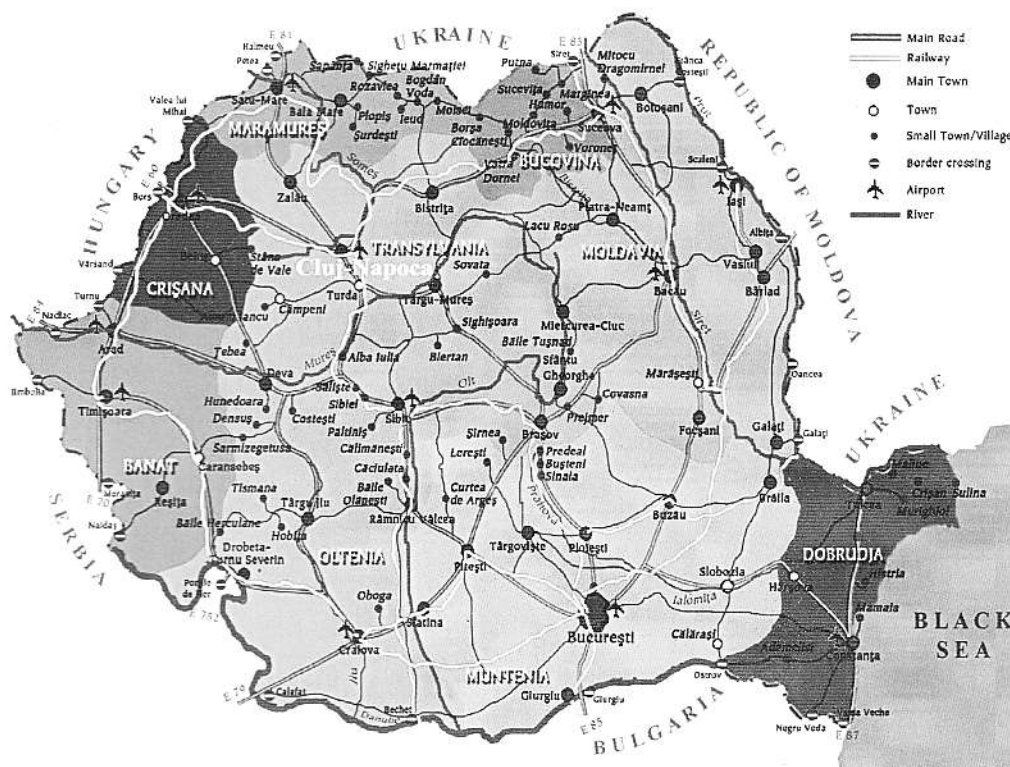




STUDIA UNIVERSITATIS BABEȘ-BOLYAI



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Giovanni, Ruggeri, 2008, *Icoanele pe sticlă din Sibiel* (*The Icons Painted on Glass from Sibiel-Sibiu*), by Giovanni, Ruggeri, the Città Aperta Publishing House, Troina (Italia) 72 p.

Some time ago, namely in 2008, a beautiful and lively monograph called "*The icons on glass from Sibiel*" was published in Italy by the Città Aperta Publishing House. Its author is an Italian journalist from Bergamo by the name of Giovanni Ruggeri.



It is a well-known fact that in the Eastern Orthodox Church "icons have played a crucial part, being revered as part of the liturgy" and also that "they have come a long way, from being strictly rejected in early Christianity to becoming the focus of Orthodox piety" (Eva Haustein-Bartsch, 2009, *Icons*, Taschen Publishing House, Köln, p. 8).

In a short introduction entitled "*The light of Sibiel*", the author introduces us to the tradition of Transylvanian iconographers, whose creations "represent an extraordinary phenomenon

of faith and folk art, born out of the great richness of the Christian Orthodox tradition and out of the vast creativity of the Romanian peasant painters [...], a blend of fundamental dimensions: spirit and matter, contemplation and involvement, prayer and toil".

Although we consider ourselves these creations to be masterpieces of the folk genius, the recognition that we receive from Italy – "*the country of art*", as it is referred to by Elvira Bogdan, one of Nicolae Iorga's assistants – through Giovanni Ruggeri's voice, reaffirms to us, if needed, the sensibility, skill and value of the Romanian folk iconographers.

