

BETWEEN BYZANTINE CANON AND POPULAR EXPRESSION: CHURCH PAINTING IN THE PRIESTLY FOUNDATIONS OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WALLACHIA

Marinel PĂDURE,

Ph.D.'s., Faculty of Theology, University of "Ovidius", Constanța,
ROMANIA,

E-mail: spredezvoltare@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

How did parish priests in eighteenth-century Wallachia shape the painting of the churches they founded? This article works that question through a defined corpus of modest masonry and timber churches, drawn from recent fieldwork and from regional mural repertoires rather than from the abstract idea of a "priestly church." Its proposal is a simple one. Two levels run through these programs at once: a stable theological core that fixes which subjects appear and where, and a mobile surface that carries local dress, local landscape and a taste for narrative. On this reading the "popular" look of the paintings is not a sign of provincial decline; it is the second level doing its work. The study sets Teodora Voinescu's old distinction between the "peasant" and the "popular" beside Stoicescu's documentary evidence and recent research on Wallachian post-Byzantine painting, including new work on painters and the laboratory analysis of panels. The priestly foundations, it argues, were sites of controlled hybridization, where canon and vernacular held each other up rather than pulling apart, and where a quiet naturalizing of the sacred image began that would come into the open only in the next century.

Keywords: *Byzantine canon; Wallachian church painting; eighteenth century; priestly foundations; popular iconography; Phanariot period; post-Byzantine art.*

INTRODUCTION

Romanian art history has rarely treated any period as harshly as the Phanariot century, the years from roughly 1711 to 1821.¹ Later nationalist historians saw it as politically servile and morally compromised, and they measured it mostly by what it had failed to make. The churches say otherwise.

Hundreds of them went up across Wallachia in these decades, were painted, and were put to use, and a great many owed their existence to parish priests of small means and little schooling. None of this amounted to refined court art. It amounted to something else: a crowded, resourceful visual culture, and that culture is worth reading on its own terms.

¹ The conventional label Phanariot derives from the Phanar (Fener) quarter of Constantinople, home of the Greek families from whom the Porte appointed the rulers of Wallachia and Moldavia after 1711–1716. The term carries a heavy pejorative charge in nineteenth- and twentieth-century national historiography; I use it here only as a neutral chronological marker for the period, not as a value judgement on its culture.

That visual culture belongs to what scholars since Nicolae Iorga have called “Byzantium after Byzantium”, the long survival of the Byzantine cultural model in the Orthodox principalities after 1453.² The model did not fade quickly. It kept working as a living frame of reference, and the priestly foundations stand exactly where it begins to meet Western and Central-European fashion. Art history has often folded Wallachia in with Moldavia, as though the two were one undifferentiated province. They were not. Wallachia kept its own routes for passing on and reshaping the inherited tradition, and that fact bears directly on how its village churches came to be painted.

My point of departure is a distinction Teodora Voinescu drew in 1973, between the „peasant” (țărănesc) and the „popular” (popular) in late-medieval Romanian painting.³ The older literature had run the two together. Voinescu showed they name different things, and I take her distinction as a working tool and try it against a defined set of monuments. Beside it stands the documentary record Nicolae Stoicescu assembled on how churches were actually commissioned and painted through the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth.⁴ Two recent books change what can be said.

Tudor Dinu walked the ground and photographed some 135 surviving votive ensembles in the churches of Wallachia and Moldavia, putting faces back into the record;⁵ and Elisabeta Negrău and Cristina Cojocaru have studied the painters of the Brâncovan tradition closely enough that questions of authorship can now be posed with real precision.⁶

The argument runs in five stages. I begin by fixing the corpus and the method. I then place the subject in the architectural and cultural setting of the Phanariot period, turn to the priest-patrons and the bargains they struck with painters, look at the painters themselves as people with histories, and finally read the painted programs through the canon-and-expression distinction. The conclusion asks what all of this adds to the history of Orthodox visual culture.

