UNCOVERING THE GREAT ARTISTIC VALUE OF THE 18TH CENTURY ICONOSTASIS PAINTED BY VASILIE ZBOROSKI THROUGH THE REMOVAL OF OBSCURING ADDITIONS

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**Abstract:** This article presents a case study of an object of great value for Romanian culture, neglected over time and affected by the lack of communication between social groups interested in it. The object is an 18th century iconostasis, of an uncertain geographic origin, signed by the painter Vasilie Zboroski, that was in liturgical use for 50 years in the cemetery church in Mănăştur, Cluj-Napoca. The lack of protection against both natural and anthropic damage factors caused extensive alteration of the overall appearance of the object. The removal of the materials added during recent inappropriate interventions, which used to cover over 90% of the painted surface, was based on thorough investigations and discussions over the ethical and practical aspects of the operation. Through the conservation treatment the high artistic qualities were brought to light enhancing the object’s value for all its users, regardless of which of its meanings they see as prevalent.

**Rezumat:** Articolul prezintă situația unui obiect valoros pentru cultura românească, neglijat de-a lungul timpului și afectat de lipsa de comunicare dintre grupurile sociale interesate de acesta. Obiectul este un iconostas din secolul al XVIII-lea, de origine geografică incertă, semnat de pictorul Vasilie Zboroski, care s-a aflat în uz liturgic timp de 50 de ani în biserică cimitirului Mănăştur, Cluj-Napoca. Lipsa protecției împotriva factorilor de degradare naturali și antropici a provocat altări grave ale aspectului general al obiectului. Îndeplinirea materialelor adăugate prin intervenții necorespunzătoare recente, care acoperese peste 90% din suprafața pictată, s-a bazat pe investigații și discuții temeinice cu privire la aspectele etice și practice ale operațiunii. Prin tratamentul de conservare au fost descoperite calități artistice deosebite, sporindu-se astfel valoarea obiectului pentru toți utilizatorii acestuia, indiferent care sunt semnificațiile pe care aceştia le consideră prevalente.

Ancient religious art objects are sometimes part of a so-called “conflictual heritage” with meanings in both religious practice and art history. The conservators’ ideal of keeping heritage alive, by maintaining it closely connected to the life of the community, is not easily achieved. The main reason is the difference in the perception of the object’s meaning between the two groups, the religious community seeing only its functional side, while the specialists in the field of culture are focusing only on the historical or artistic one. In Romania, the insufficient involvement of the state institutions and the excessive power of the church in matters of decision-making are unfavourable for the preservation of this type of heritage objects, which often become the target of inappropriate interventions, undertaken by unqualified people, with prejudicial long-term results for all parties involved.

A representative example of the ambiguous situation of old religious art objects is an 18th century iconostasis that stood in the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, in the Mănăștur cemetery of Cluj-Napoca until March 2012 (Fig.1). This object is a high wooden iconostasis of medium size (3.83 m tall and 5.85 m wide) with three registers above the architrave and three openings towards the shrine, the central one being closed by the Holy Doors. It is composed of 40 icons painted on wooden panels and over 50 carved wooden pieces which make up the decorative framework. A peculiarity of this iconostasis is the dual function of each component, both aesthetic and structural, the latter owing to the technique of assembly: each piece is joined with another and the wall they form is leaning on a beam structure.

Regarding the iconography, the studied object follows the typical configuration, the representations being organized by theme on the traditional tiers: the Sovereign, the Feasts, the Apostles (Deisis) and the Prophets (Fig. 2). The paintings were executed in post-Byzantine style with strong Baroque influences, which can easily be observed in the freer manner of applying the colour and in the use of a wider chromatic range. The dynamic postures of some characters given by the ample gestures and the disproportion of their bodies, accentuated by the light beams incline towards Baroque art, while the gilded backgrounds show the connection to the hieratic taste of Byzantine art (Fig. 3). The richly detailed landscapes and sceneries, in some cases created using colour strokes in realistic illusionist manner, and in others using the reversed perspective, picture perfectly a moment

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