The book revolves around two major themes: on one hand, it shortly presents the creations of the Transylvanian iconographers, on the other hand, it includes "the story of a man", the story of Orthodox priest Zosim Oancea, the creator of the Museum of Icons Painted on Glass from Sibiel, who "with clairvoyant intelligence and relentless tenacity has created, being supported by the residents of Sibiel, the largest exhibition of icons painted on glass in one of the smallest villages in Romania". He is an example of faithful devotion for the purpose of spiritually ministering to the community.

Being published in excellent printing and graphic conditions, the book begins with the foreword written by I.P.S. Dr. Laurențiu Streza, Metropolitan of Transylvania, a profound and revered scholar, humble minister of the Church, belonging to the trinity of the wise Orthodox Metropolitans, among which Nicolae Corneanu of Banat and Pimen Zainca of Suceava and Rădăuți are included.

In the foreword entitled "*A heavenly gift*", I.P.S. Dr. Laurențiu Streza considers icons as "windows to divinity" and he also says that "the devoted prayer that takes place in front of them transports people from merely looking at them by means of their senses to spiritual eyesight and to the mystical encounter with the represented persons and with their healing work". The high priest highlights the specificity of the icons painted on glass in the Transylvanian culture, as being "an expression of our nation's spiritual sensibility", from which the icons were born in the beginning as a "comfort, guidance, support and teacher". His Eminence blesses the

toil of the one who is worthy to be mentioned, the priest Zosim Oancea, in preserving the Transylvanian spiritual values, having by his side the community of Sibiel, which followed its shepherd, making available for the European Christian culture their icon dowry and he also blesses the author – Giovanni Ruggeri, relentless in its presentation.

Structured in three chapters, the first two chapters of the book are dedicated to the icons painted on glass from Transylvania, respectively Chapter 1 „*Transylvanian heaven and earth. The way icons painted on glass are born*”, as well as to the collection of icons from the museum in Sibiel, in Chapter 2 „*Heavens and earths of Transylvania. The icons from the Priest Zosim Oancea Museum*”, Chapter 3 „*Zosim Oancea. The story of a man and of a museum*” is dedicated to the founder of the museum.

After several general considerations regarding the icon, for which he resorts to the teachings of the Church Fathers, such as Saint Basil the Great and Saint John Damascene, the author recalls the harsh political, social and religious conditions of the Romanians from Transylvania, in which context the icons painted on glass appear to be as “one of the effective means of preserving their Orthodox identity”, joining the European trend, born in the 17th and 18th centuries in Bavaria, Bohemia, Silezia, Moravia, Galicia and Austria.

In this context, the author describes the miraculous event from Nicula, where the icon painted on wood of the Mother of God with Jesus, painted by the priest Luca from Iclod (who painted icons only on wood, there are no icons painted on glass known to be painted by him!) shed tears for several days in a row in the year 1694 (other say it was in 1699), event that sparked off a lively emotion among the local population and awoke the interest of the Romanian peasants for the icons painted on glass, a material more accessible, obtained manually from melting quartz sand in glass houses. Because of the phenomenon of “shedding tears”, the icon from Nicula became a topic icon for many peasant iconographers, first in the Nicula area and then in the entire Transylvania. Thus, in a short period of time, a center of painting icons on glass has developed in Nicula, becoming “the cradle of the Transylvanian icons painted on glass”, from

where the craft spread in the entire Transylvania because “in 1696, a man called «Ion of Nicula» was already working in Scheii Braşovului” (Juliana Dancu, Dumitru Dancu, 1975, “*La peinture paysane sur verre de Roumanie*”, Meridiane Publishing House, Bucharest, p. 49). Thus appeared other centers with famous iconographers, who passed along the craft to their descendents as a “gift of grace”, the most flourishing period being in the 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th century.

The author knows that painting icons was not “a merely material act” because, in addition to their technical and artistic skills acquired thanks to a master iconographer and to some “*erminia*” – painting books, the iconographers “were preparing themselves spiritually also, by praying and fasting”.