1. CORPUS AND METHOD

The argument needs real buildings, not the idea of a „priestly foundation” in general.⁷ I lean on three bodies of documented material. The first is the masonry parish churches that Dinu recorded on site, with their votive portraits. One of them is the church of St. Parascheva at Călinești, in the north of Vâlcea county, which free peasants, the moșneni, raised at their priests’ urging and „built from the foundations at their own expense” (au zidit

² N. Iorga coined the formula in *Byzance après Byzance*, Bucarest, 1935. Recent scholarship stresses that the Byzantine paradigm remained a referential system in the Romanian lands until the very end of the eighteenth century, even as Western and Central-European models began to filter in; the priestly foundations discussed here sit precisely on that threshold.

³ T. Voinescu, „Între „țărănesc” și „popular” în pictura românească de la sfârșitul evului mediu, în: *Studii și Cercetări de Istoria Artei, Seria Artă Plastică*, XX/1 (1973), pp. 21–28.

⁴ N. Stoicescu, *Cum se zugrăveau bisericile în secolul al XVIII-lea și în prima jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea*, în: *Mitropolia Olteniei*, XIX/5–6 (1967), pp. 408–429.

⁵ T. Dinu, *Oamenii epocii fanariote. Chipuri din bisericile Țării Românești și Moldovei*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2018, pp. 9–24.

⁶ E. Negrău, C. Cojocaru, *Sfântul Cuvios Pafnutie – Pârnu Zugravul. Tradiție și modernitate în arta brâncovenească*, Editura Cuvântul Vieții, București, 2017, pp. 23–40.

⁷ By priestly foundation (ctitorie preotească) I mean a church whose principal founder or co-founder (ctitor) was a parish priest, alone or together with the village community, as distinct from princely, boyar or monastic foundations. The category is social and documentary rather than stylistic: it is defined by the founding act recorded in the pisanie (dedicatory inscription) and in the votive portrait, not by any single manner of painting.

din temelie cu toată cheltuiala).⁸ The second is the wooden churches of Muntenia, catalogued long ago by Radu Crețeanu and looked at again in the recent Pro Patrimonio conservation surveys. The church at Șirineasa is a good example, its nineteenth-century repainting still resting on a plainly post-Brâncovan iconographic frame.⁹ The third is the Vâlcea mural repertory of Corina Popa, Ioana Iancovescu, Vlad Bedros and Elisabeta Negrău, which is as close as we have to a systematic record of what these walls actually carry.¹⁰

The method is plain. I take each monument, pull it apart into two levels, and ask what belongs to each. One level, call it the deep structure, is the theological program: which subjects are required, where they sit in the hierarchy, which cycles cannot be left out. The other, the surface, is everything in the handling – dress, faces, landscape, colour, how much room is given to the story.¹¹

This owes a good deal to the structural-semiotic reading Constantin I. Ciobanu has applied to sixteenth-century Romanian painting, which keeps the steady grammar of an image apart from its changing articulation.¹² I should be honest about what the article is and is not. It synthesises and interprets published material; it does not report new archival or field research. Its value, if it has any, lies in the frame and in the test, not in the recovery of unknown churches.¹³

2. THE PHANARIOT CONTEXT: ARCHITECTURE, CIVILIZATION, AND RELIGIOUS CULTURE

Civilizational Parameters

None of these interiors makes sense apart from the world that made them, and the fullest map of that world is still Răzvan Theodorescu's account of Romanian civilization between the medieval and the modern.¹⁴ Theodorescu refuses the cliché of a stagnant,

⁸ T. Dinu, *Oamenii epocii fanariote*, pp. 186–190. At Călinești only the chief donors – Patru, Anghel and Patru Popescu with their wives – were given a place on the wall, shown in plain brown and grey gowns; the rest of the contributing villagers went unrepresented for lack of space. On the moșneni as a class of free, land-owning peasants who frequently acted as collective founders of rural churches, see *ibidem*, pp. 180–195.

