THE SYMBOLICAL ARCHITECTURE OF HEAVEN IN THE ROMANIAN FOLKLORE

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Abstract: *The symbolical image of Heaven as it appears in the Romanian archic mentality can be seen on the fresco of the Monastery Voroneț painted in the XV Century. It is the most eloquent presentation of the theme of Revelation in the Eastern Christianity. Its details reveal phenomenal esoteric knowledge and a strict compliance with the Orthodox canons. In the upper layer, right under the wooden roof, under a decorative line with folkloric symbols is represented The Father. Angels open Heavens Gates revealing the face of the Creator that could not be seen by men until that day. The Lord is surrounded by a round rainbow. From the two sides, two angels are rolling the sky with stars like stripes of carpet. So Medieval theologians don't dismiss the occult, but also acknowledge that signs and secret knowledge will cease their role in the presence of Truth, personified by God. In the center of the second layer of the painting there is the second person of The Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ, sitting on the throne, blessing the believers with one hand and showing His hand wounds to the sinners on the left. The Mother of God is at His right, while Joan is at the left. The Apostles are in the first row of the jury. Symbolical images of Heaven will be analyzed as they appear in Romanian carols and on the traditional carpets of Oltenia.*

Keywords: *symbolical image of Heaven, fresco, Romanian carols, traditional carpets of Oltenia.*

The symbolical image of Heaven appears in some carols, because once with the Jisus Christ birth, it took place a cosmogony:` „Când Dumenzeu s'a născut/ Și pământul l-a făcut/ Sus cerul l-a răzimat/În patru stâlpi de argint/ Mai frumos l-a împodobit/ Tot cu stele mărunțele/Mai pe sus cu mai mărele, / Soarele cu razele".p. 72

In another carol, Adam – the first man on Earth, says the words: "Raiule, grădină dulce/, - Nu mă-ndur a mă mai duce/ De dulceata ta cea dulce/ De mireasma florilor/ De cusul izvoarelor/ De cântarea păsărilor" p.73

The image of Heaven in Christmas Carols represents a symbolical garden where there are special rivers, candle lights, big feasts between Holy Saints and God, or a human been chosen for his goodness, usually the same person who receives the carol singers.

Another context where the image of Heaven can be analyzed is the church fresco. The church fresco represents, beyond its indubitable aesthetic value, a document of a specific period of time, regarding the founding of that holly place, the details on addressing the mentality of the age when it was created. It should be mentioned that the term fresco refers to a special type of mural painting that is: "The fresco – (It. Fresco, fresh), is a technical process used in the mural painting, in which the pigments (pulverulent), are mixed with

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water and applied on a wet lime mortar (freshly plastered), which incorporates it. The fresco technique is based on the so-called process of *carbonation*, through which the limestone suffers a complete chemical process and re-becomes stone, forming a hard, semi-glassy pellicle on the surface, similar to the marble. Once the painting has been dried, *in fresco*, it is no longer affected by water or other destructive agents, becoming one of the most durable techniques of painting. For the fresco, there are preferred the new bricked walls. Firstly it is applied the plaster, called *arricio*, then *intonaco*, in which there are introduced fibrous elements, a layer that incorporates the colours. The plasters are made from filling materials (sand, marble etc.) and lime (the most used binder material for the fresco). The lime is prepared from the best limestone, which is slaked with river water in deep pitches, padded with boards. It is kept here between 6 months and 2-3 years, in order to become less active when painted on it. As type of sand, it is used that coming from rivers, rough when touched, which is washed, dried and sifted. The grounded marble is taken as filling material from the Romans, and it creates compact plasters, offering luminosity to the painting. The fibrous materials that are finely chopped are carefully mixed with the plaster, before being applied on the wall. The *intonaco* has exclusively tiny straws of flax or hemp. The most used colours for the fresco are the natural ones, mostly the earthy ones. The diluent for the colours is the clean water, lime water or milk of lime. The painting is usually realised from the top towards the bottom, in order to avoid the accidental splashing. In the Romanian spiritual space, the mural painting represents one of the most spectacular artistic accomplishments, in which there were merged Byzantine and Occidental influences, with the autochthonous tradition, resulting an artistically and ethnically refined, exceptional painting. The perenniality, over the centuries, of the church fresco from Romania, proves the profoundness and the stability of an artistic synthesis, along with the fact that the "painters" were educated people, knowing all the artistic innovations from that period of time. (…) Romania is one of the few countries of the world where this techniqueit is still used. This tradition is still kept for the icons painted with watercolours, eggs emulsion on wooden boards, polished with gold sheet, or for the sculpted miniatures. In the true meaning of the term, the fresco is only the painting made on the fresh plaster (wet, and not moistened later), which is the technical procedure that the Italians call *buonfresco* (Fr. *fresque*, It. *affresco*, *al fresco*, Germ. *Freskomalerei*, Engl. *fresco-painting*)" (Prut, 2016).