The folk artist iconographer would get their glass from glass houses. There were many glass houses in Transylvania; only in the area of Făgăraş, Juliana and Dumitru Dancu (1975, *op. cit.*, p. 16) mention the ones from Arpaşu de Sus, Făgăraş, Porumbacu de Sus, Tâlmăciu, Cârţişoara, Ucea, Avrig. “They produced the colours themselves using natural materials”. The actual realization of the icon was done in three phases, as written by Juliana and Dumitru Dancu (*op. cit.*, p. 78), namely: drawing the sketch, which is a black drawing; next, they would draw a network of lines in white or other contrasting colours; finally, the last phase would consist of filling the remaining surfaces with spots of colour.

At the end, after the painting was over, the icon would be framed in a frame which “being an actual part of the icon, would sometimes be painted or carved”.

For the Romanian population in Transylvania, which was enjoying at the time some economic prosperity, icons in general and especially the icons painted on glass were extremely popular. Colorful and beautiful, it had “not only spiritual value, but also decorative value” because Transylvanian iconographers had what is called the “*horror vacui*”, which is a fear of empty space and therefore, they filled the entire surface of the icon with colour. Of them, Ana Tâmaş, (married name: Deji, 1860-194?) led this technique to its peak, revealing its sensitive and feminine side: she was invited in 1934 to the Romanian Peasant Museum at the sociological exhibition, painting live in front of the visitors

and being admired by Nicolae Iorga himself and by painteress Lena Constante, who dedicated a published study to her in the cultural magazine "*Wheat Berries*", which had a circulation of 5000 copies (which culture publication has such a circulation nowadays in Romania?) and by sculptor Mac Constantinescu. Ana Deji was active until the end of the 1930's. Giovanni Ruggeri shows us the photograph of Ana Deji concentrating on an icon, as well as the photograph of an other iconographer, from Laz, Maria Poienaru-Diac, more austere in her iconographic representations.

In the second chapter, the largest chapter, the author describes briefly the collection of icons from the Museum of Sibiel, founded, organised and developed by the endeavour of priest Zosim Oancea. The collection of icons is presented to us in terms of regional affiliation, following the "schools of painting", if it does not sound too grandiose, and in terms of the thematic criterion.

Thus, the author identifies the main themes of the Transylvanian icons painted on glass, respectively, Jesus, the Virgin and the Saints, as well as the Birth, the Baptism, the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Mystic Wine Press, the Final Judgment, in reference to Jesus.

But we find out that "the most common topic is that of the Mother of God, in different situations." Let us not forget the name given by one of the most illustrious popes of Christianity, John Paul II, to the space inhabited by Romanians, which is "*Garden of the Mother of God*". Among the most common subjects of the representations of the Mother of God, there are those with Jesus (as a child) in different situations, the Mother of God Grieving (because of the Crucifixion), the Annunciation, the Coronation of Mary and the Assumption.

The Saints are also depicted in the icons, each "being assigned with a protective power"; the ones imagined the most often are: St. Nicholas, St. George, St. Elijah, St. Haralambos, St. Constantine and Elena, St. Paraskeva, St. Andrew.

The icons painted on glass from Transylvania preserve the essential elements of Byzantine iconography in a local "garment" because "they reflect not only the spiritual universe, but also the material universe of the Transylvanian peasant."

The regional criterion allows the author to identify the areas in Transylvania where famous iconographers can be found and afterwards, to describe their essential features, thus: **Nicula and the north of Transylvania** – "*the cradle of Transylvanian icons painted on glass*", with small format icons, with "simplified forms, saturated spaces, recurring motifs"; the craft has spread from this place to the entire province. The major representatives were: Maria Chifor, Tămaș family, later established in the area of Făgăraș, Prodan family, who later moved to the Maierii neighbourhood in Alba-Iulia, as well as Ion and Maria Chendreșan; **Valca Mureșului**, with the center in **Iernuțeni**, active between 1796-1808, whose icons are characterised "by a unique blend between the influence of Byzantine tradition, typical for icons painted on wood and the motifs inspired by local customs, having Popa Sandu as its most representative iconographer; **the Brașov area**, with its center in **Scheii Brașovului**, where "painting icons on glass made its way through the painters coming from Nicula", such as "Ion of Nicula" active in this area since 1796. He was followed by Ghimbășanu Iconaru, Elena Faur (1875-1928), Ioan Pop and Ioan Trămbițaș. Their icons are "larger and more richly decorated" because of the influences coming from Wallachia and because of a relative prosperity of the Romanian peasants from that area: **the area of Făgăraș** or that of the **Olt area** where "painting icons on glass reached its artistic peak", with well-defined artistic personalities, such as Savu Moga (1816-1899), Matei Tămboarea (1836-1906) and Ana Tămaș (married name: Deji, 1860-194...). The high thematic and artistic expressiveness of the icons from this area is due to a more profound Orthodox spirituality, maintained thanks to the rulers of Wallachia; **the area of Mărginimea Sibiului**, that "strip of territory around Sălișteu organised in 13 villages" strung on the contact line between the hills and mountains, settlement that "has persuaded the inhabitants to a certain occupation, which they developed so thoroughly and practiced on such a large expanse that they remained unsurpassed in the history of shepherding" (Nicolae Dragomir, 1938). In this place, an original style was developed through the work of iconographers Ion Morar (1815-1890) and his daughters Emilia (1861-1931) and Elisabeta (1866-1939), and

