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Sacred Art, a Core Value in the Cultural-Artistic Rethinking and Visual Practice

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Abstract

In a postmodern world which hosts a mix of cultural values, Sacred Art brings into focus the sublimation of the form of representation. This makes Sacred Art a core value in the cultural-artistic rethinking and in the visual practice. On the other hand, in its relationship to society, the moral component supported by Sacred Art in Christianity represents a core value which offers cultural and artistic rethinking and visual practice a chance for spiritual revigoration. For over two decades, the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" in Iaşi has shaped and developed artistic and heritage preservation skills to generations of students educated to protect the Chruch Heritage and revive Sacred Art. The study of art history involeved in this process brings in signs of the sacred from around the world which show a constancy in their choice of location, shape and their function of signalling the presence of the sacred, which relies on their aesthetic component. Sacred Art has empowered the core human need of the sacred as related to certain locations in the world and to the very places where it is taught and practiced. This paper presents some of the results - in their theoretical and applied aspects - with reference to iconographic art and its weight in the professional

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training of those who can continue to create, protect and remake (by conservation and restauration) mostly heritage items. Some activities, forms of artistic expression and implications to support preservation of objects as accomplished by students and graduates of our division have been chosen to illustrate this aspect. The purpose of the work is to bring into discussion the role and place of sacred art in today's society, where it rests a moral and a cultural landmark.

Keywords: *Sacred Art; core value; rethinking cultural-artistic practice; transitoriness; permanence; sacred geography; heritage preservation; visual artistic education.*

1. Introduction

One can find a mix of artistic expressions in the world today. Quite often the visuals resume and combine previous forms and actions. Thus, they rely on the favorable social impact obtaining and the creation of a conceptual launch pad for further achievements. The consistency with which various visual shocks are offered to viewers leads to the creation of mental chains in the thoughts of the receptors; they generate in the viewers the habit of preferring, accepting them without reservations and practicing them as artistic expression. The general public is attracted to issues that stimulate more instinctual aspects than elevating spiritual coordinates, including artistic experiments that paced with the gregarious sides of existence and the visual.

2. Problem Statement

We think that the stage of practicing these aspects has already made their intention to raise awareness known and brought them into discussion; another motivational route is now needed. There are, however, differences in approach, because in many situations *kitsch* cannot be evaluated only in relation to what it used to be, but especially to what is happening at the moment. But how can one keep away from the kitsch visual expressions when they are exert persuasion and impress as art? Which tradition should be chosen as having a wider appeal if traditions are have been perverted for commercial purposes?

3. Research Questions/Aims of the research

This paper draws attention to the need for rethinking the core values and cultural-artistic practices of professional quality, which are meant to stimulate spiritual elevation. In so doing it involves elements of 'sacred geography' as sources for artistic and educational purposes meant to clean

the public perception of art forms [6]: (student) artists are exposed to artwork of various genres, to buildings and objects, spaces and landscapes that shape the idea that what lies at the core of human perception of the world comes together in the artistically-shaped sacred as integrated in nature. Sacred Art emphasizes the importance of tradition and its adaptability in the perpetuation of some benefic educational messages on several levels. This is illustrated in the teaching of icon painting according to (late) medieval techniques, allowing the artist some personal contribution. [3]

4. Research Methods

This paper involves two sets of research methods: 1)- the search for sources of visuals in the milieu and in reference literature from among the works in the history of religion and aesthetics, with special focus on those involving the connection between natural perfection/order and human-made artwork; 2)- the authors' own practice of working in and teaching the traditional techniques of painting and conservation and restoration to students. The mechanism of conveying the sacred (Mircea Eliade -[5]) is illustrated in the basic concept of a book, among others, which lists, describes and analyzes human beliefs and (artistic) practices as reflected in places of worship and their decor. The paper revisits the connection between the natural, the sacred and the aesthetic, as manifestations of perfection in nature, art and human being and as a value to be conveyed through artistic education. [2]

5. Findings

The answer, a salvation from the invasive non-art forms, consists in the professionalism of achievements, regardless of where they come from, the secular or the religious. Professionalism means entering the coordinates of the creation of intrinsic and extrinsic value, of quality practice, for the transmission of the guiding concepts. The fact that a rather large amount of heritage values which have come down to our time belongs to the sphere of Sacred Art makes the latter a basic need and a practice to be persistently conveyed.[4] Education via Sacred Art favours social relationships and the understanding of diverse forms of beliefs and expression (Fig. 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12.). For over two decades, the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" in Iaşi has shaped and developed artistic and heritage preservation skills to generations of students educated to protect the Chruch Heritage and revive Sacred Art. This paper presents some of the

results - in their theoretical and applied aspects - with reference to iconographic art and its valence in the professional training of those who can continue to create, protect and remake (by conservation and restauration) mostly heritage items. Some activities, forms of artistic expression and implications to support preservation of objects as accomplished by students and graduates of our division have been chosen to illustrate this aspect. The understanding of the core value of the human need for the sacred is related to some universal techniques and practices and made specific in codes of artistic representation.

