

THE RESTITUTION OF THE NARTHEX OF THE ROYAL CHURCH IN ARGEȘ*

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Abstract: The narthex of the Royal Church in Curtea de Argeș offers us today an iconographic ensemble that is heterogeneous and confusing. The large incomplete surfaces of the mural paintings from the 14th century, the erosions and exfoliations provoked by infiltration and capillary humidity, have generated successive re-makings of the painted ensemble, starting from the middle of the 18th century and especially through the 19th century. The restoration from the beginning of the 20th century added the disastrous effect of the transformation of the inferior register of the narthex in an area designated for the replantation of the frescoes originating from the nave. One of the major consequences of this transformation is the loss of coherence of the lecture of key-images that defined the eschatological sense of the narthex iconography. To be more specific, the *Final Judgement* is fragmented in an arbitrary manner and is hard to read today in its original form.

Rezumat: Pronaosul bisericii Domnești din Curtea de Argeș ne oferă astăzi un ansamblu iconografic eterogen și confuz. Suprafețele lacunare ample ale picturilor murale din veacul al XIV-lea, eroziunile și exfolierile provocate de infiltrații și umiditatea de capilaritate, au generat, refaceri succesive ale ansamblului pictural, începând cu mijlocul secolului al XVIII-lea și cu precădere în decursul veacului al XIX-lea. Restaurarea de al începutul secolului XX a adăugat efectul dezastruos al transformării registrului inferior al pronaosului într-un spațiu destinat replantării frescelor extrase provenind din naos. Una din consecințele majore ale acestei transformări este pierderea coerenței lecturii unei imagini-cheie care definea sensul eshatologic al iconografiei pronaosului. Este vorba de ampla desfășurare a *Judecății de Apoi*, fragmentată în mod arbitrar și greu de citit astăzi în forma ei originală.

The access to the narrow space of the narthex (Fig. 1), when exiting the nave of the Royal Church in Curtea de Argeș, is made through the opening in the axis of the western wall, which has an iconography marked by the ample restorations from the 19th century. Panteleimon the painter, the “restorer” from 1827 has left us, on the southern side of the entrance to the narthex, the fresco with the image of *Saint Mary of Egypt receiving the Holy Eucharist from Saint Zosimas*. On the northern side, another devout, St. Pambo, is pictured from the front, wearing his monastic robes, making with his right hand the gesture of blessing. Both images are painted on a support layer of oakum and lime, with many irregularities, applied directly on the masonry, without any remaining traces from the original painting in its substrate.

A quick examination of the narthex concentrates the view on the ample lunette in the axis of the eastern wall, separated from the rest of the iconographic program by a neat border ornamentation. The representation of the *Deesis* (Fig. 2) in the lunette is made with a great finesse of the image composition, of the modelling of the faces and garments, which set it apart from the fluidity and liberty of the hand that made the rest of the iconographic program. One of the painters of the Royal Church, which we named „the dynamic”, was this time coerced by the apparatus of representation, in which the face of the Saviour, flanked by the two intercessors, The Mother of God and the patron of the Royal Church, Saint Nicholas, receives the prayer of the founder of the church. Clad in an red-brown *chiton* (burnt sienna) brightened by light shades of lazurite, wearing a *himation* also modelled in blue lapis lazuli shades, the Christ sits on a sumptuous ochre gold throne. The feet of the Saviour rest on a *suppedaneum*, while with His right hand He gives blessing, and His left hand rests on His knee, Gospel closed, covered in gold set with precious stones and pearls. The face of Jesus, encircled by the *cruciger* nimbus, is masterfully modelled by the iconographer, starting from a brown, dark *proplasma*, on which shades of ochre are superposed. The gradient from the *proplasma* to the lighter shades is in this case more elaborate, being based on an intermediate tone of brown-green *glykasma* to which the discrete accents of the *sarcomata* are added, made by fine *glacis* of cinnabar red. The finely and precisely traced lines of fine lime white highlights finally assure the emergence of the visage from the dark, warm, burnt sienna mass of the *proplasma*.

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