

AN ORNATE BOOK, WRITTEN IN THE GUARD ROOM OF THE MUSE CLIO

Ioan Bizău, *Tradiție și continuitate artistică la Nicula. Contribuția călugărului Ilarion Mureșan* (*Tradition and artistic continuity at Nicula. The contribution of the monk Ilarion Mureșan*) (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2020), ISBN 978-606-607-322-6, 378 pp.

Ilie GHERHEȘ*

Motto: "Don't leave us, Little Mother,
Perish on the way
Because we are the sons
Of your tears!"
(Chorus of a famous Hymn
from the Nicula monastery)

The craft of icon painting/painting on glass began in the mid-18th century in Bohemia, Silesia, Moravia and Galicia. Little by little, this folk art also reached Transylvania, where it was grafted onto an ancestral and mystical-superstitious background.

In our ethno-cultural and historical space, the icon was promoted, especially, through the peasant school of painting from Nicula. The fate of the icon called "Hodighitria" acquired unsuspected valences of spread, especially after the miracle of its shedding of tears was performed at the beginning of 1699.

The name "Hodighitria" (Hodigos, Greek lb. = guide, showing the way, guiding, caring) comes from the type of icon, namely the Holy Virgin Mary holding her Baby Jesus on her left arm, and with her right hand she points to Him, suggesting that, from then on, only He should be listened to. Also, Jesus Christ holds in His hands a scroll of papyrus, signifying the Holy Gospel or the Good News.

The Christian faith and church tradition teach us that the first icon of this type would have been painted by the Holy Apostle Luke himself and that he, being contemporary with the Holy Virgin Mary, would have shown it to her, and the Most Holy One would have blessed it.

The book of Father Professor Dr. Ioan Bizău, which I refer to sparingly and respectfully, is part of this encomiastic trend, determined by the uniqueness of the artistic phenomenon in Nicula, where a whole village of peasants painted icons, starting in the fall, when they left work of the field, and until spring, when they resumed it.

*Vasile Goldiș Western University of Arad, Baia Mare Branch. E-mail: ilie_gherhes@yahoo.com

The icon from Nicula built a spiritual and religious narrative, determining and reconfiguring, on a higher plane, the traditional universe of the Romanian peasant, from a large piece of the country.

The book published by the publishing house of the Metropolis of Cluj, Maramureş and Sălaj, *Renaşterea*, from Cluj-Napoca, in 2020, enjoys the protective and courageous blessing of The Most Reverend Metropolitan Andrei. The present work covers the inviting surface of 378 pages, divided into two generous chapters, aesthetically pleasing with 148 "applied illustrations", with iconographic models, worked by the monk Ilarion Mureşan, with an exhaustive Bibliography, as well as with a very useful name index.

From the very beginning, the priest professor Dr. Ioan Bizău from Ieud, Maramureş, wants to reveal to us, "Instead of a preface: 10 sequences from the story of the author's encounter with the art of icons on glass", pages that almost make the presumptive reader an accomplice; obliged to read everything anyway.

The unusual author confesses to us, in a first phase, that his encounter with the world of icons on glass happened during the years when he was a student at the Theological Seminary in Cluj (1967-1972), namely "sometime, around the partial deactivation of the total communist regime" (p. 11), according to a happy expression of his.

Noting that "as for the present book, he wrote it in two stages", the author also shows us that he was fascinated by "the hieratic gesture specific to the liturgical art of the Byzantine tradition" (p. 16), that the phenomenon from Nicula was generated by the famous icon of the Mother of God, something that was reinforced to him while writing the book: "What I noticed during the writing of this book is the fact that the art of peasant iconography on glass must be understood in the working presence of the icon of the Mother of God in Nicula, miracle worker" (p. 20).

The first of the two large chapters, entitled "I. The tearful icon - Pilgrimage - the artistic phenomenon", analyzes in detail both the fame of the town of Nicula for over three centuries, the function of the miracle-working icon, and its "will" to remain in this Transylvanian village, blessed by the Mother of God. Acting as the lawyer of the facts presented, the author assures us that the miracle was verified by 30 witnesses and that it was investigated by a commission of the Austrian authorities, the conclusion being: "It is known that the fame enjoyed by Nicula, for over three centuries is due to the fact that, on a fine day in February of 1699, the icon of the Mother of God, located in the village church, began to shed tears, the miracle continuing for about three weeks" (p. 23).