5.1. Structure

This paper includes, directly and indirectly, some results of the authors' own work, mostly cultural, artistic and educational, which imply research (creation, teaching, research) and student formation and promotion as authors of studies, conservation work, iconographies (Fig. 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12.). The authors' experience as independent artists who work in various forms traditional and modern forms has brought them to their position as educators. Their students follow and experiment with traditional techniques of icon painting, of restoration and conservation of icons on wood and murals, both in class and in extensive field trips in various location in the region of Moldavia. The results can be seen both in various historical locations, heritage churches and monuments and in exhibits collected for public views. Traditional Christian Orthodox values as synthesised in church painting have become part of the spiritual portrait of the students of Romanian sacred art heritage and its sacred geography. Following their own discipline students of Christian Orthodox sacred art can cultivate their community in both its search for an identity and in its awareness of the landscape.[1, 2]

Stimulated to seek perfection in the traditional forms in order to master their art professionally, students in Sacred Art also study the ways nature and art communicates. Outside class, they have to confront the other approach to the sacred: the lay one.

A basic sources for self-growth in education, reference literature reflects, at various times, the results of the human search for a balance between their own practice and the natural world. To help guide the student within the vast literature available, some lankmarks have been identified and integrated in the teaching process. (Fig.1 and Fig. 5, Fig.7).

The main idea is that the religious exists not only within the context of religious practices. Both forms of sacred involve artistic shaping. The experience of defining the sacred space after Mircea Eliade [5]. The latter has

included the results of this search, as it has been shaped by the human need to communicate in pure aesthetic forms. A return to the function of places/locations/monuments/cities/figures of founding fathers etc. Some mystical notions, death, which traditionally raised to the status of sacred places in inhumation, incineration, monuments erected to commemorate events related to death (pillars, *mor*) which might or might be not related to any religion. A sacred status belongs to objects related to the cult of the ancestors, state power, artistic genius (and the people endowed with it), (mostly mystical) knowledge, the grandeur of nature, acts of military courage, manifestations of culture (mostly in the elevated sense), physical perfection etc. In an extended sense, sacred geography includes some significant places connected to the life of some personalities and events which have marked the course of history, sacred elements of state power, memorials, deposits of cultural values (museums, libraries), natural reservations, places isolated from the environment by natural barriers, scientific bodies etc. [6]

Whereas religious objectives are involved in the communion with the divine, lay sacred objects base on a mysticism generated by categories such as perfection, acts of heroism, power, Fatherland, death etc. Understanding the functions of religious and sacred places (Fig. 1 and Fig.5, 7) - that of consolidation (the cult object exists as a conventional centre of a given territory within which members of a (religious) community live; the mediating function (the cult object mediates between the human and divinity in the religious structure of creation); the communication function, in which the cult object represents the centre of social life; the protection function (the object and forces beyond protect the people who live in certain territories or members of a social group); the therapeutic function; the function of protecting nature, in which the object supports the conservation of the flora and fauna on a territory - helps educate environmentally-aware people, open both to their own religious, spiritual needs and to those of the larger community.

6. Discussion

Our study, carried out in the process of teaching students of Sacred Art and providing them with new sources, working with them in Christian Orthodox churches and monasteries, on one hand, and in class workshops has made it possible to follow and mark their evolution in relation to the core concept of the sacred. [1, 3]. It is the sacred - religious and lay - which has brought them to the study of cultural heritage.

Student work has been coordinated and subdivized for the students of church painting, document-book restauration and icons on wood restauration by a team of specialized instructors, professors and teachers associated to Cuza University who have worked together and found many useful solutions to promote and support Sacred Art today, as a positive and necessary attitude for the spiritualization and restauration of the human being.

Training the future school teachers of visual artistic education within an optional pedagogical module proves to be an opportunity for the implementation and spreading in society of the education in the spirit of an awareness of the evidence of the Christian faith, including by the appreciation, preservation and protection today of Christian Orthodox iconography and of the Romanian spiritual and heritage values.

The study of reference literature involves the artistic conceptualization of the sacred space invested with artistic value. The sacred geography of the world shows some constants of preserving the memory of theopanies which help one understand the connections between various religions. Preserved and worshipped by generations, sacred places of either nature generally display perfection, the result of professionalism.

