

## SUMMARY

The thesis "**The Conservation of Transylvanian Iconostases. Case Study: The Iconostases in Cluj County**" studies a group of valuable cultural heritage objects, which have received insufficient attention so far. I became concerned with this subject while taking part, within the University of Art and Design Cluj-Napoca, in the conservation and restoration of the iconostasis in the „Assumption of the Virgin Mary” church in Mănăştur cemetery, Cluj-Napoca. Seeking solutions in this particular case, we noticed the lack of studies in the matter of Transylvanian iconostases, whereas the thorough knowledge of an object`s context is the premise for taking informed decisions. Therefore, we considered that researching these objects is much needed, because of their high cultural value at local, national and even international level, given by the ensemble's aesthetics, the artistic quality, their endurance in time and the continuity of use. Throughout the research we attempted on one hand to widen the knowledge regarding the material and immaterial characteristics of the Transylvanian iconostases, while on the other to hand to increase the efficiency of conservation through rethinking the traditional process in relation to the specificity of the conservation object.

The thesis is structured in five chapters which follow the proposed theme in a journey from general to particular, starting with the exploration of the notion of conservation, followed by the study of the iconostasis as a conservation object and then by the analysis of its forms in Transylvania, respectively in Cluj county. In the end, corroborating aspects of the classical theories with those of the one emerging in present time, we have developed a conservation strategy suited to the nature of the studied iconostases.

The first chapter, "**Preserving heritage objects nowadays**" explores the concept of conservation and its evolution through time, seeking the reasoning behind this activity, criteria for selecting the objects preserved and the relationship between the theories and the socio-historical context in which it was conceived. Conservation has been defined in various ways, depending on the targeted objects and the pursued goals. As a discipline, it arises sometime between the XIX<sup>th</sup> and XX<sup>th</sup> century as a consequence of the desire to keep certain objects and buildings of the past, alongside with the recognition that a very specific set of skills and knowledge is necessary to fulfill this goal. Initially, discussions focused on one's entitlement to intervene physically on the material belonging to common cultural heritage. Thus, two factions began to coagulate, supporting opposing and extreme views, namely the anti-interventionism and the stylistic unity of interventionism. The theories that succeed this dispute sought ways to legitimize intervention, introducing regulations that would reduce the risk of forgery to minimum, tending towards the objectivization of the process. Followers of this course, active

in the last century until our days, establish the use and develop hard sciences in conservation, seeking to exclude the subjective factor in decision-making. While northern European countries are proving to be more responsive to this approach, theories currently established in Latin countries and through international conventions follow an aestheticist approach based on the concept of authenticity, the conservation objects being located on the axis described by double historical-aesthetic polarity.

In the present time, new theories are emerging that emphasize the necessity of integrating conservatory intervention in the current social context by relating to people's needs that are met by the conserved object. The criteria based on aesthetic and historical value become inappropriate nowadays, due to the expanding range of objects that are being preserved compared to previous times. Thereby, the value-based theory of conservation takes shape, rethinking decision-making in conservation by emphasizing the importance of understanding the conserved object, regarding both its material and cultural significance. Conservation is perceived as a wide field of action, considered a social service, while the intervention itself is only one of its components. Another essential facet of this new view is the inclusion of non-experts in the conservation process, done by involving all stakeholders at different levels, without compromising the quality of the technical intervention. The attention given to other values than those specific to classical theories, such as the social, scientific, spiritual or economic ones, is suitable for the treatment of polysemic heritage assets such as iconostases.

The last section of the first chapter is dedicated to the conservation of cultural heritage in Romania. Its development followed international trends, with a relative delay. Romanian heritage protection does not have a high efficiency, due to the relatively low interest in cultural heritage, compared to other European countries, alongside with legal and practical obstacles encountered in the implementation process. The analysis of the subject confirms that certain reforms to the current system would be welcome and even necessary.

The second chapter "**The iconostasis as a conservation object**" examines the type of object referred to by the term iconostasis, its essential and defining characteristics, its origin, its use and its occurrences in Transylvania. The iconostasis is a highly specific object that has its individuality given by both tangible elements such as shape, iconography or location, and intangible ones, such as function or meaning. Technical complexity, proven by the variety of constituent materials and execution techniques, is doubled by the symbolic one, given by the wide variety of cultural significance perceived by different social groups. Its liturgical function, to isolate the celebration of the sacraments from the laity, and its narrative one, to show the

history of the Church in images, are sided by social and sentimental functions which are provided for different groups of people

From an evolutionary standpoint, despite being one of the defining elements of interior decoration in Eastern churches, its origin is not in the holy tradition, being rather the product of the evolution of design and liturgical functions. The separation of the altar and nave first took the shape of a low railing, evolving later on to the shape of the Templon. It was as late as the XV<sup>th</sup> century when this separation element became the high wooden iconostasis, the most widespread form nowadays.

