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**PHD THESIS SUMMARY**

**FOLK NATURALISM  
IN  
ORTHODOX RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS  
FROM THE LOWER OLT AREA**

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The thesis for a Doctor's degree with the title *Folk naturalism in orthodox religious buildings from the Lower Olt area*, represents a theoretical and artistic practices research on the images from the religious buildings set in the Lower Olt area, a contextualized scientific and artistic research, based on a comparative study on quality and quantity temporal stylistic analyses.

The paper consists of a theoretical research of the expressive study of local naturalism, based on the folk visual representations, within the chronological limits of the second half of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th, together with the development of a personal project centred on a series of votive naturalist folk portraits, a visual argument of theoretical research.

In point of history and geography, the study targets the area of the Lower Olt – the Romanați Plain, with influences coming mostly from Vâlcea area and without a strictly administrative limitation.

The paper intends to discover the religious patrimonial landmarks having historical and artistic value, the establishment of a strong and clear repertoire of the folk stylistics, based on the main religious buildings of the research and influential areas, as well as the preservation and the stylistic reevaluation of the folk naturalist expression in the Lower Olt area.

The dissertation *Folk naturalism in orthodox religious buildings from the Lower Olt area* is structured in four chapters, preceded by an *Introduction* and ended with a *Conclusion*; the body of the paper is accompanied by the *bibliography*, the *glossary*, the *list of illustrations* and the *appendixes*.

The *Introduction* consists of the *Argument*, the *Research methodology* and the *Structure of the thesis*.

The Methodology has an interdisciplinary character and covers the research field through implications of the scientific and artistic research at such levels as stylistics, artistic technology, history and its auxiliary methods, geography and anthropology, which implies psychology and social, economical and political aspects.

The research was done following three major stages.

The first stage consisted of the thorough study of all the written sources, the location of the sites and the primary identification of the characteristic elements of local folk naturalism, checking and formulating work theories and concepts, together with establishing research methods.

The second stage implied going out on the field and investigating *in situ* the orthodox religious buildings from the Lower Olt area and the adjacent zones.

In the third stage, the artistic research implied a classification of results in a logical form of expression.

The first chapter of the doctor thesis (*Folk naturalism in orthodox religious buildings from the Lower Olt area*) analyses the presence of naturalism in the liturgical space of the research area from a social and historical perspective, presents the general characteristics of folk naturalism, the particularities of the iconographic program which emerged, as well as the materials, technologies and artistic practices common to the Lower Olt area.

Folk artistic expression has its roots in the social and historical situation of the last half of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th when, historically, Vallakia passes through great political turmoil (the Fanar period, the national renaissance period, foreign occupation, the 1821 Revolution, the 1848 Revolution).

Economically, the agricultural production and the commerce, directed towards the Ottoman market, restrain the connection with the rest of Europe.

All these phenomena are mirrored in the visions of the folk painters which adorn the religious buildings of this period (1730-1866).

The historiography dealing with the orthodox religious buildings of the Lower Olt area, quite modest at the beginning of the 19th century, develops considerably during this hundred years.

The beginning of the 20th century favours the publication of the first collection-works which treat in detail the church architecture and painting in Oltenia.

The research and related contemporary studies are mostly directed to the North area (Vâlcea) and less towards the Romanați plain.

This ethnographic zone, lying between the waterside of the Danube (Lunca Dunării) and the South of the Getic Plateau (Podișul Getic), is rarely the object of a specialized research due to the small number of orthodox religious buildings, exposed for a long period to the Ottoman factor.

That is the reason why the research area of the thesis covers the ethnographic zone of the Romanați Plain and the influences from Vâlcea and Câmpia Boianului.

From an ethnographic and a folkloric point of view, the area of the Lower Olt – Romanați stands apart from the adjacent geographic zones (Vâlcea, Argeș, Teleorman, Dolj), by the morphology of the folk costume, of the customs and traditions, by the

different types of the sites, adapted to the landscape, whereas from a point of view of the religious visual representations, by the iconographic typology, in accordance with the architectural style. The architecture of the orthodox religious buildings follows an old Brâncoveanu style, characterized by not so high elevation, with an open and oversized church porch.

The paintings acquire a new stylistic expression due to the particular interest for the anthropologic study, by the tendency of laicization of the religious image, dominated by fanciful scenes. This stylistic expression of the spirit of the land is to be found in the modest churches of small towns and villages.

The dissertation on the naturalism present in the religious paintings from the folk edifices of the Lower Olt area is based on comparative studies and scientific, historical, esthetic, social and anthropological, artistic and technical analyses.