⁹ R. Crețeanu, *Bisericile de lemn din Muntenia*, București, 1968; cf. Fundația Pro Patrimonio, *60 de biserici de lemn. Căzul Șirineasa* (2023), <https://www.propatrimonio.org>. The Șirineasa interior, executed in oil on lime plaster, adopts the autonomous, framed scenes of Western devotional painting while keeping the conservative selection and registration of saints inherited from the local Brâncovan practice.

¹⁰ C. Popa, I. Iancovescu, V. Bedros, E. Negrău, *Repertoriul picturilor murale brâncovenești. Județul Vâlcea*, vol. I–II, Editura UNARTE, București, 2008. Although centred on the Brâncovan period proper, the repertory documents the formal vocabulary that village workshops continued to draw on throughout the eighteenth century.

¹¹ The pair deep structure / surface is borrowed, heuristically rather than literally, from structural linguistics; I use it to name two levels of an image system, not to claim a generative grammar of icons. A comparable analytical move – that of distinguishing the stable „syntax” of a painted program from its variable „lexicon” – underlies C. I. Ciobanu's structural-semiotic reading of sixteenth-century Romanian painting.

¹² C. I. Ciobanu, *Text și imagine în pictura românească din secolul al XVI-lea: o abordare structural-semiotică*, Editura Oscar Print, București, 2021, pp. 15–46.

¹³ The need for systematic field documentation of these modest foundations remains acute. Dinu's campaign – which located and photographed roughly 135 surviving votive ensembles, several of them in churches in advanced states of decay – shows both how much material survives and how quickly it is being lost; cf. T. Dinu, *Oamenii epocii fanariote*, pp. 9–24.

¹⁴ R. Theodorescu, *Civilizația românilor între medieval și modern. Orizontul imaginii (1550–1800)*, vol. II, Editura Meridiane, București, 1987, pp. 9–30. The very title – „the horizon of the image” – announces a history of visual culture rather than of style alone.

dependent age. He finds instead a strange productivity, with Greek church influence, the tastes of the Constantinopolitan aristocracy, faint echoes of Western Baroque and stubborn local habit all at work at once. The priest-patrons chose inside this mixture, whether or not they grasped the forces around them.

For Oltenia the point is sharpened by Negrău and Bedros, whose survey shows how long the Brâncovan repertory lasted into the eighteenth century, setting the standard a village painter carried in his eye.¹⁵

The phenomenon was also uneven on the map. Vasile Drăguț pointed long ago to the contrast between an exhausted Moldavian wall-painting and a livelier Wallachian one in this period, and when Dinu went looking, the surviving Wallachian record turned out richer than the textbooks had led him to expect.¹⁶ The causes can be argued over.

The consequence for the present inquiry is straightforward: Wallachia offers a thick field of small, datable, donor-documented churches, which is exactly the soil a study of priestly patronage needs.

The buildings themselves were mapped by Victor Stancu, whose survey records both the persistence of local construction and its slow bending toward outside models.¹⁷ His catalogue runs the whole range, from the lavish court churches of the Phanariot princes down to the bare masonry or timber put up by village priests with whatever they could raise. And the architecture was never simply a container.

A low, barrel-vaulted nave with little light asks for a different spread of scenes, and a different key of colour, than a tall and well-lit princely church. The painter of a village foundation worked inside those constraints, not around them.

Wooden Churches as Spaces of Relative Freedom

Wooden churches deserve a separate word. Crețeanu's catalogue sets out their range and their spread; for most of the rural population they were simply where one went to pray.¹⁸ Their interiors stray further from the canonical models than the interiors of supervised churches do, and the reason is no mystery. A timber church was small and close to one community, and it stood a long way, in space and in oversight, from the bishop who might have policed the choices of patron and painter elsewhere.

That distance gave the vernacular room to breathe. Șirineasa shows it well: the later repainting borrows the framed, easel-picture look of Western devotion, yet the saints are chosen and ranked exactly as the old local practice dictates.¹⁹ The surface had changed; the deep structure had not.