Regarding the route of the iconostasis in Transylvania, embracing the Brâncovenesc-style form, diffusing it and interpreting it in a local key, are facts proven at many levels, including the chronological one. Two major categories of iconostases are outlined in the studied territory: the high wooden iconostasis and the one in wooden churches. The objects in the first category can be placed on an axis generated between two poles: the Brâncovenesc-style and the baroque style. A notable fact is that towards the end of the XVIIIth century and at the beginning on the next one, the Western trend gained ground at the expense of the native Romanian. The second category, detailed in the next section, is an artistic expression, deeply influenced by the constructive technique used in the architectural building of the wooden churches. On one hand, this form attempts to imitate the Brâncovenesc-style iconostasis, which became a typology of reference, while on the other hand, reflects the pulse of the social environment in which it was created by the kinship with folk art.

Further, in order to determine the best approach for conservation, we initiated a systematic research seeking for recurring and unique points, which would reveal the nature and essence of iconostases in Transylvania, paying attention to the main risks they are exposed to. Realizing the magnitude of such a research due to geographic expansion, the multiplicity and variety of the studied objects, we resorted to selecting a target group as representative for the whole multitude of Transylvanian iconostases, group which is studied thoroughly in the third chapter, "**The Iconostases of the Churches in Cluj County**".

The delineation of the target group was not based on the executorial technique, but on the cultural function of the object and its perception by people, thus including both high wooden iconostases and those of wooden churches. Geographically, we limited the target group to Cluj county, considering it representative of the territory in the center of which it is located. Another aspect that contributed to the selection of this area was the need for finding viable solutions for one of the most valuable iconostasis in the county which is currently in the process of conservation and will be exhibited in the Orthodox Metropolitan Museum of Cluj. Regarding

the timeframe, we focused on the achievements of the XVIIIth and XIXth century because it was the peak of iconostasis making in Transylvania, the time when the most significant works of art were produced.

The target group was formed using the information provided by "The List of Historical Monuments 2010". The interior of each listed church was examined, recording which of these host an iconostasis that is relevant for the proposed research. The methods used in this research include: specialized investigations of the objects in situ, scientific analysis of the component material, documentation from scientific and academic written sources, examination of photographs and study of restoration documentation and archives.

The first section of this chapter is dedicated to the high wooden iconostases. These objects are not numerous in the chosen target group because they are specific for masonry churches, the construction of which was restricted during the studied period, in this geographical area. Of this category, we selected three artistically valuable iconostases for further examination, all of which are situated in Cluj-Napoca.

The first two items discussed have common structural features. They present a much simplified version of the solution proposed by the Brâncovenesc-style iconostasis. The latter involved an exact match of the columns and friezes, while in the cases discussed, these components lose their structural role entirely and become purely decorative, being mounted on the wall. However, the third iconostasis presented in this thesis, the one painted by Vasilie Zboroski, is comprised of many parts that are joined together using various techniques to form the vertical wall that separates the nave from the altar.

Regarding painting, the three iconostases show varying degrees of inclusion of the Western style in the traditional iconographic configuration. Although the two later assemblies contain more items of this type than the earlier one, this does not necessarily demonstrate stages of a process, but different and unique forms of receiving the active trends and transcribing them over the traditional fundament. The iconostasis in "Bob" Church has the general appearance of a Greek temple façade. Additionally, the Deisis icon, most important in the economy of an iconostasis, was replaced by a scene of the Resurrection in Western composition and the royal icons lost their expressive importance through the reduction in size and stylistic differentiation from the other painted components. The iconostasis of the Church "on the Hill" is characterized by the reduced sculpted decoration, by the scale within the ensemble of the panels showing realistic representations of flower vases, and mostly by the conspicuous imprint of the artist's hand on the portraits. The iconostasis painted by Vasilie Zboroski stands out, at first glance, because of the expansion of the areas covered by inadequate reparatory interventions. However,

in terms of the original execution, it distinguishes through the chromatic and sculpture of the polychromy, following an interpreted version of the Brâncovenesc-style, and through the innovative approach on icon painting using free paint strokes and dynamic character postures.

