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THE PAINTING SCHOOLS OF RÂMNIC AND ARGEȘ: THE ROLE OF THE MASTERS IOAN AND MINCU IN SHAPING WALLACHIAN ECCLESIASTICAL AESTHETICS

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Abstract: *This text begins from a simple question: can we truly speak of “painting schools” at Râmnic and Argeș, or does the term describe, rather, a later interpretation by art historians? At the center of the discussion stand the masters Ioan and Mincu, figures frequently invoked in the specialist literature yet hard to pin down firmly in workshop records. Instead of assuming the existence of stable artistic structures, the study follows the idea of networks of masters and apprentices, in which iconographic models circulated and were adapted from one church to another. From this perspective, Ioan and Mincu appear less as “authors” in the modern sense and more as points of reference within a flexible working system. The main stake is the difference between the way historiography has ordered this information and the way it might actually have functioned in practice, within a mobile and poorly documented artistic context.*

Keywords: *Râmnic; Argeș; church painting; Ioan and Mincu; painters' workshops*

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INTRODUCTION

In the history of church art in Wallachia, the notion of a “painting school” has been used fairly often as a device for organizing a fragmentary documentary record. It helps to group together churches, styles and painters' names, yet it is not always clear how far it reflects stable historical realities rather than later constructions of historiography.

The problem becomes most visible in the mural painting of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where the absence of workshop records and direct sources means that attributions are often built on stylistic similarities and on already established research traditions (Stoicescu, 1967, pp. 408–429). In this context, the notion of a “school” risks becoming a way of ordering information retrospectively rather than a faithful description of how artistic production actually worked at the time.



The Râmnic–Argeș region is relevant precisely because works are frequently assigned here to clusters of craftsmen, among whom the masters Ioan and Mincu hold a recurrent place in the specialist literature (Brătulescu, 1963, pp. 859–871). These figures, however, do not rest on a solid archival corpus; their image takes shape through the accumulation of stylistic hypotheses and successive interpretations.

Hence a question worth asking directly: what do these names actually designate? Are they individual authors in the modern sense or, rather, conventional markers for grouping a set of workshop practices (Theodorescu, 1987)?

The answer bears directly on how we understand the workings of Wallachian church painting. If we accept the idea of well-structured “schools,” we implicitly assume relatively stable forms of artistic training. If, however, we look more closely at the material, a more flexible model comes into view, one in which craftsmen moved between centers and iconographic models were passed on through direct workshop practice rather than through formalized institutions (Brezianu, 1962, pp. 79–105).

The present study starts from a simple hypothesis: applied to Râmnic and Argeș, the term “painting school” describes the way the historiographic discourse was built better than it describes the social reality of artistic production in the period (Voinescu, 1973).

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND CONCEPTUAL DELIMITATIONS

The concept of a “painting school” remains frequently used in Romanian art history to organize the mural production of Wallachia, especially for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Recent research on post-Byzantine art nonetheless cautions that this kind of concept belongs more to a later interpretive construction than to an institutional reality documented at the time (Schwartz, 2022).

In the Wallachian setting there is no evidence for artistic schools in any formal sense. Training took place in painters' workshops, through direct apprenticeship, geographical mobility and the practical transmission of iconographic models. Recent interdisciplinary studies of mural painting show that these workshops functioned as flexible structures, adapted to local demand and to the resources at hand (Vâlcea et al., 2023).

For the Râmnic–Argeș region, older scholarship proposed the image of a relatively unified space of artistic production, associated with figures such as Ioan and Mincu. Current research on how “regional styles” are constructed in post-Byzantine art suggests, however, that such units result, in many cases, from the later aggregation of disparate stylistic observations (Minea, 2022).

The central problem is not merely the identification of authors, but the way in which they were constructed historiographically. In the absence of workshop records, research relies on indirect methods: iconographic analysis, stylistic comparison, materiality studies and geographical correlations of the monuments (Papaodysseus et al., 2012).

In recent years, these methods have been complemented by techniques drawn from conservation science and the digital humanities, from 3D scanning and pigment analysis to visual databases. They have appreciably changed the way late-medieval artistic production is understood, shifting the emphasis from “style” toward materiality and toward networks of production (Brown, 2020). The digital reassembly of fresco fragments and the physico-chemical characterization of paint layers now offer a kind of evidence that stylistic analysis alone could not produce (Papaodysseus et al., 2012; Vâlcea et al., 2023).