¹⁵ E. Negrău, V. Bedros, *Mănăstirile Olteniei. Artă și spiritualitate / The Monasteries of Oltenia. Art and Spirituality*, Editura ICR, București, 2014, pp. 41–58. The bilingual format of this volume is itself a sign of how recent Romanian scholarship has sought to bring the Wallachian material into international circulation.

¹⁶ The observation, and the field correction, are discussed in T. Dinu, *Oamenii epocii fanariote*, pp. 12–16, who weighs Drăguț's explanation – the „fatigue” of a Moldavia saturated by the mural campaigns of earlier centuries – against the impoverishment and artistic decline of the provinces and the modest worldly ambitions of the local elites.

¹⁷ V. Stancu, *L'architecture dans les pays roumains à l'époque phanariote et les monuments représentatifs les plus importants de cette époque*, în: *Symposium – L'époque phanariote*, Thessaloniki, 1974, pp. 265–294.

¹⁸ R. Crețeanu, *Bisericile de lemn din Muntenia*, București, 1968. On the construction and decoration of the type, and on the conservation problems it now poses, see also the Pro Patrimonio surveys cited above.

¹⁹ Fundația Pro Patrimonio, 60 de biserici de lemn. *Cazul Șirineasa* (2023), <https://www.propatrimonio.org>. The carved, filigree iconostasis at Șirineasa – possibly older than the present church – is a reminder that liturgical furniture, too, migrated and was reused, carrying its own iconographic conventions across foundations.

3. PRIESTLY PATRONAGE: SOCIAL PROFILE AND CULTURAL AMBITION

Who Were the Priest-Patrons?

It would be a mistake to take the priest-patrons for a single, even class. Furtună's study of the clergy shows a profession sorted by learning, by income and by nearness to a town or a powerful patron.²⁰ At the top were priests with real theological training, books within reach and money enough to commission something ambitious. Far more common was the other kind: a man of thin means and almost no schooling, who knew the tradition by eye and by ear rather than from the page. Both built churches. Both left walls that carry the mark of their circumstances. And that is just where the interest lies, in how unlike situations produced unlike results inside what was, on paper, one and the same framework. Dinu's reading of the votive portraits supplies what the documents cannot.²¹ The founder shown before a holy figure, his church held in his hands like a model, is not mere convention. It tells us how these men wished to be seen: as pious souls deserving to be remembered, as members of a clerical estate with its own visible signs, and, as the century wears on, as individuals willing to be given a real face. Călinești makes the social arithmetic plain. Only a handful of villagers in plain gowns were let onto the wall, the chief donors and no others, and the rank order of the village was written straight into a sacred image. The funerary imagery Cristina Bogdan has studied belongs to the same world. On the outer walls of several Wallachian foundations Death speaks with a human figure – an emperor's son, an empress – summoned by an inscription to come and dance the last dance.²² A learned theme about the end of all flesh, that is, put into a direct and locally legible language. This is exactly the translation the canon-and-expression distinction is meant to catch.

How Commissions Were Negotiated

We can partly reconstruct how a priest engaged a painter, thanks to Stoicescu's work in the archives.²³ The surviving contracts, the *zapise*, fix the scope of the work, the subjects, the materials and the schedule of payment.²⁴ So the program was not a painter unrolling a formula. It was the result of a particular conversation between a patron who knew what he wanted and a craftsman weighing those wishes against his skill and the conventions of his trade. Patrons would ask for a local saint missing from the standard scheme, or insist on a certain scene, or call for dress and setting that brought a frankly vernacular note into an otherwise canonical wall. Such requests were seldom naive.

More often they show a shrewd sense of what a religious image was for, and of how it worked on the people who stood before it.

²⁰ D. Furtună, *Preoțimea românească în secolul al XVIII-lea. Starea ei culturală și materială*, Vălenii de Munte, 1915, pp. 31–72. Furtună's portrait of a clergy close to the peasantry in means and in literacy remains the documentary basis for any social account of rural patronage in the period.

²¹ On the votive portrait (*tablou votiv*) as an institution: the convention of depicting the founder holding a model of his church before a sacred figure is of Byzantine origin and had been naturalized in the principalities since the medieval period; what changes in the eighteenth century is the social range of the sitters and, gradually, the degree of individual likeness. Cf. T. Dinu, *Oamenii epocii fanariote*, pp. 25–48.

