection in Sucevița. There, a figure with golden robes and white hair, appearing among the plant tendrils of the *Tree of Jesse* is called, as far as the current state of preservation of the paintings allows, the Father. A certain anomaly in this representation is the Son, although placed in the upper register, above the Mother of God in the pose of an orant, in an aureole analogous to the Father (superimposed on a rhombus square) but seated on the left of the First Person. However, the paintings in Sucevița are later than those in Voroneț and, as it were, crown the era of painted monasteries of Bukovina (1596).

While the depiction of the Ancient of Days in Voroneț's *Last Judgment* scene is not identical to God the Father, so it does not allow

conclusions based on this premise, but it is unique in itself. The silver-haired Ancient was not included in the scene of the *Judgment* in the 16th and 17th centuries (John 5, 22: *the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son*). We do not meet him either in the Athonian frescoes or in the *Hermeneia* or other Bukovina frescoes. Thus, it is an intriguing element of the composition that anticipates the presence of the Ancient in monumental painting, without still being synonymous with the Father himself.

In the next strip, Christ, seated on a rainbow, judges humanity. His right hand is turned toward the viewer as a sign of acceptance of the Righteous, his left hand turned away – repelling sinners. Introduction to the composition of the two greatest advocates of people, Mary and St. John the Baptist creates the theme of *Deesis*. The uniqueness and merits of the Divine Mother do not require comment, and as for Prodomos, let us just point out that he was the link between the Old and New Covenants, the forerunner of Christ, about whom the Savior himself said: *among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist* (Matt 11:11).

The Hetoimasia motif has its origins in early Christian art. Its earliest developed form is found in the Arian baptistery in Ravenna. This motif is said to derive from the custom of storing holy books on the bishop's throne in basilicas, as well as the placing of a throne with the Gospels during conciliations among the assembled heads of the Church (Podlacha, 1912). Its function in depictions of the *Last Judgment* is linked to the preparation of the throne before the appearance of the Son of Man, it is a symbol of power and dominion. Adam and Eve symbolize redeemed their guilt, and they also provide a clear parallel of Christ – the second Adam, Mary – the new Eve (e.g. Rom 5, 18–19; 1 Cor 15:21–22: *For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive*).

As for the condemned, according to numerous researchers, the determining factor in placing these, and no other, nationalities was political and social, and only then religious. Bukovina frescoes feature Jews who were hated because of usury, Roman Catholics as a sign of dislike for the Roman rite, Turks plaguing Romania with numerous invasions, etc. E. Kocój (2006) believes that God would

judge not so much the sinners as the enemies of Romania, which in this arrangement actually becomes the chosen people. S. Ulea believes that the hallmark of Moldovan painting is its involvement. Theological and symbolic language sought to express freedom ideals, such as fighting the Turks (as in: Florea, 1989). As proof, in addition to *The Last Judgment*, he cites depictions of the siege of Constantinople, where the Persians were identified with the Turks, etc.

The theme of resurrection of bodies was taken from the Letters of Paul (e.g. *it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body*, 1 Cor 15:44 and the entire 1 Kor 15:35–53). The depiction of Gehenna as a monster (the maw of Leviathan) in addition to the Bible (Job 41:11–13; Is 27:1) is based on tradition (the sources already mentioned) and folk beliefs, and is even combined with depictions of a defeated Hades (Skrzyniarz, 2002). The fiery river flowing out of the east is the ultimate test of a person's worth – the righteous pass through it unscathed, and the sinners will remain in it forever (Cf. Ml 3:2–3: *But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness*).

For a long time, there was a conviction, linked to a kind of Messianism associated with the Ceaușescu regime, about the folk origins of numerous elements of the composition. Examples include the supposed *trembitas* blown by the angels calling for the Judgment, David's bagpipe, the benches on which the Apostles sit, and even the scarves in which the souls of the Saved are wrapped. Today, however, this concept is being abandoned (Kocój, 2006, 2014).

To conclude, we should still consider the function of the fresco. Undoubtedly, it is a foreshadowing of Salvation, but also a warning of the fate awaiting unbelievers after death. The representation is not free of allusions to the political situation of the time and the dangers hanging over Romania. The placement of the composition outside the building is sometimes explained by greater accessibility – the faithful often had no access to the choir and transept (Grabar, 1968). The depiction thus also acted as an interpretation of the truths of the faith. A secondary function was assigned to the fresco in the

interwar period, when, under the influence of Romanian historiography, the painting was methodically detached from its obvious religious context and incorporated into the national mythology associated with the idea of the so-called Great Romania.

The present analysis was intended to briefly present the artistic issues related to the depiction of *The Last Judgment* on the western wall of the Voroneț church. It focused on issues related to the genesis, meaning and function of the representation, trying to highlight interesting aspects of the composition that have so far not fully resonated in the context of the research on the fresco. The expressive power of the composition remains great, thus provoking future generations of scholars to make in-depth studies of as yet undiscovered aspects of the work.

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