Hearing of this mystical secret, the ruler of Moldavia, Antioch Cantemir (1695-1700 and 1705-1707) "fired with the desire to have it", offering as a ransom 1,000 Leonine florins and 1,000 Rhenish florins. It was not to be, so he sent painters to copy it.

Underlining the Armenian prestige of Gherla, after 1712, with their settlement here, the author notes the fact that after the entire estate of Gherla had become the property of the Catholic Diocese of Gherla, in 1736, the united bishop Ioan Inochentie Micu-Klein changed the domain of Gherla, with that of Blaj.

The author, priest professor Dr. Ioan Bizău, tells us that the icons from Nicula are an expression of the local Orthodox spirit, that the peasants here never painted saints from the Catholic calendar and that the faithful did not buy them only on purely religious impulse or from a decorative necessity, but also from a mystical, superstitious calling. Just as the peasant believed that the consecrated basil seed becomes a seed of good luck, bringing it and honoring it in his house, he also believed about the icons that they would protect his state and the nation, thus having an apotropaic role. Behind the master beam of the house which was the earthly correspondent of the beam of heaven and after the icons, the same peasant from Maramureș hid his diploma of nobility also from a sacred creed. Moreover, the icon of Saint George was also placed in the stable or barn, here having a propitiatory role. The peasant poured his archaic deposit of sacredness onto the icons, and in Maramureș the three layers of the sacred met: archaic, local and the Moldavian-Brancovan one.

Little by little, the faithful peasants reconfigured their own universe of faith, just as they had their own Christmas, their own wars or uprisings; in the same way they familiarized themselves with some saints or brought certain icons-symbols closer to them. Among these ethno-religious symbols is the Table of Heaven, as a "foretaste of the Kingdom to come", in opposition to the Catholic Purgatory. The anonymous icon artists did not sign their "works", the icons, out of a deep sense of humility, considering them as true windows to heaven, with which one should not "appropriate".

The icons spread easily in Transylvania, Banat, Maramureș, Bihor, etc.; they were passed more and more into the dowry sheets, they were taken as *pominoc* (wedding gift), both for their spiritual and pictorial value, but also for the intrinsic value of the glass, which was produced manually, in the glassworks; or it is known that not all peasants could afford to have even a simple piece of glass in the windows, although these were very small, some putting the urinary bladder from some slaughtered animal (ox or pig).

Our author then speaks to us of the "religious sincerity," the authenticity and rustic beauty of these religious artefacts, their "chromatic tension"; and all this in a space of about 25 x 18 cm, after an "icon warp" in black, white and red. It is also known that the icon painters from Nicula painted after models, that it was not possible to return to the drawing, using only a chromatic octave (red, white, black, yellow, gold, green, blue and brown), of a rustic, authentic beauty. Among the many peculiarities of the icon from Nicula, the twisted rope, the twist and the spiral stand out, without falling into easy mannerism, naive painting; the painters from Nicula placing all their faith in "the holy persons who constituted the main element of a liturgical image" (p. 67).

For almost a century and a half the phenomenon of Nicula dominated the peasant art of icon painters. In 1868, making a trip to Nicula, Iosif Vulcan remarked that the whole village was painting icons, and in 1891 there were 50 icon merchants recorded here, possessed by the mirage of money, "peddling" them all over Transylvania, but also in Wallachia and Moldova. Some families of iconographers from Nicula settled, over time, in Brașov, Făgăraș, Alba-Iulia, Sebeș and other areas,

contributing to the maintenance and "activation of the unity of the Romanian language, to the enrichment of the soul dowry of our people" (p. 87).

