

Ioan Pop-Curșeu, Ștefana Pop-Curșeu, *Iconografia vrăjitoriei în arta religioasă românească. Eșeu de antropologie vizuală* [Witchcraft Iconography in the Romanian Religious Art. A Visual Anthropology Essay], Cluj-Napoca: Școala Ardeleană, București: Eikon, 2020, 369 p, ISBN 978-606-797-562-8 (Școala Ardeleană), 978-606-49-0324-2 (Eikon)

This book belongs to the interdisciplinary research of eschatological iconography, a domain that aroused the researchers' interest during the last two decades. Researchers like Cristina Bogdan (author of papers on iconographic representations of Death), John-Paul Himka, Cosmina-Maria Berindei, and Raluca Beta, published their works on the iconography of Last Judgement. The present book by I. Pop-Curșeu and Ș. Pop-Curșeu focuses on one single detail of the iconographic composition of the Last Judgement, often met in these representations, i.e. the practitioners of witchcraft, who appear as condemned to hell's labors. Within this context, witchcraft's iconography exploits both the apocalyptic imaginary as well as the magic horizon expressed by spells, charms and enchantments. The witchcraft's iconography as motif of the religious art belongs to the category of punishment representations within the context of the compositions on the Last Judgement. Since witchcraft is considered a sin, its practitioner is part of those punished and found in the above-mentioned iconographic context in the area representing hell, but also in several other contexts that are part of the same register of sinners' damnation.

* With small changes, a version of this text has been published in the periodical „Anuarul Muzeului Etnografic al Moldovei” (Iași), 2022, p. 197-204.

Published in 2020, *Iconografia vrăjitoriei în arta religioasă românească...* (Witchcraft Iconography in the Religious Romanian Art...), brings forward older themes and preoccupations of the two Cluj-based academics. It becomes an encounter of the individual research the authors conducted during their doctoral studies: research on magic and witchcraft by Ioan Pop-Curșeu as Ph.D. thesis at Babeș-Bolyai University (the basis for *Magie și vrăjitorie în cultura română. Istorie, literatură, mentalități/Magic and Witchcraft in the Romanian Culture. History, Literature, Mentalities*, Iași, Polirom–Cartea Românească, 2013), and another one on theatricality in post-Byzantine painting, Ph.D. thesis defended by Ștefana Pop-Curșeu at Université de Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle, în 2008, entitled *La Théâtralité de la peinture murale post-byzantine (XVe-XVIIe siècles)/The Theatricality of the Post-Byzantine Mural Painting (15th-17th century)*.

It comprises five chapters, preceded by an *Introduction* and followed by *Conclusion*, *Bibliography* and an annex which includes two texts significant for the way in which the painters used to convey knowledge on the eschatological iconographic compositions.

The first chapter, *Eschatologia, cea mai frumoasă poveste comunitară/Eschatology, the Most Beautiful Community Story*, is dedicated to an extensive discussion on the way in which the end of the world representations and the posthumous fate of the souls are projected in the everyday existence and define its itinerary. Thus, the iconographic composition of the Last Judgement is considered a “vast repertoire of social representations” (p. 13). After a short excursus with Yves Christe on Western Christianity and Byzantine’s iconographic eschatological representations, the authors focus on the image of the sorceress, noticing that in the Western world she appears in the works of well-known 16th-18th artists like Lucas Cranach the Elder, Albrecht Dürer, Hans Baldung Grien, Albrecht Altdorfer, Filippino Lippi, Agostino Musi, Salvator Rosa, Agostino Musi, David Teniers the Younger, Francisco Goya. It’s the time of Inquisition, when the great Western artists resuscitate mythical figures of witchcraft, like Circe or Medeea. In the Byzantine world where the “secular iconography developed slowly, timidly and late” the sorceress is part of the composition *The Judgement Day* together with other figures of bad influence: the whore, the barren woman, the unbeliever, the blasphemous, the heathen one, the murderer, etc. (p. 16).

