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Icons from the Carpathian Mountains Region in the 'Spiritual Treasure of Ukraine' Museum in Kyiv

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RÉSUMÉ : Le musée 'Trésors spirituels de l'Ukraine' à Kiev comprend plus de 400 icônes allant du XV^e^ au XIX^e^ siècles. Dans cette collection, plusieurs exemplaires témoignent d'une série de traits stylistiques indiquant que leur origine pourrait se situer dans la Ruthénie des Carpates, de Pokutia ou de Maramureș. Ces icônes se caractérisent par une forme simplifiée ; une palette de couleurs limitée ; une composition schématique ; des formes stylistiques bien connues aux siècles précédents ; un fond doré gravé ; et des cadres en bois particulièrement sculptés. Le présent article décrit six de ces icônes : l'icône de la Mère de Dieu sur Trône, peinte par Michail Popovich de Kolomyia, dont les œuvres se trouvent dans les églises de Budeşti-Josani et de Budeşti-Susani ; l'Annonciation de la fin du XVII^e^ siècle, œuvre du peintre d'icônes de Hărnicești à Maramureș et Bălan-Josani ; une icône du XVIII^e^ siècle, la Descente du Saint-Esprit, peinte dans un style similaire à celui de l'icône de Saint Nicolas de Shelestovo, près de Moukatchevo (aujourd'hui au Musée de l'Architecture et de la Vie Populaires d'Oujhorod) ; et trois icônes – Christ Pantocrator, Théotokos Hodegetria et Archange Michel – provenant du même atelier que les Trois Saints Hiérarques du Musée d'Ethnographie Régionale d'Ivano-Frankivsk.

MOTS-CLÉS : icônes ; art post-byzantin ; Ukraine ; Roumanie ; XVII^e^-XVIII^e^ siècles.

REZUMAT: Muzeul „Comori spirituale ale Ucrainei" din Kyiv include peste 400 de icoane, databile din secolul XV până în secolul XIX. Între ele, câteva prezintă trăsături stilistice care indică o proveniență din Rutenia Carpatică, Pokuttya sau Maramureș. Ele se caracterizează printr-un aspect simplificat, o paletă limitată de culori, compoziție schematică, forme stilistice caracteristice secolelor precedente, fundal auriu gravat și rame din lemn adânc sculptate. Șase dintre aceste icoane sunt descrise în acest articol. Icoana Maicii Domnului tronând a fost pictată de Mihail Popovich din Kolomyia, ale cărui lucrări se află în bisericile din Budeşti-Josani şi Budeşti-Susani. Icoana Bunei Vestiri, databilă la sfârșitul secolului al XVII-lea, a fost creată de autorul icoanelor de la Hărnicești, din Maramureș, și Bălan-Josani. Icoana din secolul al XVIII-lea a Pogorârii Sfântului Duh este pictată în stil similar cu cea a Sfântului Nicolae din Shelestovo, de lângă Mukachevo, aflată acum în Muzeul Arhitecturii și Vieții Tradiționale din Uzhgorod. Ultimele trei icoane, Hristos Pantocrator, Maica Domnului Hodighitria și Arhanghelul Mihail, provin din același atelier în care a fost pictată și icoana celor Trei Sfinți Ierarhi păstrată la Muzeul de Etnografie Regională din Ivano-Frankivsk.

CUVINTE-CHEIE: artă post-bizantină; icoane; artă ucraineană; artă românească; secolele XVII-XVIII.

In Kyiv, on Desyatinnaya Street, there is a private museum called 'Spiritual Treasures of Ukraine'. It was established by Ihor Tarasovitch Ponamartchuk (1954-2020), a respected cardiologist. The museum includes, among others, a rich collection of Orthodox church art, primarily icons, but also antique books and artisanal handicrafts, such as reliquaries, crosses, encolpia, and metal icons.

