

An Icon from the Time of St. Hierarch Antim Ivireanul¹

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Abstract

Being part of the collection of the Antim Monastery, the composition represents a unique piece from the point of view of the subject matter, as well as through the manner by which is performed. The icon has the characteristic of recoding in the lower part, at the feet of each saint, the feast date from the Orthodox Calendar, on the new style. Also in lower register of the composition is written a text that mentions the name of the Metropolitan, which is the period in which it was performed.

1. Introduction

The Antim Monastery of Bucharest houses an important collection of religious objects.

Among these, an icon with a less common theme is included: "Holy Hierarch Evmenie of Gortina, Pious Saint and Martyr Eugenia, Holy Martyr Theodosia of Tir and Pious Saint Ephrem the Syrian". The piece makes an impression not only through the technical and artistic quality, but also especially through the choosing of the four represented saints.

We will briefly present the piece from a technical point of view and, later on, we will dwell on its iconography.

¹ The icon was exhibited at the MATCONS 2015 Restoration National Salon in Craiova (restaurateurs: Ligia Ana Solomon and Doina Mihăilescu – The West University, Faculty of Fine Arts and Design, Timișoara).

The piece is carried out in the tempera on wood technique and it measures 59/76cm. Before restoration, earlier interferences on the object have been observed (two such interferences can be easily recognized), the grouting has been carried out using chalk dust with poor adhesion to the support glue, and superficial and unaesthetic chromatic restoration operations have been conducted.



Fig. 1. The “Holy Hierarch Evmenie of Gortina, Pious Saint and Martyr Eugenia, Holy Martyr Teodosia of Tir and Pious Saint Ephrem the Syrian” icon from the collection of the Antim Monastery

In the support, superficial damages have been identified, but the most important ones have been found in the pictorial layer: separations, gaps, color coat erosions and shortcomings, aged varnish, restoration works not complying with the scientific rigors, residues.

2. Experimental part

After analyzing the pictorial layer in the grazing light, numerous “in the roof” detachments of the pictorial layer have been found. This fact has required the prophylactic strengthening of the pictorial layer with an isinglass solution of over 4%, brushed on Japanese paper. Following the employed physicochemical analyses (optics and electronic

microscopy studies, solubility and color tests), it has been shown that chalk has been used in the preparation level. The same tests and analysis techniques have determined the nature of the pigments tapped from the pictorial layer (green-blue pigment and white lead). The relative humidity and temperature fluctuations and the lack of ventilation have favored the emergence of the Xylophage insect attack – *Anobium Punctatum*. Imprints of this attack are observed in both pictorial layer and support. In order to establish the nature of the biologic attack, samples have been tapped. Gradual differentiated cleaning of the pictorial layer tests have been carried out with many solutions, on areas where it displayed a good support adherence.

- White spirit 1. Ethyl alcohol 10% Ethylene glycol 60%
- Ethyl alcohol 1p. Distilled water 90% Isopropanol 30%
- Ethylene glycol 10% Ammonia Toluene drops 10%
- N-butyl alcohol 20ml Ethylene glycol 30% White spirit 3drops
- Acetone 10ml, Isopropanol 35% Absolute ethyl alcohol 1drop
- Ethylene glycol 5 ml Toluene 35% Ammonia 0,5drops, Ethylene glycol 1drop.

The adherent deposits on the pictorial layer can be removed quite easily, the 10 ml acetone, 20ml n-butyl alcohol and 5 ml ethylene glycol based solutions giving good results, thinning the blackened glaze, without an impact on the colors.



Fig. 2 and 3. Stages during the conservation and restoration operations

Diagnosis: in the pictorial layer, we find superficial and deep gaps; “blind” and “in the roof” detachments; visible Xylophage insect attack (flight holes); scratches, abrasions, lipstick marks; cracks and detachments of the panels; faded, blackened and uneven glaze; non-adhesive, adhesive and clogged dirt; repainting operations; wax, bronze and paint stains.

On the icon, the following conservation and restoration, preventive strengthening of the pictorial layer operations in loss risk areas, as well as in joint areas of the worktop, where exfoliation is marked, have been carried out:

- dedusting the piece and applying the biological attack stopping treatment;
- support reinforcing after removing previous grouting interventions, when various incompatible materials have been used;
- cleaning the reverse side has been carried out through physico-chemical methods, with compatible substances, established after solubility tests;
- the bronze layer and the adherent dirt have been removed;
- the unity of the pictorial layer has been re-established by adding adequate materials, according to the restoration methodology (puttying the gaps), followed by chromatic integration, respecting the original uniform appearance;



Fig. 4. Reinforcing the pictorial layer

Each piece conservation and restoration stage has been tracked and monitored through photographic documentation and surveys, supplemented by a detailed consignment of the intervention procedures.