In the Romanian culture, the witchcraft iconography was influenced by the popular beliefs, apocryphal literature and popular books that circulated through copyists, sometimes they themselves church painters like Vasile Zugrav (p. 77-81). In his case, echoes of *The Apocalypse of the Virgin* (a text he copied between 1776-1779 and signed *Vasile Dimitriovici, painter of Sibiceu de Jos*, as proved by the miscellany manuscript 17867 from the Romanian National Library) are identifiable in the iconographic composition of *The Judgement Day* from the church in Sibiciu de Sus (p. 81). The church no longer exists today, but in 1924, N.A. Constantinescu identified the image on the exterior façade of its porch, together with the signatures of Vasile Zugrav and two other painters. The mural ensemble painting is dated 1776 when the painter started to copy the eschatological text. An extensive part of this chapter is dedicated to popular beliefs about aerial toll-houses in the traditional culture and the homiletical discourse, the authors following the sources of these beliefs in *Viața Sfântului Vasile*

cel Nou/The Life of Vasile cel Nou, a well-known Christian text. *The Iconography and Witchcraft of Toll-Houses* is a sub-chapter that lists the representations of toll-houses in the Romanian iconography with a focus on the fourth toll-house where those who practiced witchcraft are called to account (p. 34-35). The chapter includes reproductions of some representations of *Aerial Toll-Houses* in the religious iconography in certain churches in Romania and Bulgaria too.

The next chapter, *The Romanian Painters and Their Image of the World*, is the largest one in the book, and is dedicated to “circumstantial elements which shape, one way or the other, the visual representations, which give them form and direction, which fill them with a certain content” (p. 77). It starts with an extensive analysis of the influences of the copyist activity on Vasile Zugrav comparing the fragments of the copied popular book to witchcraft’s iconographic results. Another special situation is the one of a family of painters whose main figure is Radu Zugravul who left us models remarkable for the witchcraft iconography. He had a vast canonical knowledge, proven by the types of information found in the manuscripts he left. Another important aspect discussed in the second chapter refers to the influence of the *erminii* (books which provided explanations and interpretations of the church paintings) on the iconographic compositions, but also on the way these texts, more or less canonical, were influenced by the cultural perspective of the copyists and painters. The argumentation is supported by information provided by domain researchers like Vasile Grecu and Nicolae Cartoian, Matei Alexandrescu or Teodora Voinescu (p. 65-87, 100). The eschatological notes and models from Radu Zugravul’s manuscript are numerous: The Apocalypse, The Judgement Day, Archangel Michael Punishing the Sinner’s Soul, The Parable of the Ten Virgins (mad and wise virgins), the representations of death, hell’s punishments, and heaven.

Radu Munteanu is another church painter who is an important figure of the book, a painter of certain compositions of *The Judgement Day* from Țara Lăpușului, compositions in which hell is overpopulated by representations of sinners, and the devils’ images are often zoomorphic. His eschatological compositions – analyzed both chromatically and from the point of view of their representations and imaginary – show both the influence of other paintings, texts and traditional culture and the painter’s personal touch who “is more special than many other painters because he is more violent, imaginative, dynamic, closer to the people’s life, but also more allegorizing” (p. 144).

The authors also focused on Matei Țimforea’s compositions (not Țimforea as it is spelled). The observations regarding the painter never leaving his village or his skillfulness are less relevant since he was a member of such an important center of painting on glass. The fact that he acquired the knowledge of a whole generation of icon painters was not out of the ordinary. What would have really been noticeable was that the icons on the theme of *The Judgement Day* by Matei Țimforea, preserved in various collections and well-known today were different from the iconographic model frequently met in the painting on glass and did not repeat the model; this demonstrates a special talent of the painter, who probably painted them without stencil.

The personal interpretations on *The Judgement Day* that various church painters had in their compositions were influenced by well-known beliefs, superstitions, and magical practices, by popular books and certain apocryphal texts that circulated in the

Romanian area and were familiar to the artists; however, these interpretations influenced in their turn the imaginary of the communities exposed to their contemplation as well as certain copyists' activity. Thus, the influences go both ways: not only the iconography was influenced by the painters' or epochs' cultural horizon, but, in its turn, it determined certain beliefs' articulateness within communities.