We have intended to start an ample debate on several aspects referring to the presence of some symbolical elements of the Heaven, in only few of the representations of the church fresco the churches from the North of Moldova, from Bucovina.

The French researcher Paul Henri, who studied the Romanian culture and civilisation at the beginning of the 20th century, offered a very ample study that refers to the connection between folklore and the religious iconography, specific to the churches from Moldova, underlining the Romanian ethnicity of the painters, due to the popular beliefs that transpires in the frescos from Bucovina: "the artists from this region (Bucovina) had taken their inspiration from the religious legends of the Romanian people, when depicting the scene with the Customs of Heaven. (…) it was therefore constituted an iconographic type around this well-known belief of the Romanian folklore" (Henri, 1928: 63). The researcher also noticed the existence of correspondences between folklore and certain ideas, present in different printings from that period, from which he mentioned "The life of St. Vasile the

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New", described by his disciple Grigorie, a book written in Greek, but translated many times in Romanian. There was sufficient time for some fragments of the paper to be integrated into the popular stories, "therefore, the folklore and the painted images have the same source" (*Ibidem*: 64), the book and the popular tradition increasing each other's strength, in order to offer an imaginative support for the artist's theme, "the popular element being the main source of inspiration for the painter". In the same time, the researcher brings forward the Romanian painter, individualising him through his beliefs, and differentiating him from other Greek and Serbian painters "for this monuments at least (the churches from Bucovina), the painter was neither Serbian, nor Greek (…), but a Romanian, and more than that, a Moldavian (…), the popular inspiration (…) allowing the painter to unravel the force of his originality" (*Ibidem:* 64). There are numerous legends that refer to the Customs of Heaven: when Satan revolted along with his legions, God defeated and banished them from the sky, making them falling for three days and three nights, until God shut the gates of heaven by saying "Amen", that moment each of them remaining in the place where he was, some in mountains, others in valleys or water, others between heaven and earth, these last ones interfering in the customs, presenting the sins of the soul that wishes to ascend towards the heavenly gates. The guardian angel is that who helps the soul to ascend and to pass through the customs, chasing the demons away. The angels remind us about the virtuous behaviour, contest the demons, unravel their lies and defeat them by force sometimes, reducing them to silence, rebuying their soul and opening the gates of heaven. These "orally told" representations are accessible to the people, being well known that "the ornaments of the churches, both in Orient and Occident, have as a purpose the education of the believers and constitute the bible of the uneducated" (*Ibidem*: 65-66).

The fresco painting of Voroneţ church preserves the belief in the existence of the two guardian angels, who help the soul to ascend in heaven, along with those from Vatra Moldoviţei, Gura Humorului, Arbore, where there is as well found the theme of the divine ascension.

An interesting representation is at Suceviţa, where the souls ascend on stairs, under the protection of several rows of angels. "As our painter, the Romanian peasant knew that between the last customs and heaven there is a terrible obstacle: the bridge of heaven, a narrow passage, like the blade of a knife, traversing through a profound obscurity (…) The right reach the top and, not finding the stairs to descend, are grown wings that take them up to the entrance of the gate to heavens" (*Ibidem*: 72).