The museum's collection of over 400 icons is a representative sample of successive periods in the history of Orthodox church painting and the most important artistic group. The majority of works date to the 18th century and hail from central Ukraine, but there are also examples from other periods and areas, such as Red Ruthenia, Volhynia, and Carpathian Ruthenia. Unfortunately, the icons have not been catalogued and the collector did not record their provenance, so it is not clear from which Orthodox churches and areas they come from. Therefore, the determination of their date of creation and origin had to be conducted based on comparative studies in terms of iconography and style.[1]

The museum's collection includes a group of icons whose stylistic features indicate that they originate from Carpathian Ruthenia, Pokuttya, or Maramureș. They are characterised by a simplified, flat, heavily contoured form, a particularly limited colour palette and schematic, and a generalised composition. Their creators often used stylistic forms evident in previous centuries, which often hinders the correct attribution and dating. These icons usually have moulded or engraved golden background and wooden, deeply carved frames covered with geometric and vegetal ornamentation.

The icon of the *Mother of God on the Throne* (Fig. 1) is an example of such a work, painted in a style characteristic of the 16th century. The Mother of God is depicted here sitting on the throne with the Christ Child against a background of moulded primer with an oblique gold-painted lattice of crosses. The inner surface of the icon has been additionally separated by a profiled slat from the now-partly-damaged frame decorated with a moulded stylised and geometricized leafy twig ornament, and with attached convex cabochons.

The Virgin and Christ are depicted as full-length figures, facing each other in three quarter view. Mary is dressed in a long red cloak with a delicate flower and star design, and a light blue dress. She is embracing her Son with her left hand and pointing at him with her right hand. Jesus, in a light-coloured chiton and a red himation with trimmings of small pearls, is raising his right hand in a gesture of blessing. The heads of both figures are framed by wide, artistically decorated nimbuses. A high throne, with openings in its sides and with leaf-ornamented legs, draws attention with its polygonal, angular form.

The form is characterised by linear values outweighing three-dimensional ones, a sparse palette of dim colours

▲ Fig. 1. *Mother of God on the throne, wood, distemper, mid-17th century, Carpathian Ruthenia.*
Crédits: Valentyn Kuzan.

◥ Fig. 2. *Mother of God on the throne, wood, distemper,* c.*1640, Budeşti-Josani (Maramureş, Romania).*
Crédits: Alexandru Baboș.

and a preference for decorativeness. Figures are built with distorted proportions and quirks of shape, sometimes almost bordering on caricature, as with Mary's left hand. Face modelling is also interesting; against the dark grounding, with a characteristic brick-red hue, a black, sharp contour delineates all the key elements: long eyebrows merging into the nose ridge, almond shaped eyes, lips, the oval of the cheeks and chin, and a characteristic volute of the chin. The middle of the face is marked with fine and dense white lines and the cheeks are rouged, probably with whitened red.

The icons of the same painter, identified as Michail Popovich from Kolomyia, can be found, among others, in Orthodox churches in Maramureș. Examples survive in Budeşti-Josani (an almost identical icon of the *Mother of God on the Throne*, Fig. 2) and in Budeşti-Susani (*Christ on the Throne*).[2]

The icon of Mary in particular is very similar to the one described above. The two icons display many common elements: the frame decorated with stylised broken twig, moulded background with the lattice of crosses and dots in the centre, a plant twig shaped like a wave in the Mother of God's nimbus, a three-dot pattern on the robes, a high chair with sharp angular armrests. Moreover, the figures have elongated proportions, long necks and large hands, including the ineptly delineated left hand of the Mother of God. The facial features of Mary and Christ in both icons are almost identical, with long, gentle arches of the eyebrows, almond shaped eyes with elongated outer eye corners, long, narrow noses and full lips. Christ on the Throne was probably paired with the icon of Mary in one iconostasis, which can be corroborated by the similar size of the wooden boards, as week as the same frame and background. Additionally, research by Alexandru Baboș revealed additional icons by the same painter from the Orthodox churches in Budeşti-Josani: Saints Peter and Paul, Saint Paraskevi, and the Last Judgement. Even though at first glance they do not resemble (especially the last one) the idiom of the creator of the icon of the Mother of God from Kiev, a detailed comparative analysis of these works reveals common features, especially in details such as background, frame, and robe ornaments. Furthermore, the St. Paraskevi icon strikes the viewer with an archaic form of landscape and architectural motifs, and the Last Judgement shows the robes of the figures in line with 16th-century trends. This interesting painter harked back to the previous century, in terms of depicting both formal and iconographic features.