Besides the artistic and especially the technique quality that the icon that is the subject of the study displays, it also presents an unusual theme, whose key we are trying to decipher. Thus, the icon displays four saints from different periods, so, the chronological element was surely not the underlying one in establishing the theme.

We are presented a holy hierarch, two martyrs, and a pious. At the feet of each of the four saints, the dates of their celebration are mentioned – but this is a subsequent intervention. This has been determined following both laboratory research and the fact that the icon dates back from the time of Holy Hierarch Antim Ivireanul, and the writing below the feet, different from the way in which the saints' name are written, is made after the new calendar. The inscription at the bottom of the icon, which provides information on the Greek bishop who gave this holy icon, is executed in the same manner as the writing below the saints' feet.



Fig. 5. The writings at the bottom of the twentieth century dated icon, discovered after restoration interventions, under repainting

The research on the icon has also revealed the fact that the icon had a frame that has been removed in time (there is a hypothesis claiming that it has been carried out with coffer). Probably due to technical reasons, it has been “adapted” to the new space in which it has been included and, thus, the coffer has been taken down, the area being grouted and integrated with bronze. For a better understanding of

the theme chosen by the dormant partner, let us consider those four painted saints.

The four painted saints are:

The Holy Hierarch Evmenie, Bishop of Gortina who, “as a young man, chose an eremitic life and spent it in great difficulties, earning the perfect humbleness. For this, he was also entrusted with the church flock of Gortina. He burned a dragon that descended upon him. Then, going to Rome as a high light, he shone with divine teachings, frightening many people with signs and wonders. From there, arriving in Tebaida, he immediately calmed down the sorrow drought. Thus, being there, he gave his soul to God. And, after his death, the inhabitants of Tebaida sent his body to his estate and flock, in the place called Racsos, where the body of the Chiril also rests. He is celebrated on the 18th of September.”²

Pious Saint and Martyr Eugenia. “Saint Martyr Eugenia (Evghenia), a good family offspring and pride of her kind, was born in the old Rome.

Receiving from the king a high dominion, her parents, Filip and Eugenia, went to Alexandria, with their daughter. While in Alexandria, their daughter, Eugenia, secretly left her parents. She dressed manfully, took two maids with her and, one night, ran away from home. She went to a bishop, who baptized her. She trimmed her hair, called herself Eugeniu and, early in the morning, rushed to a monastery. There, she lived experiencing diligence, difficulties, toils, all night vigils and achieved all virtues. She shone like a great light, so the brothers asked her to be their abbot. She did not want that, but forced by their words and love, she accepted. Thus, the word and not the deed showed all Eugeniu big and too bright. His face drew everybody. Like a magnet attracts iron, so he drew everyone, to enjoy the view of his good deeds. But a woman, Melantia, black-hearted as her name, who accompanied the people to pray at the monastery, fell madly in love with Eugeniu’s beautiful face. Pretending she was sick with a long illness, she asked Eugene to give her permission to tell

² † Gherasim Timuș, episcopul Argeșului, *Viețile Sfinților*, Tipografia Cărților Bisericești, București, 1898, p. 269 (Gherasim Timuș, the Bishop of Argeș, *The Lives of the Saints*, Ecclesiastic Books Printing House, Bucharest, 1898, p. 269).

only him about her disease, otherwise she could not be cured. Crying, Melantia's misleading words touched Eugeniu's heart. Trusting Melantia, he received her without realizing her guile. When she found herself alone with the abbot, the fornication coal ignited more Melantia's heart towards love. And, just like a blind, kindled by passion, she sought to cry shame on Eugeniu, but because she did not fulfill her goal, Melantia went to the praefect of the city, Eugeniu's father, and complained that in a certain monastery, the abbot wronged honest women with cunning words and that the debauched dared to profane even herself. Hearing these things, the praefect immediately got angry and hastily sent someone to the monastery to bring Eugene, the abbot of the monastery, and the monks. To bring them bound as guilty people, liar worshipers and evildoers, to appear before his judgment chair and give account of their deeds. And the parties came to be judged. Melantia began to speak. She cried shame on the divine abbot; she mocked and defamed him as much as she wanted. She shouted, pointed the abbot to her friends, calling him a jerk and the monks under his obedience, wicked. In loud voice, she cried out and said: "You all listen to me, because I tell you the truth!" How great is Thy patience, O Lord Almighty!

