
CLERICAL FACES IN THE ACCLESIASTICAL ICONOGRAPHY OF PHANARIOT WALLACHIA: THE VOTIVE PORTRAIT AS HISTORICAL AND ARTISTIC DOCUMENT

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Abstract: *This article examines the votive portrait (tabloul votiv) as a primary source for the history of the clergy in Phanariot Wallachia, roughly between 1716 and 1821. Instead of treating these images as conventional commemorative effigies, it reads them on two levels at once: as historical documents that record the ranks, vestments and self-understanding of an entire clerical estate, and as artistic documents that register the slow individualization of the sacred image. The corpus is deliberately concrete, drawn from masonry and timber churches in Oltenia and the sub-Carpathian counties documented in recent fieldwork, among them the church founded at Păișani (Gorj, 1810), and it is read against the edited corpus of church inscriptions. Methodologically, the study brings Rico Franes's notion of the contact portrait and recent scholarship on Wallachian donor imagery to bear on material previously read mainly in stylistic terms. Because the founder here is himself a servant of the altar, the priestly votive portrait also condenses a theology of intercession: the relational logic that governs the mural doubles as a statement about the sitter's own liturgical role. It argues that the priestly votive portrait is neither a passive convention nor a failed likeness, but a relational image in which canon and vernacular, rank and person are held in productive tension.*

Keywords: *Votive portrait, Phanariot Wallachia, post-Byzantine painting, church inscriptions.*

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INTRODUCTION

For a long time, the Phanariot century (roughly 1716–1821) was treated by art history as a period of decline, judged more by what it failed to produce than by what it left on the walls. The churches tell a different story. In these decades hundreds of small places of worship were raised and painted throughout Wallachia, many at the insistence of secular priests of modest means, and on their walls there remained a gallery of faces that scholarship has only recently begun to read systematically (Dinu, 2018, pp. 9–24). This is not a mere rehabilitation of taste. The effort belongs to a broader movement of recent years that seeks to lift the post-Byzantine art of Eastern Europe out from under a framework built on Western criteria and to view it on its own terms, as a visual culture with its own logic rather than a provincial appendage of Byzantium (Rossi & Sullivan, 2020; Sullivan, 2023c). In this world the votive portrait, the founder depicted holding the model of the church in his hands, turned toward a holy figure, is not an ornament but the place chosen by an entire clerical order to remain before posterity.

This study begins from a simple observation. The votive portrait has been described countless times, yet the face of the priest-founder has not been taken seriously as a document in its own right. Most often it has been read either along the thread of princely genealogy or as a pretext for the discussion of style. The votive portrait of the voivode and the great boyar has, admittedly, received solid studies (Negru, 2011; Sullivan, 2023a; Văetiș, 2012); that of the humble priest has remained, by contrast, more of a footnote. Here I attempt to bring it to the center and to read it on two levels at once: as a historical document, which preserves the rank, the vestment, the insignia and the way in which those depicted saw themselves; and as an artistic document, which registers the slow individualization of the sacred image toward the end of the post-Byzantine era.

The theoretical framework is provided to me, without my applying it as a recipe, by the reassessment proposed by Rico Franses (2018), who prefers the term contact portrait to that of „donor portrait” and insists on the active role of the image in the relationship between the human and the divine. Three questions interest me in particular. What does the face of a priest-founder, one whom archival writing often overlooks, record as a source? What changes when the founder is himself a servant of the altar, that is, a man who mediates through his very vocation? And where, exactly, does the individual slip into an image built upon iconic fidelity?

I claim no discovery of any archive. What I propose is a framework for reading, tested on a delimited corpus: the priestly votive portrait read as a double document, placed in dialogue with the theory of the contact portrait and with recent international scholarship on the founder's image in Wallachia (Sullivan, 2023a). On this basis I also contest a tenacious prejudice, namely that the founder's portrait remained, until late, a conventional effigy with no trace of individualization.