The Annunciation (Fig. 3) from the end of the 17th century is another icon painted in a style characteristic of the previous century. It was painted in distemper on a recycled wooden board, with a kovcheg (a sunken field) enclosed by a carved frame, with an arcade resting on trusses carved into it, with a cymatium in the archivolt and stylised roses in the top corners.[3] Its composition is particularly static, laconic and symmetrical: The Archangel Gabriel positioned on the left and Mary on the right. The angel, in three-quarter profile, dressed in two tunics of different lengths, is standing with his right hand raised in blessing and holding a cross-shaped staff in his left hand. Mary, in a light blue gown and a dark brown maphorion, is sitting on a throne under a canopy with her hands folded on her chest. In front of her on the table lies an open book in which the text of the angel's greeting has been written:

ѢЦЄ ДВО РАДѮСѦ ѺБРАДОВАННАА МРИЄ ГѢДЪ С [ТОБОЮ]
(Luke 1:28).

▲ Fig. 3. *The Annunciation, wood, distemper, end of 17th century, Carpathian Ruthenia.*
Crédits: Valentyn Kuzan.

◥ Fig. 4. *The Entry into Jerusalem, wood, distemper, end of 17th century, Hărnicești (Maramureș, Romania).*
Crédits: Alexandru Baboș.

The painter put a foundation inscription next to it, on a white cloth covering the table:

СѢИ ОБРАЗЪ КѢПИЛЪ РАБЪ БЖИ҃ ОНОФРѢ ХѢТАРНОГО И ГАЗДЫНѢВЪ СВОЄВЪ ЗА ОТПѢЩЕНИЄ СВОЄ ГРЄХОВ.

At the top, under the arch of the frame there are clouds in the open sky from which a dove flies forth, representing the Holy Spirit. The silver, neutral background is complemented by modest architectural motifs on the left and a stone wall in the middle of the scene. A narrow strip of earth at the bottom, originally probably green, is filled with undulating hillocks and meagre grassy vegetation.

The icon is characterised by a sparse colour palette, limited to dim yellows, browns and reds and muddy blues. The features characteristic of this icon-maker include compact, general figures, strong, black contours of flat forms, linear values outweighing decorative ones. His other works can be found in the Orthodox church of the Birth of the Mother of God in Hărnicești in Maramureș. These are *The Ascension and Entry into Jerusalem* (Fig. 4).[4] These icons have already been studied by Alexandru Efremov in the 1960s, and then by Marius Porumb.5 The latter researcher also identified further works of this painter: *The Annunciation* in Bălan-Cricova (Sălaj County),[6] *The Ascension* of unknown origin in the Museum of Folk Architecture and Life in Uzhgorod,[7] and *Archangel Michael* in the Art Museum in Cluj-Napoca.[8] Furthermore, preliminary study in the Orthodox church of the Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel in Bălan-Josani (Sălaj County) has revealed the heavily damaged and blackened royal doors to be most probably the work of the same master. Alexandru Baboș found one more example of the royal doors in the Orthodox church in Giulești (Maramureș County). A remaining fragment of *Saint Nicholas* from the Orthodox church in Kolodno in the Carpathian Ruthenia Museum in Uzhgorod can be added to this collection, albeit circumspectly and in hypothetical terms, as substantial damage makes it difficult to pinpoint its style with certainty.[9] The icon of *Christ Pantocrator* on the southern wall of the nave of the Church of St. Paraskevi in Deseşti (Maramureș County) is stylistically close as well.

A detailed stylistic analysis streng-thens the conviction that most icons mentioned above originated in one workshop. Disregarding the artistic elements of the frames, which were made by a woodcarver and not a painter, many other common formal features can be identified. Symmetrical and static compositions are built by means of accumulating grounds, against the background of an engraved gold-painted vegetal design. Architectural motifs are flat and schematic and landscapes are conventional, not reflecting reality. All general and detailed forms are delineated with black contours. The figures are small with compact frames and large heads. Folds in the robes are imitated with the use of thick black lines representing shades, and fine, sometimes zig-zag and chaotic lines representing gradations. Thick, black eyebrows merging into the nose ridge which give the figures' faces a menacing and ominous expression are one of the clearly visible features, which facilitate the attribution. The painter worked at the end of the 17th and maybe at the beginning of the 18th century in the area of Maramureș and Transylvania.