Over time, Nicula became a "brand" of ethno-social identity, and all traders of such "holy merchandise" specified the fact that "they are from Nicula". So, Nicula was a guarantee certificate, and here a real passion for painting icons on glass was triggered and developed. Rivers of colors lay in the patterns of the Nicula iconographers, taking the form of the saints from the known canons, but also from the soul of peasant artists, sometimes illiterate, but brilliant. These peasant painters specialized so much that some of them made a ritual out of their work, and before starting work they prayed to the icon of the Mother of God and observed black fasting. They bore names like Maria Chifor, Elena Flur, Elena Tabără, the Prodan family, Ion and Mișu Pop, the Petru and Ana Tămaș family, the Deji family, etc.

In the middle of the 19th century, when in the rest of Europe the phenomenon of painting icons on glass was declining, at Nicula it was at its peak. In the name of the so-called refined taste, the disease of contesting the Nicula phenomenon also caught some Romanian intellectuals of the time, who considered themselves more refined, being part of the secular or ecclesiastical elite of the time.

In 1853, the scholar Andrei Mureșanu noted that the painters from Nicula were selling "with good profit their monstrous icons, frightening for small babies, not only throughout the length and breadth of our country, but also in the neighboring principalities of Moldavia and Romania" (p. 101-102). The author of the poem "Un răsunet" called the painters from Nicula "cheats", "rags", "charlatans" and remarked, however, that "there is no Romanian family so poor, which does not try to earn in his house, one or more church icons" (p. 103).

In the same vehemently-accusatory note, St. Calinic from Cernica spoke, who considered the icons to which we refer as "some caricatures that will fool the people" and asked the Bucharest government to impose a real embargo, to stop the influx of icons from Transylvania.

As expected, in a total freedom of expression and creation, with time, so-called theological aberrations crept into Nicula's thematic iconographic inventory, "heretical images, originating from the spiritual laboratories of the Bogomils, which on rightly so, they had to be fought: «St. Trinity in a Body»" (p. 108).

The journalist Mihai Eminescu was also contemporary with the phenomenon of Transylvanian icons, who could not miss such an exciting topic. Thus, in the publication "Romania literară", from November 13, 1888, our great poet appreciated: "...before, the religious icons that were sold in Romania were exclusively manufactured in Gherla (Transylvania). These were really Romanian products, but let's face it, they were very primitive" (p. 110). Considering them simple "Byzantine caricatures" and as an effect of "propagation of Muscovite sleuths to us", Mihai Eminescu was relentless towards the painters from Nicula, writing: "Made by simple and naive peasants, without any artistic culture, they were fought by even bishops from Transylvania, who forced themselves to introduce somewhat better-made faces, in order to accustom the eyes to concrete forms, especially because it was generally believed in the hypothesis that women in the puerperal state could give birth, looking at such icons, monstrous faces" (p. 110).

After 1880, the icons from Nicula were no longer painted by traditional peasant painters, in their families, the process being taken over by the speculum mechanism, by increasing the number of amateurs, who practiced a series production, specializing (even!) in phases of the painting. All this degradation was also hastened by the fierce competition of factory products, insinuated, more and more on the market, in the form of chromolithographs.

The second part of the book, entitled "II. The providential meeting - Discovery - Impressive constancy ", the author, priest professor Dr. Ioan Bizău, dedicated it to the worthy monk Ilarion Mureșan. He was born on February 16, 1942, in the village of Breaza, and the worthy priest, Florea Mureșan from the eponymous monastery, guided him towards monasticism. He listened to him, and at one point he was forced to endure the rigors of Decree 410/1959 by which the communist state integrated into the labor field almost all the people living in monasteries in the country, aged between 16 and 55. Florea Mureșan returned to Breaza where he worked on the collective farm, even though he was crippled in one hand, since he was 10 years old.

In January 1962, he entered the community of the monastery at Nicula, living also periods of clandestineness, hiding from the Militia and Security, in the forest of the monastery, being warned by a dog, which signaled the arrival of the regime's policemen, being trained in this sense.

Also in 1962, abbot Serafim of Nicula managed to enroll him in the school of church singers in Cluj, but the persecution against the monastery was intensifying, even bishop Teofil Herineanu being stopped from participating in the dedication ritual. Between 1949-1962, the pilgrimages and the great feast from Nicula, from August 15, were prohibited, and then they were allowed with a limited number of participants, state trade was prohibited, along with itinerant trade, and even the custom of the villagers from Nicula to place bowls of fresh water at the gate for thirsty pilgrims.