Then Eugenia tore off her clothes and showed those present a frightening and unseen sight. After that, she boldly addressed everyone: "It is ought that we, monks, suffer happily from the insults, the taunts, and the torments the body. But, not to mock the religious clothing, behold, I say I'm a woman; I am the judge's daughter. The judge is my beloved father. His wife is my mother. The ones beside me are my brothers, I do not call them servants."

Eugenia's words made everyone stand still. Anyone will be astonished when learning how God punished Melantia. While still at the Judgment, fire fell from the sky and burned her house to the ground.

Shaken by what happened, Eugenia's father left all the glory, the wealth and the enjoyment of life and got baptized. He became pastor for the faithful in Alexandria, ended his life as a martyr, killed by the disbelievers' swords, and joyfully rose to heaven.

After her father's death, Eugenia and her mother fled from Alexandria, the foreign country and, driven by longing, went to live in Rome,

their homeland. Then the king commanded all Christians to make sacrifices for the idols; if not, they were to die. Eugenia, who shone before everyone because the love for Christ lit her up, was tied with a heavy stone and thrown into the water, but she miraculously survived. This is why she was beheaded with a sword and joyfully flew towards Christ, her desired Bridegroom.”³

Holy Martyr Teodosia of Tir. “Martyr in Caesarea. This saint was from the city of Tyr, Phoenicia. She was brought up in the Christian faith, promising to remain a virgin. In 308, while in Caesarea, she approached the witnesses bound before governor Urban’s palace, who were waiting to be judged. Saint Teodosia congratulated them for the happiness of suffering for Jesus Christ, advising them to courageously confess their faith, and asked them to remember her when they would find themselves before God. The guards accused her of being a Christian and, chaining her up, took her before the governor, who was persecuting Christians for over three years. Urban interpreted Teodosia’s courage as an insult at his address. He commanded to lie her down on a wheel and tear her ribs with iron nails; then he cut off her breasts in the cruelest manner. The saint suffered all these torments without complaining, on the contrary, her face showing a joy that nothing could have altered. “Your cruelty”, the saint was saying to the governor, “makes me happy and it would have hurt me terribly if I hadn’t felt it. I am glad to be called to the crown of martyrdom and I thank God with all my heart that He has considered me worthy of such grace.” Seeing that she would not die despite all the ordeals, the Governor threw her into the sea. Other witnesses were taken to the mine, in Palestine. Teodosia was only eighteen years old when she gave her life for Jesus Christ. Her martyrdom took place on the 2nd of April, 308. She is honored especially in Venice, as well as in other places.”⁴

Pious Saint Ephrem the Syrian. He was from Mesopotamia, born in Nisibis, of Syrian origin and from Christian parents. He learned at the Syriac school in Nisibis, and when the Persians occupied

³ <http://www.calendar-ortodox.ro/luna/decembrie/decembrie24.htm>, accessed on the 18th of September, 2015

⁴ Gherasim Timuș, the Bishop of Argeș, qtd. work, p. 805

the city and the school, keeping the Syriac language, he moved to Edesa, under Roman rule, in the year 360. He lived in the time of the Roman emperors, who succeeded from the great Constantin to Valens (364-378).

“He was ordained deacon by the Bishop Jacob of Nisibis and he was entrusted the new Syriac school from Edeea which, under his leadership, experienced a great brilliance. The tradition holds that, as a young deacon, as well as St. Athanasius of Alexandria, St. Ephrem took part at the Council of Niceea, in 325. The tradition also tells us that, being invited to Caesarea, Cappadocia, St. Basil, as a sign of appreciation, consecrated him priest.

The blessed Ephrem was a poet, an ardent speaker, a severe ascetic and a man of prayer, a lover of the spiritual life. Through his poetry, he sought to consolidate the Orthodox faith in those who heard it, against the heresies of his time, for his hymns were like poems sung or read during meetings, with questions and answers, which he accompanied with harp songs. And he got to be so famous due to this good deed, that helped them all, that he was called “the harp of the Holy Spirit.”