A notable social aspect is the poor attachment shown by the community towards the dislocated iconostasis, deprived of an appropriate visual context. In contrast, the two iconostases that are set in their original exposure space have a much better connection to their users. Thus, the dependence of this type of object on the exhibition space is revealed.

Regarding their conservation, we consider it worrying that of the three objects studied, the iconostasis on which human interventions were minimal, namely the church "Ascension", is in the best state of preservation. Concerning the legal status of the studied objects, we noticed their absence from the list of protected movable cultural heritage, because of the assumption that religious objects reside in valuable historical monuments, whose status also protects the inside of the building. But the case of the iconostasis painted by Vasilie Zboroski contradicts this assumption, revealing important shortcomings of the current system.

The second section concerns the iconostases of wooden churches. These buildings were the most common works of Romanian art and architecture in rural areas of Transylvania during the XVIIIth and the XIXth centuries. The typical iconostasis for this category is part of the edifice, being an interior wall, flat and decorated in painting technique. In about 40 of these buildings, listed as historical monuments in Cluj county, the old painting of the iconostasis is still preserved, in full or in part.

An important contribution of this research is the qualitative analysis of the objects in the target group, which offers new information regarding the tradition and the art of the iconostases in wooden churches. The predominant morphological typology in the area, type I, is characterized by the unity of the separation wall, having only two or three openings in the lower part. Type II, more rare than the first, is the result of using other constructive techniques for the vaults of the church and it is distinguishable by the occurrence of a half-round opening in the upper part of the separation wall. Variations, which are distinguished by the use of relief as a means of artistic expression, arise from the basic typologies. After this paradigm shift, the wall-like iconostasis becomes increasingly laden with mounted carved decorative elements and with other movable objects. These changes appear to the later iconostases, after the mid-eighteenth century, showing a tendency to individualize the composing parts and upgrade artistic expression.

As a general characteristic of the painting of these iconostases, we noticed, on one hand, the desire to copy Brâncovenesc-style iconostases and, on the other hand, the influences of the

Western Baroque present in the area. The balance between these two directions is given in most cases by the interpretation of the borrowed elements in a popular art key, which gives coherence to the assembly.

One recurrent feature is the attachment of mounted parts on the iconostasis, which tackles the aesthetic merge of wood panel painting and parietal. Royal icons, the Royal Doors, the crucifix and molens are elements borrowed directly from high wooden iconostasis. While significant adjustments occur for the crowning elements, the Royal Doors and icons keep similar forms for both categories and only vary in the level of rusticity of the image in some cases.

Painted decoration of the iconostasis is used to bind or separate groups of figurative paintings. Thematically, the motives vary from plant to geometric and one can often identify elements inspired by folk art or transposed into painting from the carved ornamentation of the high wooden iconostasis. The configuration of decorations show a clear distinction from figurative painting, being a filler for predetermined spaces, such as girdles or borders. The occurrence of carved decoration implies the replacement of the painted one. In the studied cases, we have identified various stages of this evolution, leading to the aesthetics of the high wooden iconostasis, which has the expressive techniques separated categorically: the entire decoration being carved and the entire figuration, painted.

In the matter of conservation, eight churches, ranked as historical monuments in the studied area, have vanished and two others are in an advanced state of decay. The main degradations that affect these objects are the detachment and the lacunae of the paint and ground layer, the surface being covered at different extent with adhering dirt. The methodology for treating these degradations is effective and relatively easy to implement, but lasting in time of the intervention is strictly conditioned by the building's state of conservation which depends on its use. Therefore, the diminishing social relevance of wooden churches is the main cause of their obsolescence, both materially and spiritually. Community involvement in the preservation appears as the only solution to achieve a sustainable preservation of these buildings with great cultural value.

In the fourth chapter, "**Proposed conservation strategy for the iconostases in Cluj County**", we asserted requirements that we consider fundamental and that outline a proposal of a sustainable conservation strategy for iconostases in Transylvania.

On the basis of the results of the analysis of the target group we established a series of features specific for the Transylvanian iconostases, which are relevant for their conservation. These features are: the status of cultural asset, polysemy, maintaining the original cultural

function, dependence on the exhibition space, correlation with other objects, local character, form of public art, typological variation, identitary symbolism, continuity of use and individuality as artistic typology.