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Fig. 1. The angels'stairs, Sucevița

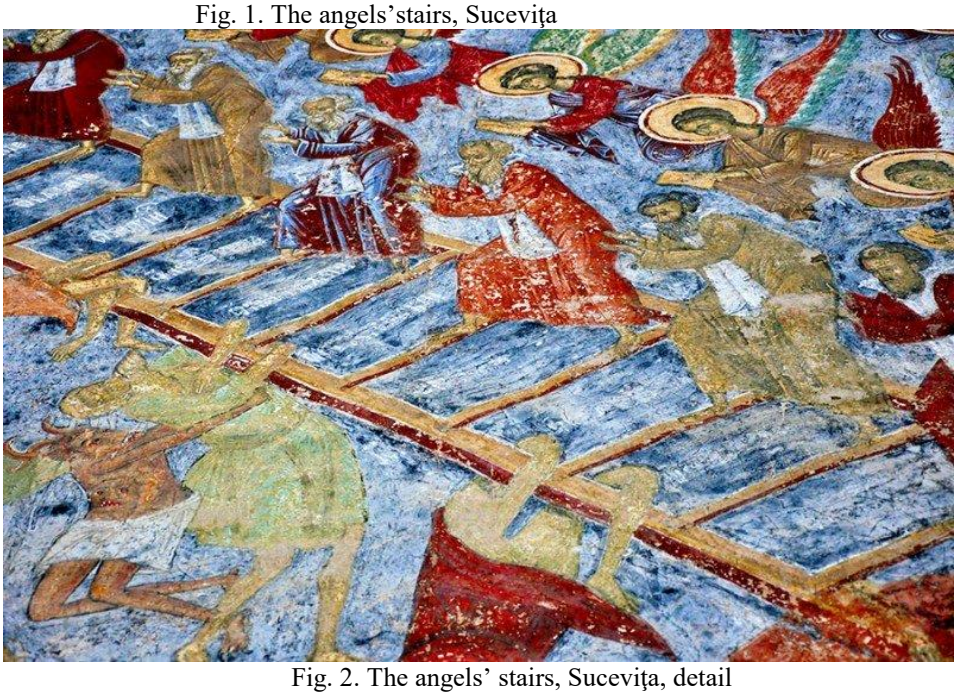


Fig. 2. The angels' stairs, Sucevița, detail

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The bookish conception about the Customs of Heaven from the book of Grigorie, seems complete, as regarding the symbolic imaginary of the painter on numerous popular beliefs: "the book did not imposed itself on the painter's imagination, because the inert issues of a theological work were abounding with the alive materials of the eschatological principles of a people where there had been prospering millenary beliefs. These popular beliefs determined the artist to go beyond the limitations of the book (…) In Bucovina, we can observe an innovative art, woken by the popular tradition that the artist belongs to, with his entire spirit, being therefore able to say that he was autochthonous" (*Ibidem*: 82).

At the Monastery Voroneţ from Moldova, the fresco of The Last Judgment from the western wall is so impressive that it is also compared with Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, created almost in the same period of time. It is the most eloquent presentation of the theme of Revelation in the Eastern Christianity. Its details reveal phenomenal esoteric knowledge and a strict compliance with the Orthodox canons.

With all this studiousness, originality is not at all absent: the Turks (the country was often invaded by the Ottoman Empire) are depicted as the villains, while various Romanian costumes are mingled with the saints' army along with traditional instruments.

It is impressive how medieval theologians were able to compress tens of chapters from the Revelation of St Joan, the prophet Daniel and other texts of the Bible in a picture with such impact.

The composition of The Last Judgment from Voroneţ is organized on five horizontal layers, but the difference between these layers almost goes unnoticed in comparison with the drastic contrast between the two hemispheres: the left and the right chromatically marked by the river of fire bursting from the feet of the throne of The Judge.