Nicolae Oancea (1806-1890) from Vale. The icons are characterised by "the accuracy of the drawing, the chromatic originality, the compositional balance", sometimes with "a mixture of elements of erudite painting": **the area of Valea Sebeşului – Alba Iulia (Maierii)**, where "more sober colours and more statical compositions characterise the icons" and the characters have a more hieratic physiognomy; in this place, iconographers Ioan Kosteia, Nicolae and Petru Zugrav, Savu Poienaru and his family, from the centers in **Laz-Lancrăm**, stood out.

The presentation of these iconographic creation areas represents a foray into the "*cultural geography*" of Transylvania, undertaken with sensibility by Giovanni Ruggeri.

The third chapter is dedicated to the founder of the Museum from Sibiel, priest Zosim Oancea (1911-2005). It is a shattering chapter due to the drama of a journey so special, both of the priest and of the man at the same time, which can be identified with the journey of other hundreds of thousands of patriots – models of civic behaviour that opposed the communism in Romania.

I am grateful to Giovanni Ruggeri, who provides a big enough space for the founder of the museum, because in Romania, communism has destroyed the sense of gratitude to the elites. The communist historiography presents our great political or social events as if they belonged to the masses of peasants, soldiers, workers, knowingly concealing the role of personalities! A serious error that is perpetuated to this day! Why?

At a particular moment in time when he was assessing his life, priest Zosim Oancea said: "I and my generation have lived a life of suffering and sacrifice, but we have not lost faith in our eternal values. What I managed to accomplish, with God's help and with the help of so many people of good faith is somehow a revenge on the perpetrators of my generation. I learned what confession and forgiveness means and the icon has always seemed to me a sharing of the eyes and soul of goodness and beauty that connects us and takes us all to the One who has conquered the world."

Zosim Oancea was born in 1911 in the village Alma, near Mediaş. Shortly, he becomes an orphan because of his father's death and is raised by his mother, Anica and by one of his

grandfathers. With great efforts, he managed to attend and graduate from the Faculty of Theology from Bucharest in 1935.

The lines in which he himself describes the special affection that his grandfather had for him are full of tenderness: "when I was a child, I would sleep only in the barn, in the hay, in the summer nights, that is where I liked to sleep. Often, when I woke up, my grandpa used to bring me something, a fruit or something else. He would climb in the barn and put them next to me so I could find them when I woke up. My grandpa Zosim was a very special and smart man..." Here we can see a genuine sequence of life from the interwar period in Romania, when the valuable elements of society rose from a healthy peasantry, their success intertwining with the nation's success! By his own merits, young Zosim Oancea became a priest at the Orthodox Cathedral in Sibiu and a professor of theology, but his beautiful evolution was suddenly interrupted on 7th July 1948, when he was arrested on political grounds. In a Romania of "popular democracy", the Great Purge began by eliminating the valuable elements formed in the solid patterns of a monarchical interwar Romania.

Priest Zosim suffered for ten years the privations of the communist prison system in Aiud (until 1957), where, as he confesses "the first miracle of his life happened", while he was sharing abject cells with the personalities of the Romanian elite. But "God was not far, in heavens, He was like a neighbour, you could talk to Him and ask Him as if He was a neighbour. That is how close He felt!" Released from prison to take the path of house arrest in Bărăgan and in the Danube Delta, where he lived until September 1963, he saw his youngest child for the first time, in a railway station...