In the case of the masters Ioan and Mincu, the problem sharpens: they are more visible in the specialist literature than in direct historical documents. Their role in the historiographic discourse has to do more with organizing the material than with identifying individual authors in the modern sense (Brătulescu, 1963). For this reason the term "master" (*dascăl*) should be read operationally, as designating a craftsman with technical authority within the workshop rather than a formalized teaching position. Studies of the cultural and material condition of the clergy of the period fill out this picture of an environment in which artistic training remained informal (Furtună, 1915), while recent research on the organization of artistic labor in the post-Byzantine world confirms the absence of stable training institutions (Brezianu, 1962).

The stake of the research is therefore not the existence or non-existence of a "school of Râmnic and Argeș," but the very validity of the conceptual tools with which we describe Wallachian ecclesiastical art. Terms such as "school," "style" or "author" need to be rethought in relation to a system of production that was mobile, adaptive and poorly documented (Theodorescu, 1987).

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE PROBLEM

The discourse about a possible "painting school" in the Râmnic–Argeș area does not appear all at once; it takes shape gradually, through the accumulation of stylistic observations, local attributions and historical syntheses that, over time, come to be treated as evidence. What looks today like a stable interpretive framework is, in fact, the result of a long process of selecting and consolidating working hypotheses.

The first systematic formulations of the problem appear in the historiography of the mid-twentieth century, when research on church art in Wallachia begins to be organized around the idea of "centers" and "regional schools." At this stage the emphasis falls mainly on stylistic description and on identifying recurrent "master's hands," less on archival documents or on analysis of how the workshops were organized (Stoicescu, 1967).

Victor Brătulescu plays an important part in fixing this perspective. In his studies devoted to the painters Ioan and Mincu, he proposes the existence of a nucleus of painters active in the Râmnic–Argeș area (Brătulescu, 1963). The hypothesis, built on stylistic comparisons and local traditions, later becomes a point of reference for synthetic accounts. In the same period, research on post-Brâncovan and post-Byzantine painting by authors such as Răzvan Theodorescu and Teodora Voinescu outlines a broader explanatory model, in which art is read as a process of transition between medieval and modern, with an emphasis on continuity and local adaptation (Theodorescu, 1987; Voinescu, 1973).

These early interpretations carry an important methodological limitation: they rest largely on stylistic analysis and on retrospective attributions. Without a consistent archival apparatus, many conclusions are built through visual analogy, which introduces a high degree of subjective interpretation. Not by chance, this same tradition also produced the theses about the "discovery" of anonymous painters and about the birth of a "realist current" in Romanian painting, sometimes advanced on fragile grounds (Brătulescu, 1959; Popovici, 1940; Săndulescu-Verna, 1937).

Over the past two decades, the international historiography of Byzantine and post-Byzantine art has begun to reassess these models. The emphasis has shifted from the idea of a "school" and a "unitary style" toward concepts such as artistic mobility, networks of production and the circulation of workshops. This change is supported both by theoretical research and by new methods drawn



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from the digital humanities and from the scientific conservation of heritage (Cormack, 2018; Brown, 2020).

Within this frame, attributions such as those of Ioan and Mincu are viewed with greater caution. They are understood no longer as biographical certainties but as the results of historiographic processes that aggregate disparate information. In other words, what older scholarship called a "painting school" is today reconsidered as an interpretive construction, dependent on the methods of analysis used (Rossi & Sullivan, 2020).

This shift of perspective does not invalidate the earlier research, but it repositions it: those studies become part of the history of the discipline, not only of the object studied. In this sense, historiography itself becomes an object of analysis rather than merely a descriptive instrument.

THE CORPUS OF MONUMENTS AND THE PROBLEM OF ATTRIBUTION: IOAN AND MINCU IN THE RÂMNIC-ARGEȘ REGION

Any discussion of Ioan and Mincu gains substance only once we try to see, concretely, which churches are attributed to them. Until then, they remain recurrent names in the historiography rather than authors firmly fixed within a stable documentary corpus. And this corpus is not, even today, unanimously accepted: the lists of monuments vary from one author to another, depending on the selection criterion used.

In the classic literature, their association with the Râmnic-Arges area rests on relatively constant stylistic observations: the way the iconographic registers are organized, the typology of the figures and certain compositional solutions that recur across several churches. These elements were deemed sufficient to support the hypothesis of a workshop nucleus, or even of a local "school" (Brătulescu, 1963, pp. 859–871). Yet they are not exclusive and cannot serve as firm artistic signatures.

Looked at more closely, these criteria describe general norms of eighteenth-century Wallachian mural painting rather than the particularities of a single workshop. The hierarchical organization of the iconographic registers, for instance, is a widely diffused convention, transmitted through liturgical tradition rather than through a single training center. Attribution based on this structure alone therefore becomes insufficient unless it is backed by more specific indicators.

