

# The Iconography of Saints as Represented in the Baroque Monumental Sculpture of Banat

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**T**HE DIVERSITY of styles is one of the defining features of 18<sup>th</sup> century art. Different artistic conceptions, from Baroque to Classicism and Realism, came together forming a universe in which the collective imagery had an important part. In Jan Bialostocki's<sup>1</sup> opinion, the Baroque is not seen as a European style but the entire 18<sup>th</sup> century is viewed as European as different styles and different stages of those styles combined into a general phenomenon.

The Baroque is also seen as a cultural force, an ensemble of shapes and contents, the style being born from a struggle between these two, as an expression of a particular ideology, of a defined tradition, notions or functions, establishing its influence on other cultural areas than the one it originally emerged from, suffering mutations, losing their ideological background and becoming in time a standard or a model surpassing the limits of territory, environment and time.

The Baroque becomes for the newly acquired imperial province of Banat an ensemble of shapes and contents that had as a background the ideology of the Counterreformation, substituted with the ideology of the European Enlightenment due to the fact that the style reached this border province starting with the third decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The style evolved from one mature stage to a more classical one, known as Late Baroque, with particularities that shape its manifestations in a different manner than the initial creative impulse. Also, the Baroque becomes in the imperial province of Banat a European cultural phenomenon, overlapping the existing tradition that survived during the 164 years of Ottoman rule. It is an art with a mission, meant to indicate the victory of the Christian state power, having both symbolic and votive-decorative values. Employing means of persuasion specific to illusory art, the Baroque sculpture in Banat maintains the illusion of power. This period (the entire 18<sup>th</sup> century),

is rich in formal expressions, being at the same time a period when sentiments are exaggerated, in a reevaluation of both *carpe diem* and *memento mori*. The providential spirit characteristic to this period manifested itself in the collective conscience through a passive, contemplative attitude, accepting fate and the arbitrariness of the Divine.

In Europe, for centuries art was regarded by artists as *una cosa mentale*. In the province of Banat it gradually becomes what we define as *techné*, with a well defined iconography that stands for definite means of evolution.

The investigation of Baroque religious sculpture in Banat reveals some major themes found in the Central European repertoire as well. As means of expression, Baroque art used monumental sculpture to decorate public places, in an assessment of ideology and seeking to impress and subdue with visual forms that involved direct intuition.<sup>2</sup> According to the urban building principles, the monumental sculpture adorns the main squares of a town, and by concentrating the community around the monument it plays a part in local social life.

The Baroque rhetoric used visual metaphors instead of words, being at the same time a part of the policies pursued by the House of Austria in its territorial expansion.

Researchers of the subject come across various themes, from the one that depicts the victory of Christianity over Islam to many representations having a complex iconography and featuring the *Virgin Mary* as central character, as we can see in the many representations of the Pest Columns, during the entire 18<sup>th</sup> century and continuing in the following one. The religious landscape of Baroque devotion, with its pilgrimages and processions, calvarias and wayside crosses, took shape at the local initiative, as in the case of Jean of Hansen who, after his wife's death, commissioned a monumental sculpture to be erected in the central square, in front of the Catholic cathedral of Timișoara.<sup>3</sup>

The iconography of the Virgin Mary in the Baroque art of Banat feature her in one of the most abstract portrayals for that age, namely the *Immaculate Conception*.<sup>4</sup> As written in the Apocalypse, she is shown stepping on the globe of the Earth and on the horn of a crescent, with her feet crushing the head of a snake, the symbol of evil, of the Fall, of heresy, the embodiment of Islam, with lilies in her hand as a sign of her virginity, and a crown of stars on her head. She has a beautiful face with a large forehead, almond-shaped eyes and wisps of hair. This iconographical type follows a *bozetto* that circulated in the empire at the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, attributed to Lorenzo Mattielli. This elegant, slender figure of the Immaculate having a similar iconography can be encountered in Banat statues at Timișoara (the statue of the Virgin Mary, or Pest Column, in Liberty Square, 1756, attributed to E. Wasserburger and F. Blim) and at Ciacova (Timiș county; the monumental statue of Mary as *Virgo Singularis* placed at the top of a column in the central square of the town). The representations found

across the rural territory of the empire, like the ones at Sopron (1744, Jacob Cristoph Schletterer), Kecskémet (Pest Column), Linz, Pécs, Vác and Olomouè, render the saint with a similar iconography.