METODOLOGY AND CORPUS DELIMITATION

An argument such as this needs concrete monuments, not the general idea of „priestly foundation.” I rely on four kinds of documented material. The first is provided by the votive portraits of the masonry churches that Tudor Dinu (2018) photographed in the field: a campaign that inventoried around 135 surviving votive ensembles, with nearly a thousand persons represented, from metropolitans and bishops down to humble monks. One landmark is the church at Păișani (Gorj, 1810), whose inscription and votive portrait preserve the founders, vel pitar Ioan and his wife, Elenca, in the garments in which they wished to be remembered.

The second set is formed by the timber churches of Wallachia, catalogued by Radu Crețeanu and revisited in recent conservation campaigns. Their interiors depart more from the canonical

models than those of the churches kept under the eye of the hierarchy, precisely because they stood, both in space and in oversight, far from the episcopal see (Crețeanu, 1968).

The third is the regional mural repertoire, chiefly that of the Brâncovenesc paintings of Vâlcea, which fixes the formal vocabulary with which village workshops continued to work throughout the eighteenth century (Popa et al., 2008).

The fourth I add here because, without it, the other three remain half mute: the corpus of inscriptions. The founding inscriptions and marginal notes were gathered and critically edited, for the area that concerns us, in the series of medieval and modern inscriptions coordinated by Constantin Bălan, where the volume dedicated to the historical county of Vâlcea covers precisely the interval up to 1848 (Bălan, 2005). Without such editions, the name, the status of founder and the dating would have to be deciphered anew each time from the wall; with them, the votive portrait becomes a document that can be cross-checked, verified and placed in a series.

The method is one of stratified reading. I take each votive ensemble and unfold it on two levels. On the level of the historical document I follow the rank and social position of the person depicted, the vestment and the insignia, but also what the inscription says: name, status, date. On the level of the artistic document I follow the relationship between canon and expression: what remains prescribed and what moves in execution, in physiognomy, in color. It must also be said what this study is not. It synthesizes and interprets material published and photographed by others; it brings no original archival research. If it has a value, that value lies in the framework for reading and in its testing on a named corpus, not in some church brought to light.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The votive portrait as institution: from effigy to “contact portrait”

The convention of the founder who extends the model of the place of worship toward a holy figure comes from Byzantium and had already become acclimatized in the principalities since the Middle Ages (Musicescu, 1979; Ștefănescu, 1973). Read through Franes, the scene is not primarily commemorative but relational: it enacts a relationship, a request, a hope of salvation addressed to the heavenly intercessor. The same idea had been formulated, on Romanian material, by Christine Peters, who proposed that we see the votive image less as a portrait and more as a relationship staged between the human and the divine (Peters, 1994). For the priest-founder the stake is twofold: he not only commissions the image but shows himself within it as a servant of the altar, that is, precisely of the place where contact between man and God takes place by definition.

The shift of emphasis has very concrete consequences. If the votive portrait is a contact portrait, then „likeness” to the real model is no longer the supreme proof of success. The donor portrait in the Wallachian icons, long studied by Efremov (1971), already functioned as the sign of a presence rather than as a photograph of a face. Hence the apparent contradiction we will encounter at every step: deeply conventional images that nevertheless begin to retain individual features.

To all of this is added, in Wallachia, a documentary and ideological dimension. In an extensive study of the image of the South-East European sovereign, Negrău (2011) shows that the founder's portrait is not only a gesture of piety but also an instrument through which an authority, princely but, on another scale, priestly as well, asserts its legitimacy and seeks its place within a sacred order. The iconographic conventions could be used deliberately to this end: the reappearance, in sixteenth-century Wallachia, of the theme of the sovereign crowned by angels shows how



conscious the votive program was of its own theological-political stake (Negrău, 2019). Even when the founder is a country priest of slender means, he inherits this grammar of legitimation and tailors it to his own measure.

