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## Summary of PhD Thesis

Art and society. Church founders, foundations  
and worship objects in Valcea in the XVIII<sup>th</sup>  
century

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## Summary

Valcea County is a special area regarding foundations and icons painted during this period, and it has influenced both Transylvania as well as other counties in The Romanian Country through its maestros trained in the workshops here, who have spread these crafts. A lot of these foundations are not yet sufficiently well-known, a lot have suffered changes but we can still find foundations and icons which deserve to be published so that art history researchers in the country can form an image as broad as possible on the theme. This research has implicitly started by closely studying the literature in order to find out what is already known on the subject. The next step was field research, as thorough and objective as possible, on a large number of churches built during this period (what remains of them, because inevitably over time they have suffered transformations and repairs) and on the icons kept in museums or collections, ending up at the pieces in the collection of the County Museum *Aurelian Sacerdoteanu*, Valcea.

This paper aims at covering three main areas.

- 1. Political and social evolution in Europe and the Romanian Countries.
- 2. The evolution of art in Europe, the Romanian Countries and especially in the Valcea County. Church founders and foundations in Valcea in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century.
- 3. Analysis of the icons in the collection of the County Museum *Aurelian Sacerdoteanu*, Valcea.

### I. Society in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century

The first chapter analyzed the political and social evolution. I tried to capture the changes that took place during that period, especially after the death of Constantin Brancoveanu, once the Phanariot reigns began and the way these reflected in society and in art. Due to a rapid economic evolution caused by the industrial revolution and to the ideas promoted by the enlightenment, we are dealing with great changes in the structure, attitude and material culture in Europe, especially in Western Europe. Technical progress was made, in textile manufacturing, in metallurgy, the steam engine evolved, the maritime field developed and agricultural techniques were optimized. Lots of people came to the city to work in industry. The standard of living and life expectancy increased. More attention was given to education by creating academies, and to science, and this led to a number of scientific discoveries in mathematics and chemistry and the basis of the modern study was created. In philosophy, the mentality changed and the feudal arrangements

broke down in favor of modern practices. Man was free, enlightened man, rational being who changes the world and society for the good and who is master of its own destiny. A lot of philosophical books about happiness and light, political life, laws and society were written. Religious and political freedoms were established during this period. Religion was separated from state and the economy. This all led to the French revolution and the creation of national states. On the political stage, despite the fact that most European states were monarchies, most of them promoted economic modernization while still keeping in place the old social structures which benefited them. England maintained a constitutional monarchy and became the biggest maritime power and extended its empire. In France this was the time of the French revolution with all its known events and implications and it was the time of Napoleon Bonaparte. In central and eastern Europe, Prussia, Austria and Russia were in a period of full expansion, conquering areas in the detriment of Poland and the Ottoman Empire.

In the Romanian Countries, there existed a national and democratic enlightenment, closer to the people. The Romanian Countries weren't eluded by changes although these were on a smaller scale than in Western Europe. Following the death of Constantin Brancoveanu in The Romanian Country and Dimitrie Cantemir in Moldova (Romanian rulers and known promoters of culture regardless of the chosen field), the Ottoman Empire, whose power had weakened, imposed in leadership Phanariot rulers. The Romanian Country and Moldova ceased to have their own policy, because the imposed leaders were servants of the Empire and on a personal level they only wanted to recover the money they had spent on getting to the throne. At the same time, they had to adapt to the realities and they established the mentalities that enabled to Romanian Countries to pass quite directly from the Middle Ages to modernity. The society was now on the edge of modernizing and the ideas of freedom and citizen dignity arrived in the Romanian Countries as well. Overall, the presence of the Phanariot rulers at the helm of The Romanian Country and Moldova was not an entirely negative phenomenon but has significantly delayed the evolution of the two countries.