In Romania, the religious visual naturalism can be observed at *Sfântul Nicolae* Church, in Curtea de Argeș (14th century), where the Virgin Mary is depicted pregnant (nave, Southern side).

Unlike the previous centuries, dominated by the Byzantine tradition, folk creation is expressed without restrictions, continuously individualizing itself.

The Romanian painter tries to render the emotional effects characteristic to the visible world, drawing religious art near to everyday life, through the thematic journey into the political and social realities of the epoch (dishonesty, vices, poverty, political instability) and through the capturing of the intensity of the moment (sacrifice, pain, folk comic and satire).

The preference for the detail of the human nature is mostly obvious with the villains who torment Jesus Christ or with the sinners present in the hell scene, linked to the Judgment Day).

The garments and adornments which accompany the scenes of the iconographic program are rendered in detail, as close as possible to the natural element.

In the first half of the 19th century, folk tendencies, taken over and improved in the last century, increase their intensity.

By its folk concept, the iconographic program includes particularities which have as a source of inspiration both the writings of the Old and the New Testament (with a special mention for the *Psalms 148-149* of King David and the prophecies of Prophet Isaiah), the patristic writings and the apocryphal elements, bogomolic, folk and mythical oral literature and aspects of the real everyday life.

It is so that the iconographic program justifies some changes, such as the folk configuration of the Evangelist Saints in the nave pendentives, according to their age (*Saints Mathew and John* being painted in the Eastern angles towards the altar).

At the iconostasis, the icons of the holy feasts are configured following the rule of the orthodox traditional calendar, not following the chronological order, recommended by the Religious Painter's Manual (Erminia).

In the frieze of the military martyrs there often appears the portrait of *Saint Christophorus*, and in the lintel of the passage from the naos to the pronaos we can remark the figure of the *Pious Saint Mary the Egyptian*, in a semi-nude, profile representation.

The pronaos is decorated with specific scenes, such as *The Tent of the Virgin Mary* or the *Saint Martyr Marina punishing the devil*.

The votive picture, inheriting the Brâncoveanu style representations, extends, by adding new characters, such as the town craftsmen or the free peasants.

On the church porch, in the frame of The Last Judgement, the scenes dedicated to the Hell develop specifically by compositions which satirize vices and bad aspects of human reality (poverty, misery, injustice).

In the same space we find illustrations of folk legends connected to Heaven or Hell.

The exterior is decorated with a frieze of the prophets and apostles – sometimes sybils and Greek philosophers – which announces, towards the East, the Feast of the Annunciation and the Embodiment of the Word.

In subchapter *Materials, technologies, artistic practices specific* to the Lower Olt area, I mention the working typology of the painters from the Lower Olt area, at the border between the 18th and the 19th centuries.

Technichally and stylistically, painting iconographic folk programs had as a source of inspiration the Byzantine tradition, passed on from generation to generation.

Under the impact of the technologic changes, the local painters stand out by their creative potential and innovation.

As a principal support there remains the lime paste, used both in the fresco technique and in the fat tempera technique.

The pigments were obtained in the house and were completed by those purchased at the permanent fairs at Caracal or the Corabia port and the itinerant fairs from the Vâlcea area.

As for the tools, two categories can be identified: those for the preparation of the fresco support (spade, shovel, trowel, mason's ladle, palette knife) and those aimed for painting (brushes, mallerstock, recipients for the pigments and water).

Technologically speaking, the gross plaster (*arriccio*) was made up, just like in the Brâncoveanu period, from sand, river gravel, ground brick, lime paste, all mixed with clear river water.

As for the fine plaster, used as support for the painting, I noticed the existence of some impurities, such as dirt or remains of local vegetation, which replace the lime or the tow jacket, specific elements to the Byzantine technology (the churches *King Saints* from Hotărani-Fărcașele or *All Saints* from Caracal).

In the folk-artistic practices of the painters we can identify work particularities according to the season or the environment where the work was done.

The models, the recipes, as well as the different social notes were written down in their own notebooks, which turned, over the years, in real manuals and guides for the younger painters.

Chapter II, *Folk mural painters in the Lower Olt area – visual language particularities*, offers details about composition, chromatics, ornamentics, landscape, human figure and portrayal, together with the analysis of proportions, attitudes and garments in the religious scenes.

By the proofs left in the iconographic programs (inscriptions, signatures and stylistic manners), I established that in the Lower Olt area worked painters from Craiova (Dolj county), Dozești (Vâlcea county) and Peretu (Teleorman county).