²² C. Bogdan, *Moartea și lumea românească premodernă. Discursuri întretăiate*, Editura Universității din București, București, 2016, pp. 211–248. Bogdan reads the Wallachian motif as a late, single-confrontation descendant of the medieval Western *danse macabre*; its appearance on the exterior of village churches is a clear instance of a learned eschatological theme translated into an emotionally immediate, popular idiom.

²³ N. Stoicescu, *Cum se zugrăveau bisericile*, pp. 414–420.

²⁴ On the contractual language of these agreements – the *zapis* specifying subjects, quantities of gold leaf and pigment, deadlines and penalties – see N. Stoicescu, *Cum se zugrăveau bisericile*, pp. 420–426.

4. THE PAINTERS: FORMATION, WORKSHOPS, ARTISTIC CHOICE

Workshop Lineages and the Transmission of Craft

You cannot explain the look of these paintings without the men who made them. Brătulescu's surveys are still the widest attempt to give that mostly nameless group a biography and a profession, and his work on the workshop lineages – the master-to-apprentice chains that carried iconographic knowledge forward – shows a craft at once conservative and quick to adapt.²⁵ The painters of Râmnic and Argeş trained one generation after another, and their hands can be followed across a wide stretch of country and a long stretch of time. What holds their attributed works together is not copying. It is a shared schooling, a common stock of models, and a steady way of fitting execution to prescription.²⁶

The setting of that training was studied by Barbu Brezianu, who traced the first rudiments of artistic instruction among the „zugravii de subțire” of Moldavia and Wallachia.²⁷ The phrase means, literally, a „fine” or „subtle” painter: a man at home with figures, icons and gilding, as against the ordinary painter of houses and ornament.²⁸ Brezianu makes plain that this apprenticeship was never merely technical. It meant taking in a whole visual language – a stock of sacred images, of compositions, of colour conventions – the shared tongue in which painter and patron could understand one another. And the language kept moving, as engraved books circulated, as painters travelled, and as local works themselves turned into models for the next hand. The tradition was alive even when the men inside it believed they were only repeating what they had received.

Individual Painters: What the Archive Recovers

Pulling individual names out of anonymous production is one of the real achievements of Romanian scholarship here. Popovici identified an eighteenth-century painter no one had known, and Dobjanschi worked out Radu Diaconul Zugrav and a set of village painters traceable through museum collections, proving that the archive could yield attributions where the eye alone had run aground.²⁹ The names matter less for the biographies than for what they reveal about a social world. That a painter signed, or was remembered by name, points to a degree of personal recognition that fits awkwardly with the anonymous, collective character we are used to ascribing to Byzantine art. No one shows this better than Pârву Mutu (1657–1735), the finest Wallachian church painter of the generation just before the one studied here.³⁰ In the votive tableau of the Cantacuzino church at Filipești de Pădure

²⁵ V. Brătulescu, *Zugravi de biserici din secolul al XVIII-lea și al XIX-lea*, în: *Glasul Bisericii*, XVIII/3–4 (1959), pp. 269–281.

²⁶ V. Brătulescu, *Dascălii de zugrav Ioan și Mincu de la Râmnic și Argeş*, în: *Mitropolia Olteniei*, XIX/11–12 (1963), pp. 859–871. The episcopal centre at Râmnic, with its printing house and its school of painters, acted as a regional node from which models and trained hands radiated into the Vâlcea and Argeş countryside.

²⁷ B. Brezianu, *Rudimente de învățământ artistic la „zugravii de subțire” din Moldova și Țara Românească*, în: *Studii și Cercetări de Istoria Artei*, IX/1 (1962), pp. 79–105.

²⁸ The distinction is occupational and qualitative rather than strictly institutional: a zugrav de subțire commanded the figural repertory and the gilding techniques required for icons and murals. The term itself signals that contemporaries recognized gradations of skill within the trade – a recognition that sits awkwardly with the notion of a purely anonymous, undifferentiated craft.