His reintegration into social life took place at the beginning of 1964, when priest Oancea was entrusted with the parish from Sibiel, which he served at the Holy Trinity church. At the age of fifty-three years old, he began to work hard to raise the morality of the village, in a genuine pastoral and liturgical life, reaching true unity with his believers, becoming a "*genius loci*", whose protecting spirit grows as time passes by...

After carefully restoring the church, on Easter Day in 1969, he launched the idea of creating a museum of icons to his parishioners,

accomplishment, which he himself considered to be "the second miracle of his life". Charming pages follow, in which Giovanni Ruggeri describes different episodes, which accompanied the completion of the icon museum from Sibiel because "Romanians are not communist at heart. Very few fools were persuaded!" as priest Oancea Senior said himself. Then, the museum became well-known and was visited by many secular and ecclesiastical personalities from all over the world, and radio stations such as BBC and NBC have reported on this topic.

If the collection of the museum of Transylvanian icons painted on glass, belonging to priest Zosim Oancea, from Sibiel has enjoyed, as we can see, the attention and promotion of an author such as Giovanni Ruggeri, we cannot say the same thing about other great collections in Romania, which are known only by exegetes.

We mention here the collections of Dr. Ștefan (1902-1973) and Marietta Jianu, Dr. Corneliu Anton Ciobanu and Simona, Dr. Klaus Kessler, of the priest from Sic-Gherla and his wife, Alexandru (1866-1934) and Liana Bidian, of professor Garabet Avachian, of Nicolae Romalo, of musicologist Constantin Brăiloiu (1893, Bucharest – 1958, Geneva), of Liviu Scorobet from Cârțișoara, of husband and wife Juliana and Dumitru Dancu, of C.S. Niculescu-Plopșor and there will be many others. All these collections deserve thorough monographs, in order to become known and thus enter the cultural circuit, as important identity pieces of the spirituality of our nation.

In the afterword entitled "*Encounters on the thread of destiny*", the youngest son of priest Oancea, Dorin Oancea, he himself being a priest and a professor of theology, points out in a few well-written and soul-felt sentences, the moral portrait of his parents, through the eyes of the child that experienced the great trials his family had to go through.

A short bibliography is attached to the book and it ends with thanks given by the author to the ones who helped him in his undertaking, both to the ones in Romania and to the ones in Italy, where the book was published in excellent graphic conditions, having numerous reproductions in colour, sepia and black and white, of great accuracy; it was published in Romanian, Italian, German, English and French.

making it accessible to a very large inland and foreign public, to which a general information site is available: www.sibiel.net. Also, Giovanni Ruggeri, besides the fact that he created this book, which can become a spiritual bridge between Romanians and Italians, a means for them to better understand our spirituality, he also is a tireless presenter of our values – the Transylvanian icons painted on glass, to the public in Western Europe. For all these things, we also thank journalist Giovanni Ruggeri, who managed to capture an aspect of our spirituality, proving that the Latin saying "*sunt fata locorum*" is true, which means that all places have their own story...

As for me, I bring a modest tribute to the memory of priest Zosim Oancea, accompanying this review with three icons from the area of Făgăraș, painted by Ana Deji.

I highly recommend this book, little jewel of Romanian spirituality, to all who are passionate about art and beauty, to those who desire to understand, a second faster, the iconographic representations of those who drew their inspiration from the wonderful multicultural geographical space called Transylvania.

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Johnson, Hugh, 2009, *Povestea vinului – ediție nouă ilustrată*, coordinated by Maia Bănciu, VINO VERO SRL, Cluj-Napoca, 256 p. (Johnson Hugh, *The Story of Wine – New Illustrated Edition*, Octopus Publishing Group Ltd.).

The VINO VERO SRL Company from Cluj-Napoca offered us in 2009 the translation of the excellent monograph on wine written by Hugh Johnson "The Story of Wine – new illustrated edition, actually the first edition in Romanian, translated by Maia Bănciu (born Homorodean) and Alex Moldovan. The book can be purchased from the "VINO VERO" shop located on Napoca Street, no. 13, as well as from the chain bookstores Humanitas, Cărturești and Book Corner.

The book originally appeared in 1989 in Great Britain, being a real success, which is why it was published in many editions, showing the public's interest in wine, in the "institution of wine" as an anthropo-cultural act.