A theological image: intercession, the Deisis and the priest-founder

It is worth dwelling on what „relationship” concretely means in such an image, for it is precisely here that the priestly portrait acquires an accent of its own. The underlying scheme of the votive scene is one of intercession: the founder does not appear alone but turned toward an intercessor, toward the Mother of God, a protecting saint, sometimes the entire structure of the Deisis, where Christ is flanked by those who pray for humankind. Musicescu in fact called Romanian votive iconography a „portrait with an intercessor” (Musicescu, 1979), while Peters (1994) read it as a staging of the relationship between the human and the divine. The founder's gesture, the hands that carry the model, is not just any donation but an offering that asks, in exchange, for remembrance and salvation.

When the founder is a priest, this structure is doubled. The voivode or the boyar who prays in the votive portrait asks for the intercession of the saint; the priest who makes the same gesture is, moreover, the very one through whom intercession is worked day by day, at the altar, in the service. His effigy says not only “this man built and asks to be remembered,” but also “this man stands, through the holy things, between the community and God.” The contact portrait of the priest-founder thus gathers, in a single image, two kinds of intercession, the one asked of the saint and the one fulfilled by the priest, and it is precisely their superimposition that makes it a richer object than it appears at first sight.

Seen in this way, the discussion of „likeness” shifts its stake. What matters first is not whether the painter captured the real features of the priest but whether he managed to show a man caught in a relationship, with the saint, with the altar, with the community that will remember him. Individualization, when it appears, does not contradict the theological function of the image; it serves it, giving the earthly intercessor a face that the community could recognize.

Clerical founders: ranks, hierarchy, social visibility

It would be a mistake to take the priesthood as a homogeneous block. Furtună's (1915) study of the clergy of the eighteenth century describes a stratified order, according to learning, according to wealth, according to how close one was to a town or to a protector. The votive portrait makes this very hierarchy visible. At Păișani, only the principal founders reached the wall, while the rest of the community that had contributed remained unrepresented, for lack of space: the social order of the village is written, literally, into a sacred image (Dinu, 2018, pp. 180–195).

As a historical document, the votive ensemble tells us, then, how these people wished to be seen: as pious souls, worthy of remembrance; as members of a clerical estate with its insignia; and, as the century advances, as individuals ready to receive a face of their own. The recent reassessment of Wallachian founder portraits confirms that the stake was not only remembrance but also the assertion of a status and of a network of ties (Sullivan, 2023a, pp. 18–30; Văetiși, 2012, pp. 185–230).

Vestment, insignia and inscription as documentary text

The vestment and the insignia turn the portrait into a text that can be read. Rank is seen in the cut and color of the garment, in the head covering, in the objects held in the hand; the inscription fixes the name and the status and gives the historian the dating markers that the image alone would



not provide. Here the corpus of inscriptions edited by Bălan (2005) is what turns an isolated observation into proof: the name of the priest-founder, the title, the year of building can be cross-checked against the text on the wall, not merely supposed. As for the way in which a painting commission was concluded, through a contract, with subjects, materials and deadlines set down in writing, it has been reconstituted from archives by Stoicescu (1967). The program was therefore not a formula mechanically cast by the painter but the result of a negotiation between a founder who knew what he wanted and a craftsman who weighed these wishes against the habits of the guild.

The same translation into local idiom is also seen in the funerary imagery on the exterior walls of certain Wallachian foundations, where Death converses with a man, summoned by an inscription to the last dance, a grave theme about the end of all flesh, told in a way and in a language the community could understand (Bogdan, 2016, pp. 211–248). This capacity to bring a universal theme down into the concrete is exactly what the distinction between canon and expression must capture.

From effigy to portrait: canon, individualization, technique

On the level of the artistic document, the finest instrument remains Teodora Voinescu's (1973) distinction between the „peasant” and the „popular.” The „peasant” gathers everything that comes from the rural world of the painter and the founder, the local dress on the shoulders of the saints, the mountain landscape behind the biblical scenes; the „popular” has more to do with taste, with the pleasure of lively storytelling in place of hieratic abstraction. On our corpus, the distinction clarifies a paradox: the same painting can appear, at the same time, deeply traditional and strangely free. What belongs to the depth, the theological program, which subject stands where, remains stable; the surface moves, that is, the painter's hand and the freedom he takes.