Secondly, this evolution was focused on the Valcea County as an integral part of these transformations but also on its special role in the art of the times. The Ottoman Empire was in full decline and was trying to maintain its suzerainty on The Romanian Country and Moldova. The Habsburg Empire was during this period at its peak and was already ruling over Transylvania. Russia was in a period of large development and was posing as the protector of

Orthodoxy, wishing to expand its area of influence. Despite all this, The Romanian Country and Moldova proved to have military and diplomatic astuteness and managed to maintain their internal autonomy. Although a lot of products went to the Ottoman Empire as tributes or at symbolic prices, more was produced and commerce developed. In a world in full progress, Ramnicu Valcea was a lively commercial hub with ties both in Transylvania and in Moldova. The health services in the city were developed, more schools appeared and books circulated more. A number of conflicts took place between these foreign powers on the territory of the Valcea County in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century. The first example is the Turkish-Habsburg conflict during 1716-1718 which offered the hope of emancipating from Ottoman suzerainty with the help of the Habsburgs. One of the places where conflicts took place was Ramnicu Valcea. During 1718-1739, the region of Oltenia was under Austro-Hungarian domination. During this period a postal service was organized in the city, the Caroline road was worked on, the city was fortified, production grew and trade flourished. The book "First teaching for young people" was written for the first time in Romanian in the printing house of Ramnicu Valcea. Following the Russian-Austrian-Turkish conflict of 1739-1739, the diocese of Ramnicu Valcea was burned down by the Ottomans. Oltenia region was given back to The Romanian Country. There have been other wars during 1768-1774 between Ottomans and Russians and during 1787-1792, the Russian-Austrian-Turkish conflict during which Cozia Monastery suffered great damages and the city of Ramnicu Valcea and the church Cuvioasa Paraschiva were burned and pillaged. A lot of churches were built during this period (the church of Teius, the church of Copacelu, the church of Bucsani, the church of Cacova etc.) in the county or in the city (the chapel of the diocese of Ramnicu Valcea, the church Toti Sfintii), and the ones previously build were repaired, mostly because they had been damaged during the conflicts previously mentioned. At this time we have genuine painting schools in Valcea, Costesti, Pietrari, Tomsani an Teiusi, and a lot of the maestros trained in the workshops here spread their art in The Romanian Country as well as in Transylvania, with Ramnicu Valcea and the Olt Valley being a true gateway between the two Romanian Countries.

## **II. Arts in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century**

High art can offer varied information on the society of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century in the Romanian Countries. Analyzed documents can describe a world out of which the monuments, the inscriptions or a few books are amongst the only testimonies left. On the basis of these

artistic accomplishments we can find out about the evolution of inhabitants from different social classes, the transformations in the structure of cities, markets and villages or about the highlighting of elements from the active parts of the population. The second chapter was dedicated to forms of expressing beauty and to the church founders. We tried here to highlight the direction that the development of art took during this period, the churches, and the cataloging of social classes, very diverse, out of which the church founders that built these churches came from. We must understand the art and paintings on the walls of churches from the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century in order to then understand the icons painted during this period.

In the first part of the second chapter we followed the transformations that took place in the art of Europe and the Romanian Countries. A lot of fields, including art, have drastically changed. In Europe we are in full swing of the rococo style. Then, along with the French revolution, painters adopt the neoclassic style and the easel painting ceased to be shocking a long time before. Transformations happened in the Romanian Countries as well, although not as fast as in Western Europe. The territory of the Romanian Countries was still marked by the artworks of byzantine Christianity and the art here goes through a period characterized by the lack of unity. Transylvania was under Austrian rule and was more influenced by the western art and Moldova was under the influence of the mannerism caused by the beautiful accomplishments of the previous century. In The Romanian Country, it was not the leadership anymore that gave the most orders for church building, as in the period of Brancoveanu, which shows once again the changes that were taken place in the Romanian society. Over the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century there were a lot of church founders from all layers of society, either clerics or seculars, and they wished to underline the importance of the role that they played in society, announcing new horizons, the modernity. Culture became more accessible through the editing of books in Romanian but also through the beautiful paintings on the walls of churches, which told important fragments from the Bible for illiterates or for those that did not know Romanian.

The architectural style in The Romanian Country had a smooth crossing from the XVII<sup>th</sup> century to the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century. In most cases, churches are simpler, composed of nave, narthex and semi-circular altar. However, based on the donations and requests of church founders, there were also bigger churches, sumptuous, with more towers and carefully decorated, especially in areas with a greater importance. What were special for this period were the exterior paintings of the churches in this area, which first covered a smaller area and then covered the entire surface.