The 18th century icon, T*he Descent of the Holy Spirit* (Fig. 5) is another example that can be added to the group. The scene is depicted on a small wooden board in the field bordered by a frame painted red and separated by a black contour. A front on figure of a man with a crown on his head, holding a long strip of fabric in his spread-out arms, is depicted in the middle of the foreground in the entrance to the arcaded passage. This is the personification of Cosmos, shown against the dark background, symbolising the part of that universe that does not yet know of Christ.

The twelve apostles have been placed on both sides: two at the front and four further back, depicted one above

Fig. 5. *The Sending of the Holy Spirit, wood, distemper, second half of the 18th century, Carpathian Ruthenia.*
Credits: Valentyn Kuzan.

Fig. 6. *Saint Nicholas, wood, distemper, 1777, Shelestovo (Mukachevo, Ukraine).*
Credits: Uzhgorod Museum of Folk Architecture and Life.

Fig 7. *Saint George, wood, distemper, second half of the 18th century, private collection.*
Source: after Сидор 2003.

Fig. 8. *Christ Pantocrator, wood, distemper, 18th century, Carpathian Ruthenia.*
Credits: Valentyn Kuzan.

Fig. 9: *Virgin Hodegetria, wood, distemper, 18th century, Carpathian Ruthenia.*
Credits: Valentyn Kuzan.

Fig. 10: *Archangel Michael, wood, distemper, 18th century, Carpathian Ruthenia.*
Credits: Valentyn Kuzan.

Fig. 11: *Three Saint Hierarchs, wood, distemper, 18th century, Museum of Regional Ethnography in Ivano-Frankivsk.*
Credits: Alexandru Baboș.

the other, in line with the rule of accumulating grounds. At the very top a dove symbolising the Holy Spirit is flying down surrounded by a halo. This vertical composition has been placed against a background divided horizontally into strips filled with stylised plants and single architectural motifs, mostly presented in foreshortening, closed with arcaded windows and oculi. This background constitutes one of the most typical features of this painter's oeuvre.

His manner is also characterised by a strong graphic style, a flat, simplified form, an archaic way of building depth, and a limited, dim colour palette, consisting mainly of reds, yellows, and greens. There is no doubt that the same painter created the icon of *Saint Nicholas* from the Orthodox church of St. Michael rescued from the village of Shelestovo near Mukachevo, dating to 1777 and now in the Museum of Folk Architecture and Life in Uzhgorod (Fig. 6). In that icon, each motif is also flat and delineated by a black line. The faces of Christ and Mary become narrower in the lower sections, just like with almost all the apostles in the icon from the collection in Kiev. A sparse colour palette, flat form and particularly characteristic, schematically drawn plants in the background, separated into strips, make it possible to ascribe both icons to one painter. The same features can also be observed in the icon of *Saint George*, now in a private collection (Fig. 7). The colours are slightly richer and more diverse here, as we can identify three shades of red, light browns, muddy white, as well as dimmed blue and green. But all the icons have a flat, graphic form, the same way of depicting architectural motifs such as window gaps and stone walls, as well as graphically drawn plants, arranged in symmetrical, stylised shrubs.

Moreover, an almost identical icon The Descent of the Holy Spirit was in the Orthodox church of St. Nicholas in Maidan, which burned down in 1974.[11] Its reproduction was published in the 1970s by the Ukrainian researcher Hryhoryj Lohvin.[12] It has not been established whether the icon burnt together with the church, but the lack of any mention of it in later literature allows us to assume that that may have been unfortunately the case.

Three icons from the Kyiv collection have undoubtedly come from the same painter's workshop: *Christ Pantocrator*, *Virgin Hodegetria*, and *Archangel Michael* (Fig. 8, 9, 10). All three were painted on almost square wood planks, with similar dimensions, which indicates that they were probably sovereign icons from the same iconostasis. The images have a similar frame, but in the icon of the Mother of God most of its elements have been lost. They consist of three main parts: an internal pilaster arcade with an archivolt decorated with a cymatium; the middle string of astragalus placed along the three (and originally perhaps four) sides of the rectangle, and an external board of smooth wood, nailed at a slant, with a profiled border and a graphic ornament, consisting of flowers delineated with black and zig-zag lines. On the icon of the Archangel, there is an inscription at the top: СТЬИ МІХАИЛЪ (St. Michael). Moreover, wooden rosettes have been glued in the top corners of the arch and winged heads of angels have been painted. These are Renaissance elements that appear in Ruthenian icons in

