RESTORATION MEETS LINGUISTICS:  
GHENADIE’S ICONOGRAPHY

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Abstract: In 1891 the Bishop Ghenadie al Râmnicului published a painting handbook, based on a manuscript authored at the beginning of the 19th century by a painter called Gheorghe. Besides iconographical descriptions and technical recipes, the book also contains a quite unique vocabulary. Although the text is on the whole written in Romanian, several pigments are listed under bizarre pseudo-German names. The manuscript speaks to the nature of Romanian–German relations in the 19th century, and also constitutes a precious source of information on particular varnish recipes.

Rezumat: În anul 1891 Episcopul Ghenadie al Râmnicului publică o carte de pictură, care are la bază un manuscris redactat la începutul secolului al XIX-lea de către zugravul Gheorghe. Pe lângă indicaţiile iconografice şi de tehnică, acest text conţine un vocabular cu totul special. Deşi manuscrisul este integral redactat în română, există pigmenţi care apar sub nume pseudo-germane. Manuscrisul atestă încă o dată legăturile româno-germane în secolul al XIX-lea şi reprezintă totodată o sursă preţioasă de reţete de vernis.

Trahin blut, Cronghelb, Blaĭvais. These words are to be found in an early 19th century Romanian manuscript on the painter’s craft. They don’t reveal their meaning, at least not at first. The text is written in Romanian and, as was the norm for the beginning of that century, in Cyrillic script. In 1891, the text has been transcribed into Latin script, and as such it is still comprehensible to the Romanian readers of today. However, several parts – a pigment list, two shopping lists and two varnish recipes – remain unclear. Below, we will try to understand the linguistic phenomenon at work and to decipher these texts.

The book in the book: the manuscript and the publication

In 1891, at the Tipografia ”Cărţilor Bisericeşti” the Bishop Ghenadie al Râmnicului publishes a Romanian 19th century manuscript called “Iconografia. Arta de a zugrăvi templele şi icoanele bisericeşti”. He claims to have received the manuscript from the author’s son. In the 1891 edition of the work in question, we are, in fact, dealing with two authors: the earlier, main, “older” one – the painter Gheorghe – and the later, “newer” one – the bishop Ghenadie – who read, reviewed and published the original text. If the main text is the raw material delivered by a monk, detailing his yearlong experience as a painter – as well as his broad experience in housekeeping and other various matters concerning rural life at the beginning of 19th century, as we are about to find out –, the Iconography penned by the bishop enframes the painting handbook, introduces it and explains the cultural and historical context in which it emerged. The bishop – the secondary author – edited the entire original text, he transcribed it from one alphabet to another (from Cyrillic into Latin), interpreted, described and evaluated the manuscript not only in its content, but also in its materiality, discourse and language. The bishop carefully annotated a large amount of information.

The forward (Preacuvântare) introduces the reader into the substance of the manuscript. Before dealing with the main object of his Foreword – the manuscript –, the Bishop starts by establishing the cultural context, and in so doing takes on a broader topic: the relationship between religion and art. The bishop talks about the reasons why religion uses artistic means to express its “mental conceptions”. He discusses music

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1 The English name of the publishing house is “Typography for Church Books”.
2 English: Ghenadie of Râmnic.
3 English: The Iconography. The Art of Painting Temples and Church Icons.
4 Ghenadie 1891, p. 40.
5 We will refer to the 1891 book Iconografia. Arta de a zugrăvi templele şi icoanele bisericeşti as Iconography.
6 Ghenadie describes oriental music as emerging from the “not yet coordinated accents of the undisciplined Asian”, while “in the disciplined Europe, where the imagination is controlled and ruled by rationality, the music starts with measure” (Ghenadie, 1891, pp. 7–8).
7 Romanian: “concepţiunî mintale” (Ibidem, p. 5).

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