The Militia and the Security, together with the regional commissioner of cults, took measures to "officiate the religious services [when] 10 priests were selected each, most of them agents of our institutions... in addition to them, other agents were also sent to the pilgrimage" (p. 181).

Having been expelled from the Art High School in Cluj, on the grounds that he was a son of a rich peasant, Ilarion Mureșan returned to Gherla, where he found an amazing collection of icons on wood and glass; on March 25, 1973, he had counted over 700 such gems. On the night of April 23/24, 1973, a fire struck the Nicula monastery, which consumed the small wooden church, along with the collection of icons of which only 17 remained. Grief-stricken, the inhabitants of Nicula began to take burnt earth from the area of the former church, like a holy ornament, and in 1974 a similar traveling church was moved here, with its last residence in Pădureni, but which came from the village of Năsal, in Cluj county.

As early as 1972, following his calling, the monk Ilarion opened a small painting workshop, and after the terrible fire, he went on to restore the iconographic treasury from Nicula, making copies as faithful as possible, out of admiration and special historical-professional reverence for its worthy predecessors.

Iconographer monk Ilarion Mureșan iconically visualized approximately 50 theological themes, remaining faithful to the chromatic octave from Nicula, but also imposing some original creations: The Entry of the Mother of God into the church, The Presentation of Jesus, The Dormition of the Mother of God (in two versions) - patron icons, the Holy Emperors Constantine and Helena, St. Nicholas, Jesus Christ - the true life, etc.

His recognition and consecration as an icon painter happened over time, through the thousands of icons painted and spread to the faithful people, through his participation in famous exhibitions, through receiving the rank of Stavrophorus, through granting the right to wear the pectoral cross but, especially, by receiving the distinction "Patriarchal Cross", the highest of its kind, that an Orthodox cleric can receive. He always donated the money collected from the sale of icons to the monastery, contributing to the development of the access road, the purchase of canonicals for the congregation, the purchase of the amplification station, etc.

Without falling into an ad hoc encomiastic exercise, father professor Dr. Ioan Bizău manages to render the truthful portrait of the monk from Nicula, Ilarion Mureșan, "the monk of a single monastery", who through his activity and his remaining work, represents a living archive of the phenomenon from Nicula, from the second half of the 20th century.

Through the present book, which amply proves to us that the peasant school of painting from Nicula increased the "bright background of European history" (p. 20), the author managed to outline an arc of Christian spirituality, which started from St. Apostle Luke, the first iconographer, to priest Luca from Iclod and then to the improved monk Ilarion Mureșan from Nicula.

The role of the Nicula monastery was strongly felt in Maramureș, through the establishment of three painting workshops, Nicula type, at the Peri, Moisei and Dragomirești monasteries. There are today around 350 copies of such icons of Maramureș and of Nicula at the Maramureș Museum in Sighetul Marmăției and about 140 at the Maramureș County Museum of Ethnography and Folk Art in Baia Mare, among which some are included in the "Treasure" category.

There is no doubt that the most "hunted" pages in this book are those related to the intransigence of Archbishop Bartolomeu Anania, nicknamed "the lion of Transylvania", to his attitude, not at all honorable, towards the monk Ilarion Mureșan.

Exciting and courageous are also the pages that describe the alleged gross immorality of Bishop Nicolae Colan, who would have tolerated the debauchery of the former priestess Eugenia Mureșan, then her marriage to the philosopher D.D. Roșca, as well as the humiliation to which the priest, the cuckolded ex-husband, was subjected, being forced to officiate that marriage in the very Metropolitan Cathedral of Cluj, with the complicity of the bishop.

Father professor Dr. Ioan Bizău's book is also an attempt at moral sanitization, in addition to a special treatise on the history of church art, without making an indictment, in this sense remaining only an attempt to free oneself from the sin of concealment; a noble exercise of lucidity and morality. The book seems to have been written in the guard room of Muse Clio, smelling of incense and humility,

of professional admiration; it is a ornate book with rich and complex content that fixes topics without exhausting them. Perhaps this is the great, challenging merit of a book by a daring author.