The other iconographical type of the Virgin Mary is found on the Pest Columns across the empire: Mary as an *Intercessor*, mediating between Heaven and Earth, as we can see on the Holy Trinity column in Timișoara (1740), attributed to a Viennese workshop, where she stands between the Holy Trinity, in gestures of divination. These images propagated the cult, together with other biblical topics.<sup>5</sup>

The Virgin Mary is always accompanied by saints that have a distant life legend: *Sebastian* (the Christian martyred for his faith by the Romans during Diocletian's reign, pierced by arrows against a tree trunk; *Nepomuk*,<sup>6</sup> with many representations, mostly based on Mathias Rauchmiller's prototype from Prague, represented in different postures that reveal some characteristics of his cult—the saint is depicted with the Cross, as a recurrent symbol of his faith, sometimes a *putto* accompanies him and carries the cross or the *ex-voto* book, or may make with the finger the sign of secrecy, as portrayed in many representation found all over Banat in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century (statues found in Timișoara with the saint's earliest depiction from 1722, 1736, 1756, or the ones at Neudorf, Frumușani, Pecica, Oravița, Dognecea, Bocșa Montană, Fântânele, Arad, Lipova or at Kiszombor, Magyarcsérnye, Biserica Albă (in Serbian Banat), Kecskemét; *Carol Borromeus*, the personification of Love, the greatest among the theological virtues; and *Rocchus*, invoked against plague and other disasters. The mentioned saints can be seen in representations of monumental size (Holy Trinity Statues or Pest Columns) that were signs of true faith and devotion in a period when plague, wars and famine influenced the life of the inhabitants of the province that found itself under the direct rule of a European state in constant expansion. In this area, influences from both worlds will collide and form a new style, with roots in the ancient central European tradition. The colonists that settled in Banat during the entire 18<sup>th</sup> century brought with them a whole repertoire of saints with distant life legends which were immediately transformed into subjects of religious devotion. These new saints were Donatus, Florian and Barbara. Saint Barbara is present with her consecrated symbol, the three-window tower, alluding to the devotion to the Holy Trinity on the volute of the Trinity Column in Timișoara. This representation must be seen as a proof that the southern part of the province was an important economic supplier for the empire: the colonists worked as miners, Barbara being their protector,<sup>7</sup> the patron saint of Good Death, as Timișoara was at that time the capital of the mining department of Banat.

One interesting phenomenon one may observe in the iconography of the saints represented in Baroque sculpture is that European prototypes<sup>8</sup> were always used as models, the quality of the work and the material being important factors in what anonymous artists and artisans of the period managed to render.

Baroque art lingered throughout the entire 18<sup>th</sup> century in rustic contexts and remote areas. First in the capital of the province, Timișoara, and later in rural areas, where the quality of the works and the iconography differs, the models that circulated in the province were adapted to the mentality of a people living under constant threat. The province of Banat was considered the last bastion of civilization at the gates of the Orient. Thus, this area adopted models from the center of the empire and rendered them in what we nowadays define as a local variant of the Baroque style. The Baroque art symbols found in Central Europe achieved different connotations in the border province of Banat. One suggestive example is the meaning that the Immaculate Conception received: initially, Mary stepping over the serpent stood for the victory of Christianity over the Protestants, but in Banat the serpent became a symbol for the Unfaithful, the Turks.

The iconographic repertoire of the Baroque sculpture from Banat is a complex one and reflects the 18<sup>th</sup> century reality in a plastic manner with didactic values. The gestures of the depicted saints point to and allow the multiethnic and multicultural population of Banat to come into contact with the Divine.