In the upper layer, right under the wooden roof, under a decorative line with folkloric symbols is represented The Father. Angels open Heavens Gates revealing the face of the Creator that could not be seen by men until that day. The Lord is surrounded by a round rainbow. Unsuspecting tourists might be shocked to discover here clear representation of the zodiac signs, but the esoteric message is clear. From the two sides, two angels are rolling the sky with stars like stripes of carpet. So Medieval theologians don't dismiss the occult, but also acknowledge that signs and secret knowledge will cease their role in the presence of Truth, personified by God in the end of history.

In the center of the second layer of the painting there is the second person of The Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ, sitting on the throne, blessing the believers with one hand and showing His hand wounds to the sinners on the left. The Mother of God is at His right, while Joan is at the left. The Apostles are in the first row of the jury.

In the center of the third layer is The Holy Spirit, symbolized by a white dove, the form in which He revealed at the baptism of Jesus. From the throne of The Holy Ghost goes out a hand holding a balance on which souls are weighted. On each side, angels and devils fight for the souls of humans.

At the limit of the two worlds departed by the river of fire stands Moses, presented with the aura of a holy man, holding a scroll with the prophecy of a Messiah from the Old Testament which he is showing to Jews and pagans.

The sinners presented in the struggle between angels and demons are naked, as the usual representation of Adam and Eve in various representations of the Genesis in

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Romanian churches. In the style of naive picture, the runs are exaggerated as a symbol of a humanity governed not by spirit, but by matter. But in the vision of those who painted Voronet, the primordial couple has finally surpassed this phase. So Adam and Eve are painted as patriarchs at the end of time, with aura just like saints. They both atoned their original sin and after a waiting that lasted as the entire history kneel on one side and another of the throne of The Holy Ghost.

Two interesting diagonals are obtained by looking at the two pairs that frame the throne of The Savior and the throne of The Holy Spirit. In the superior row, The Mother of God wears garments that are different only in shade of those of Eve. She reaches the greatest honor accessible to a human maintaining her role as an archetype of woman. The place she occupies in this scene is eloquent and superior to that of Apostles, prophets or patriarchs and we have to assume that this status of The Holy Mother is accompanied by a similar level of knowledge by her participation to a revealed truth. It is an image and a philosophy that makes futile all speculations about the misogynism of the Orthodox world.

The second symbolic diagonal is created by Adam and St Joan, or between the one that had fallen because of his lack of obedience after tasting the fruit from The Tree of Knowledge, and the one who which the secrets of the end were revealed in the Revelation.

A particular impact has the wall of saints with golden aura gathered at the wall of Heavens. Their leader is Peter, recognizable by the key he holds in his hand. The status of Virgin Mary is reiterated by placing her in the middle of the garden of Heaven. Near her, there is the robber from the cross whom was promised to be the first citizen of Heaven by our Lord during His crucifixion. The patriarchs are also there, holding their numberless progenies.

In the river of fire are depicted infidels, idol-worshipers and the Devil sitting on a dragon with two heads holding a black cup.

The threshold was constructed after the building was erected and changed the side from which believers enter the church, but it also made room for a wall on which to lay this painting without any window at all. On the Southern wall the famous blue color, known as "Voronet blue" is most present. The color is obtained from an unknown natural pigment that shifts shades by the level of humidity, turning from blue to almost green. The picture of the Northern wall is the most deteriorated since this is a mountain territory with heavy snow falls and snow storms during the winters.

A special context where the symbolical image of Heaven appears is on Oltenia's carpets. There are some resemblances between traditional Oltenia's carpets and oriental carpets (Dunca, 2006). Both of them have symbolical flowers that remind the Heaven Garden. A special symbol is the Life tree represented on the centre of the carpet.

The special contexts where the image of Heaven can be studied speak about the rich ornamentation of Heaven as it is perceived from the mental patterns of Romanian civilization: Christmas carols, Church fresco, Oltenia's carpets.

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Fig. 3. Oltenia's carpet with Life Tree and The Symbolical Heaven's Garden

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