the 17th century and are often present in the 18th century as well, especially in icons that emulate earlier styles. The background is always painted gold and engraved with a simplified vegetal ornamentation. The icons have a sparse colour palette, consisting of reds, browns, and blues. The graphic manner prevails in them, in which a clear black contour delineates every motif and divisions within it. *Chiaroscuro* modelling is missing and no attempts have made to indicate a perspective. A clear distortion of proportions of figures is also visible and the iconography is traditional. The representation of Christ Pantocrator shows the book open on the verse from Mt 25:34. It is, in fact, a Deësis icon, as it includes small figures of the Mother of God and John the Baptist on clouds. The Virgin Hodegetria icon has new small elements, such as crowns on the heads of both figures and a string of beads around Mary's neck. The Archangel Michael is depicted as a soldier, in a suit of armour, a short tunic, cloak, and high stockings, with a sword and a sphere in his hands, stamping on the recumbent Satan with one foot. Even though usually in icons the archangel stands on a cushion, a footrest in the shape of an infinity symbol or a snake curled in the same shape, the motif of stamping on Satan as an anthropomorphic creature, understandable for all, is also traditional, albeit less frequent.

In the Museum of Regional Ethnography in Ivano-Frankivsk another icon by this painter was discovered: *Three Saint Hierarchs* (Fig. 11).[13] It is more pictorial, with deeper, more saturated colours, and a fuller modelling of robes, which could indicate the loss of the upper layer of colours in the described icons from the Kyiv collection. What they have in common are graphic ornaments on the frame and in the background, close facial features delineated with a dark contour against the light ground, underlining details with a dark sharp line and the shading of the robes.

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All the icons described above most likely hail from the regions of the Ukrainian Eastern Carpathian Mountains. Historically, these lands belonged to the Polish and Hungarian Kingdoms. These were mostly rural areas, poor, and with limited economic development. Probably the lack of financial means made it impossible for parishioners to employ recognised painters from important cultural centres. Therefore, works that are less refined in terms of technique and artistry are more frequent in rural Orthodox churches. Painters who made their icons in a style that alluded to earlier developments were probably also more likely to be employed by small provincial centres. Icons with a simple form and composition, as well as traditional in style and colours were more easily understood by uneducated audiences, unfamiliar with the world at large. It is worth emphasising that these are three separate categories of works: technically weak, primitive-like or archaic-like, which can often be found in provincial and poor centres. But all these features can also characterise one piece. The icons discussed here have elements of both archaic-like features, i.e., a conscious use of old stylistic means, and primitivism-like features, expressed here in simplified forms, graphic values or a sparse colour palette. These are universal features, present in each era, irrespective of the style of the times, and, therefore, trying to date these icons is complicated. In other words, they usually look older than they really are. The works from one workshop being present in Orthodox churches in various modern countries is not a surprise, given the current state of research and knowledge. It reminds us not only of the cultural coherence of the Ukrainian-Polish-Romanian-Hungarian-Slovak borderland, but also of the mutual exchange of services and goods, in this case religious icons.

Notes:

1 This research was made possible thanks to the Visehrad Fund ID 52010248 (02-06.2021).

2 Porumb 1975, ill. 13-14; *Monumente* 1982, ill. on the cover; Porumb 1998, p. 64. The painter's name was determined thanks to the research by John Paul Himka (after Betea 2013, p. 216).

3 Gronek 2021, p. 14-24.

4 Porumb 1975, ill. 22-25; Porumb 1998, p. 158; Efremov 2002, no. 148-148, ill. 277, 278; Man 2007, p. 187.

5 Porumb 1975, ill. 22-25.

6 Porumb 1998, p. 158.

7 Ж- 797, 81x62 cm; Puskás 2008, p. 217, ill. 52.

8 Porumb 1998, p. 158.

9 Ж- 1381, 104x62 cm; Puskás 2008, p. 118, ill. 18.

10 Сидор 2003, nr. 66.

11 Сирохман 2000, p. 475-477.

12 Логвин 1973, p. 105, ill. 61.

13 ІФКМ, КН 23279, І-48.

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