²⁹ I. Popovici, *Un zugrav român necunoscut în veacul al XVIII-lea*, în: *Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice*, XXXIII/105 (1940), pp. 39–48; A. Dobjanschi, *Icoanele lui Radu Diaconul Zugrav*, în: *Revista Muzeelor și Monumentelor*, 1 (1975), pp. 52–56; eadem, *Nume de zugravi săteni din secolul al XVIII-lea identificați în colecția de artă veche a Muzeului de Artă al RSR*, ibidem, 7 (1977), pp. 57–63.

³⁰ Although Pârву Mutu's principal activity falls under the Brâncovan reign rather than within the Phanariot century proper, his workshop and example set the terms within which the eighteenth-century Vâlcea and Argeş

he gathered some fifty-five members of the founding family, and at Bordești he left a self-portrait – a rare thing in this period – the painter shown with his brush and his shell, the tools that earned him his standing.³¹ The recent monograph by Negrău and Cojocaru reframes the worn question of „realism” around cases like these. Instead of crowning a single initiator, it shows a painter bargaining, picture by picture, between the inherited canon and the Greek and Western models of his day, and using the votive portrait as the place to try naturalism first. Săndulescu-Verna’s old claim that the painter Grigore launched a realist current is still disputed, and later work has chipped away at his case for priority.³² But the question he asked is a good one: how do observational, naturalistic habits surface inside a tradition built on iconic fidelity? Material study points the same way. The laboratory analysis of a Wallachian panel from Râmnicu Vâlcea found a narrow, traditional palette of lead white, red ochre, vermilion and green earth, and an egg-tempera technique faithful to Byzantine practice, even while the handling drifts toward the look of observed things.³³

Something was moving across the century in the relation between the sacred image and the visible world, and it moves most plainly in the priestly foundations. It is telling that the most celebrated painter of the whole tradition, Pârvu Mutu, was canonized in 2017 as St. Pafnutie. The maker of images had become a person in his own right.³⁴

5. ICONOGRAPHIC DYNAMICS: CANON, ADAPTATION, SYNTHESIS

Voinescu’s Framework Revisited

Voinescu’s split between the „peasant” and the „popular” is still the sharpest instrument we have for these walls.³⁵ The „peasant” part gathers everything that comes from the rural world of the painter and his patron: local dress on the saints, Wallachian farmland behind the scriptural scenes, the cottages and orchards that crowd into stories set, in theory, in the Near East. None of this is decorative accident. It is a deliberate planting of a universal story in one particular place and one particular way of living.³⁶ The „popular” part is less tied to a class and more a matter of taste: a liking for vivid story over abstraction, for the image that moves you over the image that holds you at a hieratic distance, for abundance over

painters operated; he is treated here as the immediate horizon of the priestly-foundation painters, not as one of them.

³¹ On the Filipeștii de Pădure votive ensemble and the Bordești self-portrait, see E. Negrău, C. Cojocaru, *Sfântul Cuvios Pafnutie*, pp. 61–78. The self-portrait – a rarity in a tradition that seldom let the maker appear – is itself evidence of a shifting sense of the painter’s status.

³² C. Săndulescu-Verna, *Zugravul Grigore, începătorul curentului realist în pictura românească*, în: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, LV/7–10 (1937), pp. 487–491. For the corrective, see E. Negrău, C. Cojocaru, *Sfântul Cuvios Pafnutie*, pp. 61–78, who locate the naturalizing tendency in a broader workshop culture rather than in a single „initiator.”

³³ O. G. Dulu et al., *A Multi-Analytical Study of a 17th-Century Wallachian Icon Depicting the “Mother of God with Child”*, în: *Heritage*, 6/10 (2023), pp. 6931–6948. The non-invasive imaging and spectroscopy confirm a continuity of technique – egg tempera, a narrow traditional palette – beneath an evolving visual language, a useful caution against reading stylistic change as a change of materials or method.