Another sensitive point is the internal variation of the works attributed to the two. Some churches show a rigid execution, with schematized figures and compact compositions, while others reveal greater freedom of drawing and closer attention to detail. The difference raises a natural question: are we dealing with a single workshop, with several teams, or with different phases of work? In the absence of documents, the answer remains open.

Even when research manages to recover the names of village painters or to link icons to a particular master, as happened in the case of Radu Diaconul, such identifications remain hard to fit into a "school"-type structure (Dobjanschi, 1975, 1977). What seems to bind the churches of the area is not, on an honest look, a unitary style, but rather geographical proximity coupled with a historiographic tradition that came to group them under the same names. Once fixed in the literature, the grouping began to sustain itself: new attributions are measured against existing ones, and the impression of coherence reinforces itself. Ioan and Mincu thus function more as instruments for organizing dispersed material than as individual authors in the modern sense. They allow historiography to order a complex ensemble, but they do not guarantee a real unity behind that ordering.



REASSESSING THE CONCEPT OF THE „IOAN-MINCU SCHOOL”

The idea of an “Ioan-Mincu painting school” appears in the history of Romanian art as a solution for ordering a group of churches in the Râmnic-Argeș area that share certain stylistic resemblances. The term “school,” however, implicitly presupposes a stable structure of artistic training, with internal continuity and a coherent transmission of practice. For the Wallachian space of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such a structure is not directly documented; the available sources point rather to flexible forms of workshop organization than to stable “school”-type institutions (Schwartz, 2022).

What can in fact be observed is an overlap of workshop practices, the circulation of the same iconographic models, and the constant mobility of craftsmen between ecclesiastical centers. This kind of production is well documented in recent research on post-Byzantine art, where the workshop is no longer seen as a fixed structure but as a mobile formation, adapted to the context of the commission (Gerstel, 2015; Rossi & Sullivan, 2020).

The resemblances among the churches attributed to Ioan and Mincu also call for a cautious reading. They concern mainly the organization of the iconographic registers, the typology of the figures and certain chromatic conventions. These features are not unique, however; they appear frequently in the Wallachian painting of the same period, which limits their value as an argument for attribution when they are not supported by other kinds of evidence.

We thus arrive once more at a difficulty of a historiographic order. Once established, the hypothesis of an Ioan-Mincu nucleus begins to work circularly: the churches that resemble one another are included in the group, and their inclusion consolidates the idea of unity. This cumulative reasoning is characteristic of older art history, in which stylistic analysis held a dominant role in the absence of solid archival data (Cormack, 2018; Voinescu, 1973). The differences among the monuments are nonetheless real and cannot be ignored. Some churches show a rigid, standardized execution, others clear variations in composition and detail. Hence the question whether we are not dealing with several working teams, or with different phases of execution, rather than with a single unitary workshop. Precisely for this reason, the “Ioan-Mincu school” becomes easier to understand if we regard it as an interpretive construct rather than a fixed historical reality. It remains a useful instrument for organizing dispersed material, but it cannot serve as proof of a coherent artistic structure in the institutional sense.

CONCLUSIONS

The present analysis has undertaken a critical reexamination of the so-called “Ioan-Mincu painting school” in the Râmnic-Argeș area, starting from the way this concept was built and consolidated in the history of Romanian art. The main result is that the term “school,” however useful as a descriptive instrument, cannot be sustained as a historical reality in an institutional or organized sense.

The available data point rather to a system of artistic production based on mobile workshops, fluctuating collaborations and the circulation of iconographic models than to a stable structure of training or a coherent line of transmission. Within this frame, Ioan and Mincu appear less as founders of a unitary artistic nucleus and more as conventional markers, used later to order dispersed material.

An important contribution of the research is the identification of the circular character of many attributions: stylistic resemblances generated the hypothesis of a “school,” and this hypothesis was



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then used to confirm the same resemblances. The mechanism explains why the corpus of monuments associated with the two masters remains variable and dependent on each author's criteria. The paper does not deny the existence of stylistic convergences in the Râmnic–Argeș area, but proposes a different reading of them. These convergences can be explained through the circulation of craftsmen, through the use of a shared iconographic repertoire, and through the functioning of workshops as flexible structures adapted to local commissions. In this sense, the coherence observed in some churches is not proof of a “school,” but of a relatively homogeneous artistic context.

The study's principal contribution lies in repositioning the concept of the “Ioan–Mincu school” from a presumed historical category into an interpretive one. The term retains its usefulness as a working instrument, but loses its status as a structural explanation of the artistic phenomenon.

In the end, the question is not the existence or non-existence of artists such as Ioan and Mincu, but the way historiography turned fragmentary clues into a coherent model. Reassessing that model opens the possibility of a more flexible reading of Wallachian mural painting, one in which the emphasis falls less on the author and more on networks of production and visual circulation.



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