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# The Icons on Glass at Sibiel

Preface H.E. Laurențiu Streza

Postscript Dorin Oancea

THE ZOSIM OANCEA MUSEUM





ВВН ЯВ СОТНД

## Heaven and Earth of Transylvania How the Icons on Glass were born

In ancient times God, incorporeal and timeless, could not be depicted in any of his aspects; but now, because God has been glimpsed in the flesh and shared the life of men, I can depict what has been seen of God.

St John Damascene, *Apologia Against Those Who Decry Holy Images*

The painting of icons on glass began in Transylvania in the first decades of the eighteenth century and reached its peak in the years between 1750 and the end of the nineteenth century. The tradition almost lapsed in the period between the two World Wars. The Zosim Oancea Museum at Sibiel offers a wide and detailed panorama of this great phenomenon of Romanian popular religious art. The richness of this art becomes even more specifically evident if viewed against the vast backdrop of the Eastern Christian tradition and the role of classical iconography within this tradition.

### **The Icon, image of a Presence**

The icon (its name comes from the Greek word, *eikon*, or image) is essentially connected with the liturgy and with prayer. Usually the work of an anonymous painter, often a monk, the icon – according to the magisterial teaching of Fathers of the Church such as Basil the Great and John Damascene – opens the believer to the adoration of God in tangible form, made possible by the Incarnation of the Son. Contemplating the image, the believer stands in the presence of and prays to the one it represents. Far from being merely an image depicting a religious subject, the icon expresses the experience of the Church's faith

Opposite page:  
*Annunciation*  
(detail),  
Nicula, early  
19<sup>th</sup> century,  
42x46 cm.



### THE LAST JUDGEMENT

This motif is found almost everywhere but recurs with particular frequency and elaboration in the area of Făgăraș where its greatest exponent was Matei Țâmforea. Some scholars tend to attribute this icon (from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 77x93 cm) to Țâmforea's early period – though others experts disagree. Texts from the Gospels and the Book of Revelation form the basis of the iconography of the Last Judgement (also known as the General Judgement). These texts are further enriched by elements from religious and popular tradition. In this icon, a fine example of the richness of the theological thinking of the peasant artist, the Judgement develops on two levels: the upper level, where God reigns with his saints, is the destiny of the saved and justified, the lower level the region of the flames of Hell, the destiny of those doomed to perdition.

**HOLY TRINITY**

Surrounded by the Seraphim, the Trinity form the apex of the majestic scene of the Judgement and on which everything depends.

**JESUS CHRIST**

He is seated on the throne of the Universal Judge because it is to Christ that the Father has entrusted the judgement of the human race. Beside him, but at a lower level and acting as mediators, are the Blessed Virgin and St John the Baptist (this grouping is commonly known as the *Deisis*).

**THE THRONE OF ETIMASIA**

(from the Greek *etoimasia*, i.e. *Preparation*). The throne is empty but has the Book of the Gospels in the centre and is surmounted by the Cross. The Last Judgement will be conducted according to the criteria found in the Gospel (Matthew 25,31-46).

**WILD ANIMALS**

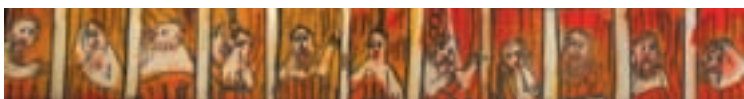
In view of the Last Judgement, Earth and Sea deliver up their dead. The lion and the crocodile - wild animals of land and water, respectively, linked to this symbolic register - give back the people they have devoured.

**HELL**

The eternal fire, burning in the arms of the black Satan, awaits the line of the damned. Above these can be seen the tail of the serpent which reaches from Hell to the Throne of Etimasia.

**DAMNED**

In the flames of perdition is the destiny of the damned.





## Zosim Oancea

### The Story of a Man and of a Museum

It was the 4<sup>th</sup> January, 1964, when I got off the train at Sibiel station. Everything was white and covered with frost, from the railway to the mountain. I stopped for a moment, looked at this amphitheatre spread out before my eyes and I asked myself: what shall I do and what is waiting for me here?

Zosim Oancea, *Muzeul de icoane pe sticlă "Zosim Oancea" din Sibiel*

A tiny village of shepherds in the Carpathians, so unimportant for the communist regime that it was not even included in the collectivization imposed on Romania in those years. When Father Zosim Oancea arrived there as the village priest, Sibiel was this: a group of houses, a few hundred souls, a great silence. What spirit moved this man to succeed, right in middle of the communist regime, in establishing in this corner of Transylvania one of the biggest museum of icons on glass in the world? Who was Zosim Oancea and how did the museum that today bears his name come to be established?

In discovering the answer to this question the reader should be prepared to follow a journey which, at least for some pages, will travel from the serene light of the icons to the dark night suffered by Romania in the years following the Second World War. This is a complicated scenario and background against which a simple recounting of the facts will reveal the sheer greatness of the story originated by Father Zosim and the people of Sibiel.

A typical votive shrine (*troița*) in a laneway in Sibiel.



Opposite page: Father Zosim Oancea (early 1980s). In the background is Mother Teodora, one of the nuns who helped him in Sibiel.