The authors present in the chapter *History and Geography* the list of the 182 churches where they identified witchcraft's representations, chronologically organized; then they suggest quantitative research regarding their geographical spread. Discussing hypotheses suggested by Trevor-Roper, Arno Borst and Guy Bechtel regarding the geographical area of spreading the witches' persecutions, the authors try to demonstrate that this would overlap on more isolated and less fertile mountain areas. The hypothesis is only partially correct from the point of view of the research's result, and the authors offer a few provisional explanations focused on historical aspects. We suggest that the numerous representations identified in the nowadays Gorj, Vâlcea and Maramureş Counties should also be compared to the ratio between the old and new churches in certain geographical areas. If we follow only two aspects – the interdiction applied to Romanians from different areas to build durable stone constructions and the wooden constructions' perishableness – things get clearer. In Maramureş County the very old wooden churches have been extremely well preserved becoming thus its regional pride. At the same time, most of the churches in the southern part of the country where the witch has been identified in the iconographic context of The Judgement Day are old stone ones that withstood the time very well compared to the wooden churches. In my opinion the iconography on such perishable supports is impossible to recover. Some of them were ephemeral, subject to elements, fire or abandoned by the communities attracted by bigger and more gorgeous constructions when the legislation and financial resources allowed. Considering these conditions, the quantitative analysis of what exists and could be recovered based on certain notes is less relevant.

The chapter *Linguistic Typologies* includes a quantitative look and a qualitative analysis of the witchcraft semantic terminology. It is followed by *Iconographic Typologies* supported by reproductions of very suggestive iconographic details. The chapter bears the responsibility of patrimonial significance by noting these details, thus saving them from loss and oblivion. The authors identify three vast iconographic types in which most of the representations are included: the witch in the river of fire, represented together with other sinners, the witch in the context of satanic riding (a type where other feminine figures hugged or ridden by devils are analyzed), and manna thieves. Beside these, other less frequent types are proposed: the witch beaten or tortured by devil, the witch whose tongue is ripped out by devil, the woman who worships the devil, and the woman with the mirror. The analysis of each iconographic type examines information on beliefs and magical practices brought by ethnographers or anthropologists. The analyses are often carried out from comparative perspectives, either in East-European context or suggesting comparisons with the Western world.

The research on which the present book is based was thoroughly conducted both through field research that spanned nearly two decades and through the reading of an impressive bibliography. The authors demonstrate profound knowledge of the

domain both in East-European and Western areas, and the *Bibliography* is divided into two sections and subsections: *The Eschatological Iconography in Compared Context (The Judgement Day & The Eschatological Iconography, The Judgement Day, Eschatology & Eschatological Iconography in the Romanian Culture, The History of the Romanian Art – sources with information on eschatological iconography – The Witchcraft Iconography, Cultural Anthropology, History, Religion, Folklore, Studies of Apocryphal and Eschatological Literature)*. Although the bibliography is impressive, a few visual anthropology references would have been useful. Studies by Georges Didi-Huberman (*Devant l'image. Questions posées aux fins d'une histoire de l'art*, Paris, Minuit, 1990), essays from *The Nymphs* series, especially *Ninfa moderna: Essai sur le drapé tombé* (Paris, Gallimard, 2002) and *Ninfa dolorosa: Essai sur la mémoire d'un geste* (Paris, Gallimard, 2019), or references to the founder of iconology, Aby Warburg, could have offered other perspectives of the analysis on the emotion the representation relies on.

The book is certainly meritorious, and The Romanian Academy Prize in 2022 clearly demonstrates the high appreciation of the specialists. It is no doubt one of the best the Romanian culture has offered on a theme of iconography approached interdisciplinary. The editorial work is also an exceptional one. *Witchcraft Iconography in the Religious Romanian Art. A Visual Anthropology Essay* reminds us of well-known books of Western culture, mostly of French one to which the authors adhere. It is also a book written within a project, under the inherent pressure of deadlines, and this is visible here and there, due to insufficient arguments or unfinished synthesis. The vastness of material, the attention with which the elements are recorded and, finally, the bibliography on which the research is based represent the premises for the publishing, two years later, of the book titled *Witchcraft in Romania* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022). The second part of the book published in English for a reader less familiarized with the Romanian culture is about witchcraft in iconography, articulating some of the presented synthesis exercises.

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