It is precisely in the votive portrait that naturalism is first attempted. The recent monograph on Pârnu Mutu, by Elisabeta Negrău and Cristina Cojocaru (2017), takes up the old problem of „realism” and shows a painter who negotiates, from one work to the next, between the inherited canon and the Greek or Western models of the time, using the founder's portrait as the place where individualization first appears. The old thesis of Săndulescu-Verna (1937), according to which the painter Grigore is said to have started a „realist current,” remains debatable (cf. Negrău & Cojocaru, 2017); his question, however, is a good one: how do habits of observation break through in a tradition built upon iconic fidelity?

Recent research has in fact moved, into the votive portrait itself, the place where portraiture proper is born in Wallachia. Studying the beginnings of Wallachian portraiture between 1750 and 1830, Negrău (2020b) shows that the founder's effigy is the one into which physiognomic observation and the conventions of secular portraiture first descend, an interval that overlaps almost exactly with the Phanariot century. The catalysts were painters trained in the West and their oil portraits: the princely commissions to the Bohemian Mihail Töpler, then the way in which a self-taught painter such as Nicolae Polcovnicul took up, in the votive portraits themselves, the model of the portrait on canvas (Negrău, 2020a). The individualization we grasp in the faces of clerics is not, therefore, a chance departure from the canon but the visible peak of a process documented on much broader material.

The artistic document also lets itself be read materially. Laboratory analysis of a Wallachian panel from Râmnicu Vâlcea brought to light a narrow, traditional palette, lead white, red ochre, cinnabar, green earth, and an egg-tempera technique faithful to Byzantine practice, precisely when the handling was sliding toward the depiction of things seen (Ratoiu et al., 2023, pp. 6931–6948).



The continuity of the material beneath a visual language that is changing is a useful methodological warning: a change of style does not automatically mean a change of technique. And the fact that the most famous painter of the tradition, Pârvu Mutu, was canonized in 2017 as Saint Pafnutie says something about the long road by which the anonymous craftsman became a person with a name and a face.

Where the programs depart from the typical, a shifted gesture, a changed color convention, we are not necessarily dealing with ignorance. Often it is a matter of interpretation: the painter appropriates a canonical subject through the visual habits acquired in his training and in the workshop, along lineages of craftsmen passed from hand to hand (Brezianu, 1962, pp. 79–105; Brătulescu, 1963, pp. 859–871). Departure from the model is not, in itself, proof of a failure.

CONCLUSION

Read on the two levels proposed here, the faces of clerics in the Wallachian foundations of the Phanariot century no longer appear as marginal curiosities. As a historical document, they bring back to light an entire order, ranks, vestments, the way of seeing oneself, where the written record is silent. As an artistic document, they capture the moment when the sacred image begins to make room for the individual face. And as a theological image, the portrait of the priest-founder says something that the princely portrait cannot say in the same way: that the one depicted is himself an intercessor. The framework of the contact portrait, tested on a named corpus, Păișani and the other ensembles photographed by Dinu, the timber churches of Wallachia, the Vâlcea repertoire, the inscriptions edited by Bălan, reveals a priestly votive portrait that is, above all, a relational image: canon and local idiom, rank and person support one another instead of excluding one another.

The contribution of this study is not a new archive but a more precise framing, put to the test on a delimited material and kept in dialogue with today's scholarship on Wallachian post-Byzantine art. The direction that calls to be continued is clear and, unfortunately, urgent: the systematic documentation, in the field, of these small foundations, many in an advanced state of degradation. The models of digital inventory and mapping developed in recent years for the art of Eastern Europe (Rossi & Sullivan, 2020) could be of use here as well, before the last faces fade from the walls.

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