³⁴ The canonization (under the monastic name Pafnutie, which the painter took in 1721) by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church in 2017 is, for the historian, less a devotional fact than a marker of the long process by which the once-anonymous zugrav acquired a name, a biography and finally an individual cult.

³⁵ T. Voinescu, *Între „țăranesc” și „popular”*, pp. 21–24.

³⁶ The localizing impulse is not peculiar to Wallachia: comparable rusticizing tendencies appear across the post-Byzantine Balkans, in the village workshops of north-western Greece and the Slavic lands. What is specific to the Wallachian priestly foundations is the social mechanism behind it – a parish-level patronage that actively solicited the local note – rather than the visual phenomenon as such.

economy. Set against real programs, the distinction clears up a puzzle – the way a single painting can look deeply traditional and oddly free at once. The deep structure, the theological grammar that says which subject goes where and which cycles must appear, holds steady across the whole corpus. The surface is what moves: the handling, the licence taken, the degree to which the painter's own world pushes into the prescribed scene. A Last Judgement keeps its required machinery – the river of fire, the scales, the ranks of the saved – and still lets in, around the edges, faces and clothes and small incidents lifted straight from the village.

Canon as Deep Structure, Expression as Surface

This changes how we should think about canon and popular expression together. The usual opposition – canon as the cage, popular feeling as the escape – will not hold. The two were not rivals tugging opposite ways. They worked at different levels of one system. The canon gave the theological skeleton, the non-negotiable plan of salvation the images had to make visible. Popular expression gave that skeleton its flesh, the colour and the gesture and the face and the telling detail, without which the images could never have spoken to the village they were painted for. Each needed the other. The canon lent popular expression its licence and its reach; popular expression gave the canon its pulse.

The same reading disposes of an old complaint: that wherever these programs depart from the standard – a gesture misread, an element shifted, a colour convention altered – we are simply looking at incompetence. Often what looks like a mistake is interpretation, the painter taking a canonical subject and making it his own through the visual habits his training gave him.³⁷ Whether or not we want to call these innovations in any strong sense, they are signs of a living engagement with the tradition, not of mechanical copying.

CONCLUSIONS

What the painted interiors of these eighteenth-century priestly foundations finally offer is a view of a world that art history has mostly looked past: non-elite patronage, the ambition of villages and small towns, the constant give-and-take between a canonical tradition and the people living inside it. Read through the corpus gathered here – the Vâlcea and Argeş parish churches Dinu and the repertory record, the timber churches Creţeanu and Pro Patrimonio surveyed – these are not curiosities at the margin. They are small, concentrated instances of the central thing in Orthodox visual culture: a tradition shaping its users and being shaped by them in turn.

Voinescu's distinction, applied to particular cases and joined to the two-level reading set out above, lets the historian separate what the older books filed together as „folk” or „provincial” and name the actual forces, social and aesthetic and theological, behind each work. Theodorescu's civilizational frame and Stancu's architectural evidence put those forces in the larger history of the age; Stoicescu's documents and the biographical recovery carried on by Brătulescu, Dinu, and Negrău and Cojocaru tie them to named individuals. The contribution here is not a new archive. It is a sharper frame, tested on a defined corpus and set in conversation with current work on Wallachian post-Byzantine art.

³⁷ The point is not to deny that real incompetence existed – it did, especially at the humblest level of the trade – but to insist that divergence from a model is not, in itself, evidence of failure. Distinguishing creative inflection from mere error requires attention to the whole program: a consistent, repeated „deviation” that serves the legibility of a scene is better read as interpretation than as mistake.

The priest-founders of Wallachia stood in between – between the hierarchy and the village, the written word and the spoken, the cosmopolitan model and the local habit – and that middle position made them unusually fit for the negotiation. The buildings they left are monuments not to failure but to a particular kind of cultural intelligence, one that kept a tradition alive by making it speak in a language its own community could recognise. And the naturalizing turn traced here did not stop at 1800. It fed straight into the folk-coloured religious painting of the next century, of which the interior at Șirineasa is a modest, readable witness.

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