They showed philosophers, sibyls or prophets, signifying the hope for a better world and the openness for knowledge. Alongside the churches and the specific iconography, we also analyzed the secular architecture and the houses built during that era. A part of this chapter was reserved for the house painters of this century, where we observe a number of interesting aspects. We find out about the first house painting school in Valcea and about the division of house painters into guilds. The number of painters grows and they become more aware of their importance, they have commissions in diverse areas and they become more mobile, they sign their work, they collect notebooks with models, they are inspired more and more by reality in their art and for some of them we can also notice their talent for portraiture. A lot of times, with plenty of imagination and humor, disregarding church dogmas, they described with talent a world inspired from fables or abounding in real characters which reveal to us daily activities of people of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century. Part of icon painters respected old recipes, and another part, those who hadn't had significant contact with the artistic world or the money necessary to create icons according to old recipes, made a number of concessions. From both groups, we were left with different and very beautiful paintings.

The second part of the chapter, and the most substantial one, is the one reserved for the church founders and the foundations they built. We enumerated an impressive number of churches as a table, 280 of which either don't exist anymore or are extremely deteriorated, but a lot of which are still in good condition, with some having been renovated in a better or a less than inspired fashion over time. We distinguish five categories of church founders. The first category is composed of high ranking clerics, clerics with positions which gave them a say in the church dealings of the area, bishops, archimandrites, archpriests, abbots of the great monasteries. Their names are tied to twenty six churches (the infirmary of the diocese of Ramnicu Valcea, Colibasu hermitage and the church Sf. Voievozi from Calimanesti), a number that corresponds to the expectations we have from this group. Out of these churches we discussed nine. The second category of church founders includes clerics, priests or monks who have founded forty three churches (church Intrarea in biserică from Mrenesti Creteni, church Sf. Ioan Botezatorul from Cacova Stoenesti or church Sf. Nicolae from Amarasti). Out of these we discussed eleven churches. In the third category of church founders we have clerics and wealthy or less wealthy seculars, which combined their donation in order to build no less than seventy seven churches (church Buna Vestire from Valea Raii, church Sf. Ioan Botezatorul from Cacova Stoenesti or



church Sf. Nicolae from Amarasti). Out of these we described eight churches. The fourth category of church founders is composed of wealthy seculars who usually had positions in the state and also the financial potency to build churches and they have built sixty churches (church Buna Vestire from Ramnicu Valcea, church Sf. Gheorghe from Cazanesti or church Buna Vestire from Ionestii Govorii). Out of these we discussed fourteen churches. The fifth but definitely not the last category, considering the number of churches they built is that of locals church builders, seculars, local people, who donate together to build seventy four beautiful churches (such as the ones in Fiscalia, Ramesti or Creteni). Out of these we enumerated thirty churches.

These beautiful and valuable churches can be researched in the future by specialists. An entire paper can be written based on this subject, and this situation will change in the future considering the fact that some monuments will either disappear or could offer new information based on research, will be restored and will regain their glow. This is an exciting and always fresh subject that deserves to be studied.

### **III. Material vestiges in Valcea in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century**

In the third chapter we firstly mentioned the significance of the icons, the way the icon is interpreted based on theological dogmas and what it means for the believer. Christian art is an art based on the Gospels, on saints and on Christian teachings. The icon respects the characteristics of the prototype fixed on dogmas, being the only human creation that does not involve idolatry. Along with the word, the icon was a method of revealing the Divinity and of communicating with it, a road to follow and a way. The icon had multiple purposes: esthetical, by beautifying the church, pedagogical, by presenting the history of the church to the ignorant, internal, by accompanying the revelation of the divine and also interceding the gift of God. We then discussed the way the icons are represented, first about the techniques they are made with, because we can have fixed (on the wall) or portable icons and they can be conceived on diverse types of material although the technique in which the chosen icons were painted is tempera on wood which implies a wooden support, primer, image painted in tempera colors and protection with varnish.