Theologically speaking, also artistically and technically, the training of the folk artists was reduced to their economic possibilities.

As a reflection of this aspect, in the compositional repertoire we remark the apparition of religious scenes loaded with folk naturalism (*round dance with musicians* in the Church of the *King Saints* from Cioroiu-Fălcoiu, *Saint Haralambie*, „*the plague healer*” in the Church *Saint Nicholas/Assumption of the Virgin* from Chilia-Făgețelu), as well as comical elements, streaming from folk beliefs and traditions (*Saint Nicholas felling down the tree haunted by devils* in the Church *Saint Nicholas* from Ostrov-Osica de Sus, *death with the scythe* in the Church *Assumption of the Virgin* from Urși-Leleasca, etc.).

Compared to the modest dimensions of the religious buildings, the folk iconographic programs are structured on two or three strips.

In the field of chromatics we find coordinating tendencies, such as the use of vivid colours, which liberalize the Byzantine scheme patterns.

The symbolic dimension is based on the folk beliefs and the regional idiosyncracies. In this context, tones and nuances, limited to the bare necessities, are individualized according to each building.

The general tonality, based on the main colours (brown, red, orange, ochre, green, blue) is developed by nuances and models through non-colours, being thus obtained a large spectre of shades, semi-shades, light or dark, and nuances of brown-reddish, red-orange, ochre-orange, ochre-yellowish, ochre-greenish, green-bluish or violet-bluish).

By the use of low glowing colours, which produce a temperate caloric effect, the interest stays at the surface of the painting and is not lost into the deep.

The centres of compositional interest, main or secondary, are brought out by the purity of the colour or by the crowding of the coloured fields.

The dominant feature is the cold-hot contrast, which is obtained by juxtapositions of red-blue, red-green, orange-blue or purple-blue.

The ornamental elements are inspired by nature itself.

The stylistic refinement from the Brâncoveanu period is replaced by an ornamental vegetable geometrical repertoire, freely drawn, both in figurative compositions (through professional objects or vestimentary accessories), and in ornamental pannels which accompany the iconographic program.

In the compositions representing Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, the architecture is characterized by archeways adorned with repeating semi-circles, networks of zigzag lines, abundant geometrical figures (rectangles, triangles, circles), either simple or connected among themselves.

The decorative strips and frames are formed by motifs and elements visually represented close to reality, including vegetation and wild flowers (couch grass, knot grass, bindweed, chicory, poppies), naturally represented, in undulating interconnected networks, or together with geometrical figures.

In the case of landscapes, the compositional principles (unity, centrality, harmony, simetry, equilibrium, proportion), specific to the Byzantine traditional paintings, are often ignored, the detail, the innovation and the creativity being preferred instead.

In the folk artist's view (The churches *King Saints* from Cioroiu-Fălcoiu, *Saints Peter and Paul/Saint Nicholas* from Reșca, *All Saints* from Caracal, *Saint Demeter* from

Preajba-Băbiciu, etc.) the form of the landscape is inspired from Vâlcea area and improved with local particularities in compositions with asymmetric tendencies.

A particular aspect is represented by the close cooperation between relief and architecture, unlike the Vâlcea area, where one of the two elements overpowers the other.

The mountain relief is less underlined, while the plain landscape stands out.

Vegetation is represented by the herbal wild plants or the vegetables with plastic ramifications from the area of the Romanați Plain. The flora, specific to the desert, is only to be found in Christ or Virgin Mary scenes.

Architecture develops by the implication of religious composition elements similar to the Lower Olt area – Romanați Plain.

In the folk phase, the architecture consisting from oriental buildings, religious or laic (series of archways, columns, small columns, portals, canopies, tabernacles or fountains), also includes a traditional repertoire, consisting of building groups with over-raised spires, similar to the churches in Oltenia, protected by strong inner walls.

The character, painted by the folk artist in biblical or votive scenes, represents the image of an ordinary man, with an affective or ideatic symbolism, which contradicts the Byzantine canon.

In this context, the making of the portrait takes into consideration both the activities of the body and the psychic processes made up of emotions and feelings of the characters.

The transition from the Brâncoveanu style iconography to the folk iconography is seen in the field of proportions and anthropologic attitudes.

The dematerialized, transfigured characters, specific to the Brâncoveanu style iconography are replaced, through the folk visual expression, with characters where the terrestrial trait is presented in great detail.