Visual documentation



1

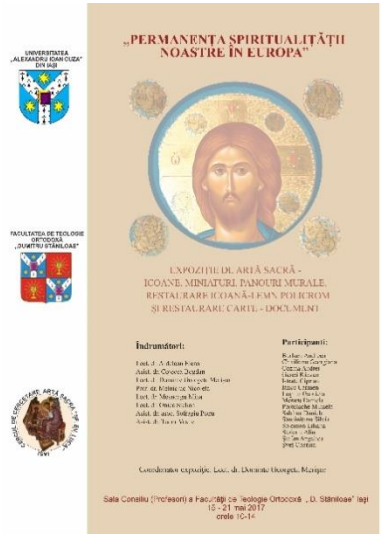


5

Fig.1 and 5 - The Stonehenge sanctuary(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stonehenge)and Nativity altar in Bethlehem (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Nativity#/media/File:Nativity_Grotto_Star.jpg), p. 206 and p. 312, respectively, in *Geografia sacră* by D.Gromov (ed.), translated from Russian into Romanian by Marina Vraciu (Chisinau, ARC, 2008)



2



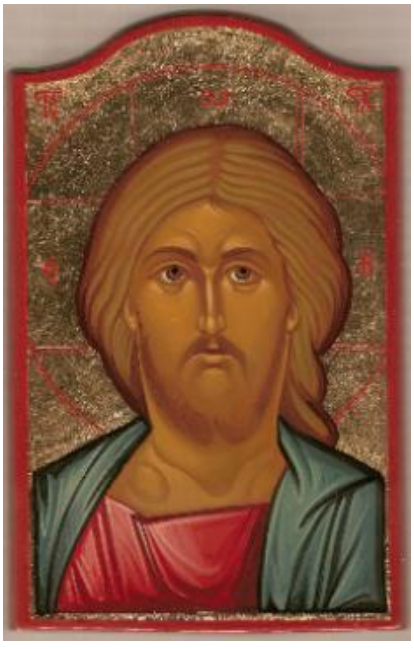
3

Fig.2 and Fig. 3 – 2009 and 2017 posters illustrate students' work conducted by professors .Merişor G. Dominte, Stelian Onica, Bogdan Cojocea etc., withtin a wide range of cultural and artistic activities (workshops, club and exhibitions of sacred art, study visits) organized for (postgraduate) students of Sacred Art, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iaşi; Photos by Petru Sofragiu



4

Fig. 4 - Jesus Emmanuel, icon painted by Cojocea Bogdan. Photo by Bogdan Cojocea



6

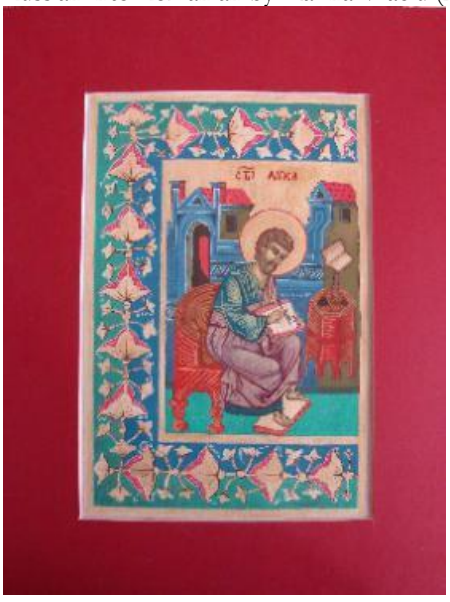
Fig. 6 – Jesus Christ the Saviour, icon painted by student Vasiloaia Monica. Photo by Tudor Vasile. .

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Fig. 7 – Saint Sophia Church in Istanbul (https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catedrala_Sfânta_Sofia_din_Constantinopol), p.312 in *Geografia sacra* by D. Gromov (ed.), translated from Russian into Romanian by Marina Vraciu (2008).



8

Fig.8 – Saint Luke the Evangelist, 2007 miniature painted by postgraduate student Moşneagu Mirela, Sacred Art (after a traditional model). Photo by Cojocea Bogdan.



9

Fig.9 – Jesus Christ the Teacher, icon painted by student Ciofu Gabriel. Photo by Onica Stelian.


10a

10b

10c

Fig. 10 (a,b,c)- Sequences from a 2013 students' exhibition, Sacred Art (Cultural Heritage at the time), Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iaşi: new and restored icons, miniatures, old church books, restored. Photos by Onica Stelian.


11

12

Figures 11, 12 - An exhibition by students of Sacred Art - Cultural Heritage, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iaşi: icons, mural panels, *Atrium Room in* Palas Mall, Iaşi, 10-15 November 2015 (joint coordination-organization). Photos by Sofragiu Petru and Tudor Vasile.

6. Conclusions

The transitory and the permanent represent the two ends for the human values and their application. The cultural-artistic values bring in new achievements and sensitivity. This draws one's attention to the fact that there is no efficient way of conveying, from one generation to another, the human aspect of concepts and application without the specific involvement and essentialization. In this sense, Sacred Art acts as a constant flag. Thus, the role of sacred art is decisive in transmitting and continuing tradition, further generating new ways of artistic expression as a means of communication in aesthetic forms.

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