Another part was reserved for the dogmas of church painting because in order to paint icons certain attitudes, compositional schemes, colors or perspectives are used. The artist did not

bring his personal contribution, but he rather regarded himself as the instrument of the Holy Spirit which worked through him. In the icon the form was dematerialized in order to present the spiritual purity of the subject. The body lost its natural appearance and became spiritualized or hid under all kinds of drapery. The face and the eyes are given special attention. The features of the saints remained unchanged and always full of a divine light. Certain proportions were strictly respected and these were based on a single measuring unit, the module, ensuring balance, simplifying the composition of the figures and favoring the harmonization between more artworks. Regarding perspective, the icon has employed other laws, using inverted perspective, linear perspective, axonometric or perceptive perspective. People, animals and buildings were different from reality. Each color had its own significance which was kept. Regarding the religious artistic environment on the Romanian territory we mentioned how this current started in our art starting in the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, and then its evolution during the period of Matei Basarab and in the second half of the XVII<sup>th</sup> century. Chronologically, what followed was the rule of Constantin Brancoveanu and, after Constantin Brancoveanu had formed the royal school which painted at Horezu, the detachment of Valcea workshops out of which the County Museum “Aurelian Sacerdoteanu” has a number of pieces.

From the collection of old Romanian art of the County Museum “Aurelian Sacerdoteanu” we chose 95 works out of which 66 are pieces from the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century and 29 are pieces from the XIX<sup>th</sup> century. For studying them the following was necessary:

- Finding out as soon as possible the origin of the icon and this meant field research, with the agreement of the people responsible for those churches
- Detailed description of each icon (photographing, measuring, description of painted surface, support and preservation state)

Moreover, for an objective study, an interdisciplinary team is needed where the art historian is given the approval to study the objects from the people responsible for them. A conservationist, a restorer and investigators are also needed. They can see details that change the descriptive data of the icon which are not visible with the naked eye.

The icons were grouped in tables based on workshops, icon themes and authors. The chosen pieces include 42 different themes representing imperial doors, imperial icons, icons from the apostles cycle but also a number of more special works such as a painted litany or the Evangelist John, sculpted fragment from the ensemble Crucifixion from the canopy of the

iconostasis. If we discuss workshops, it has been observed that from the workshop in Pietrari, the museum of Valcea owns 30 different pieces (imperial icons etc.), including a pair of beautiful imperial doors, the registry of apostles almost complete from one of the churches in Pietrari (nine pieces), but also a part of the registry of apostles which belonged to the church of Carstanesti Otesani (seven pieces) along with other icons showing apostles. From the workshop of Costesti come 16 pieces, all special, out of which 6 pieces painted by 3 painters were signed. In the museum's collection there is also an icon, a Dodecaortion from the workshop of Teius. Out of the painters, we can highlight from the collection of the County Museum *Aurelian Sacerdoteanu*, Valcea, an exponent of the Costesti workshop, Tudor Zugrav, from whom 4 pieces were kept. Also from the Costesti workshop, two icons from Dimitrie Zugrav were kept. The two worked together on the church of Mierlesti Barbatesti. One piece each was kept from Nicolae Zugrav, Pantelimon Zugrav and Gheorghe Zugrav. In total, we can count five painters and nine pieces. All these problems were settled by detailed description of each piece in the chapter that contains the largest part of the paper.

There are a number of paintings from this period on the territory of the Valcea County which are in church collections (Hurezi, Cozia), in the churches for which they were painted, in private collections, in museums and finally in the base exhibition of the Art Museum of Romania in which we have noticed a number of icons from the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century from the Valcea area in the care of the researchers of the museum. Nevertheless, the pieces in the collection of the County Museum *Aurelian Sacerdoteanu* Valcea, reveal very nicely the atmosphere of the art in The Romanian Country with its peculiarities, with works that carry on the school of the era of Brancoveanu, with works influenced by folk art or by diverse artistic areas and with works signed by the artists of the time. Through the study of these icons we can observe the general tendencies in the art of the period, we can make plausible statements and we can confirm the statements of researchers in the field. Their research brings a positive feeling and professional satisfaction.

The main goal we aimed for is the enrichment of knowledge of the chosen research theme. The theme aims at identifying the mindsets, accomplishments and the atmosphere of the period. We do not claim to exhaustively cover this vast subject, and it is a subject on which a lot of pages can be written, but we desire to add some data which would help the ones interested in the research. So far churches from this period have been studied, they have been described and

their inscriptions have been transcribed and translated. The icons painted during this period respect at the same time and in broad strokes (each has some specifics) the recommendations from the Byzantine rules (brought through Greek connections), falling into the great family of the Byzantine style.

The remarkable art accomplishments from Valcea area that had a big impact on art evolution from Romanian Country as well as from Transylvania in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century got the interest and will get the interest of heads and lays from the country or from abroad.

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