In the scenes of the iconographic programs from the orthodox religious buildings from small towns and villages, the garments and accessories of the saint or laic characters are those specific to the narrative or to the profession of each of them, while the Byzantine traits are replaced with the folk ones.

We can see, besides the religious traditional garments (*divitision, kolobion, chiton, imation*, surplice, tunic, cope, *sacos*, etc.), garment elements in accordance with the fashion of the respective epoch (the founders are clothed in mantles, *anterie*, dresses, long shirts, embroidered peasant shirts with streams of ornaments, girdles, shalwars and *iminei*, Turkish shoes).

The third chapter, entitled *The Votive Picture of the Lower Olt area*, offers information regarding the vestimentation, ornamentics or the social status of the characters, all that being reflected through the personal view of the folk painter.

The founders are depicted in solemn attitudes, offering the religious edifice, visually represented as a model, to the divinity.

Morphologically and syntactically, between the 18th and the 19th century, in the making of the votive painting we can notice the transition from the Brâncoveanu style composition to the folk composition.

The extended votive scenes, typical for the Brâncoveanu style, are limited, during the folk phase, to the Eastern wall only (especially in the modest churches, such as those from the graveyards).

In this context, the characters are endowed with atypical kinematic particularities, which contradict the visual-iconographic demands of the previous centuries. Men are more dynamic, women have more restricted movements.

From a constructive-anatomical point of view, the figures belong to the mixed race Danubian-Mediterranean, characterized by medium size, ovoid head and chestnut-brown complexion.

Psychologically, the dominant feature is the extravertive sanguineous temperament, with phlegmatic modulations, characterized by equilibrium, communication, vivacity and exteriorized group spirit.

The local vestimentary stylistic has Oriental Turkish Phanariot influences, characteristic to the late 18th century, with some elements taken from the Western fashion (beginning of the 19th century). The characters who wear these clothes are the high or middle rank boyars, the preasts, the town craftsmen and the free peasants.

Socially and economically, all these categories are represented by the folk painters bearing individualized expressions, attitudes and status, according to their natural environment and social life.

The ranks of the characters reflect their level of culture and the Slavonic religious influence (*vel postelnic, vel clucer, vel sluger, vel pitar, vel medelnicer, vel șătrar, postelnic, stolnic, vornic, vătaf, diacon*) and the Greek influence (*logofăt, comis, patriarh, protoiereu, iereu*). The social element of a Phanariot-Ottoman nature is combined with the social and cultural Slavonic layer, well structured at that time in the Romanian cultural space. A slight Latin underlayer can also be identified in the terms *vistiernic* (Slavonic) and *episcop* (Greek).

As from a constructive-anatomical point of view, I noticed in the votive portrait from the Lower Olt area, a few favourite portrait patterns, such as characters with *mezo-dolicocrane* heads and *mezo-leptoprosope* faces (*All Saints Church* from Caracal), characters with *mezo-dolicocrane* heads and *leptoprosope* faces (*Saint Nicholas Church* from Ostrov-Osica de Sus, *King Saints Church* from Hotărani-Fărcașele) and characters with *dolicocrane* heads and *leptoprosope* faces (*King Saints Church* from Cioroiu-Fălcoiu, *King Saints Church* from Măinești-Balș, *Holy Trinity Church* from Strejeștii de Jos).

By the talent and skill of the folk painters, the expressive naturalist tonalities from the votive portrayal are accompanied by external or internal sensations, underlined by the facial muscles.

The psychological implications in the votive portrait are huge, having a series of temperamental patterns, such as the extravertive sanguineous (*The Assumption of Virgin Mary* from Rusăneștii de Jos), the extravertive sanguineous with phlegmatic modulations (*All Saints* from Caracal), the extravertive sanguineous-phlegmatic (*King Saints* from Cioroiu-Fălcoiu) or introvertive phlegmatic-sanguineous (*Saint Nicholas* from Ostrov-Osica de Sus).

Chapter IV presents the *Personal Project* which, through the workthemes that I propose, *The Votive Portrait – stylistical matrix* and *Nature, decorative element and transfigured value of the folk visual expression*, describes my personal artistic contributions from a theoretical perspective and from that of the specific artistic practices.

The personal project is centred on the study of folk votive portrayal, consisting of figures of the local people from the Lower Olt area – Romanați Plain (low rank boyars, preasts, free peasants and townspeople) and of the nature which accompanies ornamentally or functionally the whole picture.

The entire project is based on a theoretical approach, sustained by the practice of specific works.