Poet, commentator of the Holy Bible, preacher and defender of Orthodoxy, St. Ephrem is one of the most important representatives of the Syrian Christianity. He is the first Christian hymnographer who used poetry as means of spreading the Orthodox theology, paving the way of the future hymnographers. He composed over three million lines. Today, more than 400 of his hymns are being kept. Although he lived outside the Roman culture, Saint Ephrem fully deserves his place alongside his well-known contemporaries: St. Athanasius the Great, Gregory the Theologian, St. Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa.

After the death of Emperor Constantine the Great, Shapur II, the king of Persia (309-379) unleashed a series of attacks on the neighboring territories of the Roman Empire. Nisibis, the capital of the province Adiabene, was attacked three times in the years 338, 346 and 350. During the first siege, the city was saved thanks to the St. Jacob and deacon Ephrem’s prayers. The third siege was very dramatic, because king Shapur II diverted the river Mygdonius to flood

the surroundings of the city. St. Ephrem described this episode in the Nisibian hymns, in which the city is compared to Noah's ark, floating in the waters of the flood.

In 363, the emperor Julian the Apostate (361-363) undertakes a campaign against the Persians. But he is killed in the battle at Ctesiphon. The new king chosen by the army, Jovian (363-364) is forced to cede to the Persians the eastern provinces conquered by the Romans at the end of the third century. On this occasion, the city of Nisibis comes back to Persia. Because the new conquerors saw the Christians as allies of the Romans, they unleashed violent persecutions against them. As a result, the Christians massively left their cities and took refuge on Roman territory. Among those who left Nisibis under the rule of Bishop Abraham (approx. 361) was St. Ephrem. His new home became the city of Edessa (today Sanli Urfa, in Turkey), the provincial capital of Osroene, where he spent the last ten years of his life.

At the time, Edessa was tormented because of the different religious and philosophical currents disputing over preeminence. The Orthodox Christians, called "Palutians", after their first bishop, Palut, were a minority. The Arians, the Marcionites, the Manichees and various Gnostic sects proclaimed themselves to be the true church. In this confused atmosphere, St. Ephrem strove to defend the true faith. Some of the heretics, especially Bardesane's followers, were using poetry and music in spreading their teachings. When Ephraim saw that the Syriacs were delighted by the elegance of the diction and the rhythm of the song, he realized that, in this way, they would also easily receive the wrong teachings. In response, he began to compose poems of similar form, but containing the teachings of the Church. Thus, he became the first hymnographer and the first Father of the Church who made poetry the vehicle of the Orthodox theological teaching. He was taken as model by future hymnographers, especially by the St. Romanos the Melodist (? 560).

"Do not sing at Ephrem's death"

Tradition holds that St. Ephrem undertook two more important journeys: during the first journey, he visited St. Basil in Caesarea of Cappadocia, and during the second, he met Avva Bishoi, in the Wadi Natrun desert, in Egypt.

He died on the 9th of June 373, being buried in modesty in the foreigners' cemetery of Edessa. Symeon the Metaphrast tells us that his disciples buried him without fast, to fulfill their father's wish, expressed before dying: "do not sing at Ephraim's death, do not praise him, do not bury him in expensive clothes, do not to place his body in a particularly grave, for I promised God I would dwell among strangers, because I am a stranger and a wanderer, as all my parents."

The Orthodox Church celebrates him on the 28th of January, along with another Syrian parent, St. Isaac. He is called "Harp of the Spirit", "the Syrians' sun" and "pillar of the Church."⁵

3. Conclusions

The item, included in the collection of the Antim Monastery, is unique in both terms of the presented theme, and through the manner of execution. The icon represents the particularity of registering the feasting date from the Orthodox calendar, new style, at the feet of every saint, at the bottom. Moreover, in the lower register of the item there is a written text that refers to the Metropolitan during which it was executed. This text and the celebration dates were added in the twentieth century, since the data correspond to the new style calendar. The restoration operations that it has suffered, except the frame that could no longer be recovered, could easily be removed, bringing the work to light in a very similar shape to the initial phase. The high technical quality has allowed the recovery of the icon and its presentation it in an exceptional shape.

However, some important dates in the historic trajectory of the piece remain to be clarified, in a later study: what was the reason for choosing this theme, what connection exists between the four represented saints and who made the twentieth century inscriptions on the icon?

⁵ <http://doarortodox.ro/2010/01/28/pomenirea-preacuviosului-parintelui-nostru-efrem-sirul-379-28-ianuarie/> accessed on the 23rd of June, 2015