In addition to the features of the described objects, their study highlighted one of the problems of current practice in conservation, which is the polarization of the decision-making process towards the possessor or the owner, who claims full authority on the object, while other stakeholders, to whom the object is significant, are not entitled to an opinion.

As a solution we tried to combine the rigors regarding the material of the conservation object, supported by established theories of conservation, with a contemporary approach that promotes the involvement of stakeholders in different phases of the conservation process in order to preserve the integrity of the object's cultural significance.

The proposed strategy follows closely the process recommended by the Burra Charter, which is based on: the importance of the place itself; understanding the significance of the place; understanding the material; guiding decisions by significance; intervention insofar as necessary and as little as possible; the need for documentation; logical ordering of actions. Besides adapting this process to the specific needs of Transylvanian iconostases, in this chapter we attempted to rethink the conservator's role, who is on one hand the expert in the material of the object preserved, and on the other hand the coordinator and the moderator of all interactions between other people involved in conservation.

In the last chapter, "**Case Study - applying the proposed strategy for the iconostasis painted by Vasilie Zboroski**", the proposed strategy was applied in a practical case, in order to prove its efficiency in identifying cultural values and finding solutions for their transmission to future generations. The case study is the iconostasis belonging to the Metropolitan Museum of Cluj, which is currently undergoing conservation and restoration.

The first step in this process is completing the data about the object through the use of investigative methods established in conservation, namely scientific analysis of the composing material. These methods concern the support layer, the preparation layer and the color layer of the iconostasis's parts. Their goal is to determine the properties of each material comprised in them. The methods used were visible and ultraviolet reflected light microscopy, polarized transmitted light microscopy, electron microscopy, infrared spectroscopy, and X-ray spectroscopy. Following these analyzes we have identified the wood essences used, the inert material and the binding media of the ground layer, the pigments and the binding media of the color layer.

The results of scientific analyzes have largely shown compliance with the traditional technique, being quite common for icon painting on wood panel and polychromy. Still, they also revealed features that show a trend towards innovation, manifested by the simplification of the technique or by introducing less common materials. Also, through this detailed investigation, we were able to operate a more precise separation of the materials added during recent interventions and their brief characterization.

Further, based on the interpretation of scientific analysis and data known by other means, we performed an assessment of the cultural significance. It revealed a prevalence of the artistic, spiritual and historic values, while the scientific and social values remain in a potential state. Setting tangible and intangible aspects in which each value resides, we underpinned the development of the conservation plan. The current plan addressed issues related to the intervention itself and others which relate to the exhibition space and how people relate to the object. All of the measures proposed were then assessed to determine the ratio between the benefit brought, through emphasizing one cultural value, and the risk carried over others.

The research conducted for this thesis started from a practical example, an object that is intended to be preserved, then searched for the origins of this type of object, the characteristics of the typology and the present context, and finally used the extracted conclusions to develop a conservation plan for the case study. Concurrently, the research delivers results with usefulness outside the accomplishment of immediate objectives assumed by the thesis.

Firstly, performing a study of Transylvanian iconostases through the exhaustive investigation of a well-defined territory is an important step towards understanding the relative value of this cultural resource. Among the notable contributions is the comparative analysis of the three oldest, contemporary iconostases of Cluj-Napoca, the typological classification of wooden churches' iconostases and proving the smooth transition from high wooden iconostases to the ones in wooden churches. Also, discussing the origin of the iconostasis as a form of religious art is important for any subsequent study, providing a basis for detailing.

Secondly, the section dedicated to conservation as a discipline provides a comprehensive picture of the issue and its evolution in line with the contemporary realities. The relevance of this fragment is increased by the fact that such a presentation is not available in the Romanian specialty literature, which omits the intensely promoted perspective nowadays, the value-based conservation.

The link between contemporary theories and the conservation of iconostases is also a novelty, which can contribute significantly to improving the practice in this field. The main end product of this work is a strategy that adapts the Burra Charter process, a successful

embodiment of the value-based approach, to the specificity of the Transylvanian iconostases. The exposed proposal shows a wide range of applicability, providing a guideline that aims to ensure coherence and long-term sustainability to the practice of conservation of the Transylvanian iconostases.

Finally, the thesis leads to a bivalent conclusion concerning the prospects of material cultural heritage conservation: while the regulations and guidelines tend to cover more and more aspects of the field in order to provide consistency to practice and to minimize the damages, the activity's flexibility and adaptability must be defended insofar that rules do not come before the human interest.