From a physiognomonic point of view, the visual expression of the votive portrait consists of a vast range of hereditary particularities, esthetized ethno-physiologically and completed in the entire course of life.

The naturalism parameters which characterize the Lower Olt area are suggested by the folk painter himself, who presented in a visual manner the human expression in a detailed form, full of courage and imagination, sometimes by exaggerating the mimic (*Saint Nicholas Church* from Ostrov-Osica de Sus and *King Saints Church* from Măinești-Balș), by accelerating the body dynamics, by reducing transfiguration and stressing the

positive and negative anthropological features, which reflect the social aspects of that historical period.

The naturalist aspects represented by the folk painters do not just imitate, but they represent thorough investigations of a psychological and ethno-anthropological nature as to the characters' personality, motivation and habits.

Towards the half of the 19th century, the folk style diminishes its accuracy and creative identity by different mixtures and takings, at the artistic and technical levels.

In the case of my personal project, I am equally interested in both naturalist innovations brought to the tradition of the votive portrait, and the social context upon which the naturalism insists.

Structured in two phases (the first phase, by descriptive works of the folk art from the Lower Olt area, consisting of sketches, visual observations and compositional details, and the second including complex sets of mobile and fixed works), centred on the exposition – as a conclusion – of naturalism in the votive portrayal, my visual endeavour meant the implication of human figure in the spiritual ethnical and folklorical process.

Starting from observations and experiments, I attempted the recomposition of some votive pictures with characters and compositional elements specific to the religious orthodox buildings from the Lower Olt area, in accordance with the norms corresponding to the contemporary requirements.

From an artistic point of view, nature implies and completes the folk traditions, customs, practices and beliefs.

A source of folklore and a religious symbol, the vegetation, in all its aspects, is thoroughly represented in folk mural ensembles, in the biblical and votive scenes, as well as in decorative panels and compositions, where we can record a cooperation with other techniques, especially that of embroidery.

The personal visual endeavor was achieved by the synthetic realization of a set of decorative works, establishing the connection between mythology and religion and offering the whole project a personal stylistic print, by the enhancement of the ornamental floral-vegetal range with *ruderal* and *segetal* herbal plants from the Lower Olt area – Romanați Plain.

The artistic endeavor implies the transfiguration of the elements from the traditional image into the personal creation and the promotion of the folk visual expression in the contemporary space. In this respect, the exhibitional project achieved in 2018 at the *Cultural Centre the Brâncoveanu Palaces* from Mogoșoaia, intitled *The votive portrait in*

*the Lower Olt area. Stylistical matrix – an anthropological perspective* gathers: documentary sketches, photographic stuff, herbarium elements and fresco fragments illustrating portraits. The contextualized image becomes a genuine story about place / memory / cultural identity.

In *Conclusions* I underline the main ideas of the paper regarding the theoretical and practical perspective of the field in question as well as the necessity of a scientific, esthetic theological multidisciplinary approach to the votive portrait, as a source of understanding the local and national context and as a historical, patrimonial value.

The bibliography includes specific books and articles necessary to the research, such as the works of the authors who have studied naturalism from the point of view of art history (E. H. Gombrich, Stephen Farthing, Franz Sales Meyer, Jacek Debicki, Jean-François Favre, Dietrich Grünewald, Antonio Pimentel, Virgil Vătășianu, Ion D. Ștefănescu), esthetics (Benedetto Croce, Katharine Everett Gilbert, Helmut Kuhn, René König, Petruța Teampău), as well as the social (Anthony Giddens, Petre Andrei), anthropological and anatomical (Gheorghe Ghițescu) literary (Émile Zola, Cristina Ionescu, Gheorghe Lăzărescu, Ieronim Tătaru), artistical (Georgios Kordis, Olga Greceanu) and technical point of view (Daniel V. Thompson jr., Sorin Albu).

In *Appendixes* I presented tables with administrative and social ranks, anatomical and psychological typologies and the garment pieces found in the votive pictures from the Lower Olt area, the works which materialize my personal contributions (observation sketches, sketches and votive compositions), phases in the painting process, materials, techniques and technologies used for the realization of mural paintings.

In a near future I intend to publish my doctor's degree thesis *Folk Naturalism in orthodox religious buildings from the Lower Olt area*.

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## **KEY WORDS**

Lower Olt area

Orthodox religious dwelling

Mural painting

Votive portrait

Folk naturalism

Anthropological perspective

Stylization and ornamentics

Materials and technics

Specificities of visual expression