Baroque art in Europe received a stimulus from the Counterreformation, the aim of which was to renew and revive the Catholic religion in the face of the Protestant challenge. The Baroque art of Banat had a dramatic range of emotional content, a great plasticity and pathos of composition. The choice of themes helped these elements to achieve their full effect, as we can see in the iconography of saints represented in the Baroque sculpture of Banat.

Regarded as the century of a tragic vision upon the world<sup>9</sup>, the entire 18<sup>th</sup> century was a period when models prevalent in Central European workshops found new means of expression in remoter rural areas, such as the province of Banat, lingering in rustic contexts till late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as we may observe in the late illustrations of the iconography of consecrated saints. These representations contribute to a great extent to the development of modern art, the rural workshops especially being responsible for the spread of iconographic models. In a world filled with signs and symbols, Baroque sculpture found in 18<sup>th</sup> century Banat the right context in which to illustrate faith in its purest form.

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## Notes

1. See in this respect the study of Jan Bialostocki, *O istorie a teoriilor despre artă* (Bucharest, 1977), 289.
2. For the cult of the saints worshipped in the period, the role of the priest as an intermediary between the human and the divine spheres, as well as for the importance of monastic and mendicant ideals, see the study of Robert Evans, "The Baroque in Habsburg Central Europe," in *Baroque Art in Central Europe. Crossroads* (Budapest, 1993), 78-81.
3. The cases when high officials from Banat are mentioned as art commissioners are rare, Jean de Hansen being the first individual to be mentioned as such by the Jesuit Diary. For details on the conditions that led to this official commission, the price paid and the means of transport see Mihaela Vlăsceanu, *Sculptura barocă în Banat* (Timișoara, 2005), 30-31.
4. The form remains almost the same in art, but its significance changes, according to the historical context. For details on the form in art and its changing capacity see Henri Focillon, *Viața formelor* (Bucharest, 1995), 38-40.
5. For the iconography of the Counterreformation in Hungary see also Martin Agghazy, *Baroque Sculpture in Hungary* (Budapest, 1959).
6. Nepomuk would become patron saint of the province after the request of numerous worshippers gathered in association founded by the Franciscans of Bosnia. For details see Juhász Kolomán, "Der Heilige Johannes Nepomuk als Schutzpatron des Banates", *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, Bd. XVIII, 1964, 89-89; for his life legend see Alban Butler, *Heiligen Levens* (Gronigen), 73-74.
7. For the organization of Southern Banat, see the study of Rudolf Gräf, "Das Banater Montangebiet", in *Vom deutschen Südwesten in das Banat und nach Siebenburgen* (Stuttgart, 2002), 58-66.
8. Johann Andreas Pfeffel's engravings illustrating J. Balbin's book entitled *Vita Sancti Joannis Nepomuceni*, published at Augsburg in 1725, are considered by most researchers of the iconography of the saint as a reliable source of inspiration for many representations found across the entire Habsburg Empire. In this respect see, Nicolae Sabău, *Sculptura barocă în România* (Bucharest, 1992), 147.
9. Pierre Chaunu, *Civilizația Europei clasice* (Bucharest, 1989), 148.

### **Abstract**

#### The Iconography of Saints as Represented in the Baroque Monumental Sculpture of Banat

The paper is based on an investigation into the iconography of saints represented the 18th century Baroque monumental sculpture in Banat. Taking into consideration the models or prototypes that prevailed in European Baroque art, one may observe that the iconography depicts visual metaphors having didactic values, in an art that instructs throughout gesture and eloquence. Baroque art in Europe received a stimulus from the Counterreformation, the aim of which was to renew and revive the Catholic religion in the face of the Protestant challenge. The Baroque art of Banat had a dramatic range of emotional content, a great plasticity and pathos of composition. The choice of themes helped these elements to achieve their full effect, as we can see in the iconography of saints represented in the Baroque sculpture of Banat.

### **Keywords**

Baroque sculpture, saints, iconography, 18<sup>th</sup> century, visual metaphors, Nepomuk.