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An Investigation on a Little-known Baroque Orthodox Icon of the Crucifixion from the Church of Kraljevac

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Abstract

The research deals with a little-known and partly damaged Baroque Orthodox icon representing Christ on the cross, located in the church of Kraljevac, Romania. The Crucifixion icon follows traditional baroque iconography. On the right side of the cross, the Virgin Mary is depicted as the Stabat Mater, and John the Apostle is depicted on the left. The grace of the pose and movement of a figure, the technical virtuosity and the rich colors give this icon an important place in Orthodox baroque art. Nevertheless, in previous art-historical studies, the icon has not received much attention and, as a consequence, there is almost no knowledge about this Baroque art piece. The aim of this study is a formal analysis of the icon and its ideological recontextualization within a Orthodox baroque art and culture.

Keywords

Crucifixion, icon, Christ, Virgin Mary, John the Apostle, baroque

Though free to think and act, we are held together,
like the stars in the firmament, with ties inseparable.
These ties cannot be seen, but we can feel them.

Nikola Tesla

A new network of art history that was distinct from the previous Ottoman style (with a reference to a Serbian visual arts during Ottoman rule; not Ottoman Baroque, a phenomenon associated with Istanbul's art of the eighteenth century¹), the Serbian Baroque, developed among Serbian scientific art historiography². The Serbian Baroque paradigm captured the attention of the Serbian humanistic sciences more than other fields. Beginning of the twentieth century was there a great interest in the Baroque style, and only after Second World War did systematic research occur. A large number of works were listed and attributed, unassociated info was compiled into biographies of painters (the most recent collection of biographies was written by Serbian professor Branislav Todić³), and afterwards broad, more general narratives about eighteenth art were created. Nonetheless, some priceless artworks, like the Kraljevac icon (Fig. 1) that is the focus of this work, went unnoticed because of the quantity and richness of the available material. This research will, thus, focus on the intercontextual methodology of visual culture and neurohistory of art, in addition to the traditional method and art historiography. The visual forms of baroque artist as well as the perspective of the artist's cognition might be intercontextually analyzed. An aspect of the paper will also concern the way the attributive technique is examined from a neuroscience perspective.

In keeping with this approach, an increasing number of researchers used a more complex doctrinal iconographic-iconological method, until more significant changes in methodology occurred as a result of the Anglo-American new art history's influence. Today, cross- and interdisciplinarity are increasingly approached biologically, and congresses take on the guise of sensory experience also in order to apply a biological approach. The lovely Colloquium at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington Sound and Scent in the Garden, was held to celebrate the heritage of sound in gardens for example⁴.

¹ Unver RUSTEM, *Ottoman Baroque: The Architectural Refashioning of Eighteenth-Century Istanbul*, Princeton University Press Princeton and Oxford, 2019.

² Miodrag JOVANOVIĆ, *Barok u srpskoj umetnosti*, Dereta, Belgrade, 2012; Miroslav TIMOTIJEVIĆ, *Srpsko barokno slikarstvo*, Matica srpska, Novi Sad, 2020.

³ Branislav TODIĆ, *Srpski slikari od XIV do XVIII veka*, I-II, Platoneum, Beograd, 2013.

⁴ *Sound and Scent in the Garden*, <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=97808884024224>, accessed 14.03. 2023.

The concept of new art history on the other side, is based on art history as a subset of cultural studies and cultural history⁵. This concept was vital in prof. Miroslav Timotijević's methodological starting point, which ranged from Serbian Baroque painting to the study of private life in the Habsburg Monarchy between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries⁶. The younger generation's historical and artistic research in Serbian scientific circles is focused on studies of visual culture and ritual, as well as its symbolic, social, ideological function, and also critical historiography⁷. Because it was factographically unsystematized and formally undefined, the Kraljevac church icon could not originally be included in these more complex studies of visual culture. There was no primary investigation.

Microhistory and comparatively tiny histories are also advancing in the field of historical sciences. From that perspective, Kraljevac has a rich history with the Serbian people. The history of Kraljevac is, however, important for contrasting baroque Serbian painting and icon style. Cultural interdisciplinarity is practically unavoidable in this context. Particular concrete interpretations of the city's history are comprehensive, as for Mark Bloch's school of annals⁸. First and foremost, in that perspective we should emphasize the Austro-Turkish wars and the Great Migration of 1690 (as well as the Serbs' leading spiritual force in the Habsburg Monarchy, which was significant for these events). It is crucial for understanding the icon that the new taste in the new environment was determined by the desire to accept the new visuality and break with Byzantine tradition. Painters continued to interpret religious content in their search for new effects in the treatment of color and space, but they also introduced new narratives

⁵ Nenad MAKULJEVIĆ, "Art History in Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia", in: Matthew RAMPLEY, Thierry LENAIN, Hubert LOCHER, Andrea PINOTTI, Charlotte SCHOELL-GLASS and Kitty ZIJLMANS (eds.), *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe*, Brill, Leiden, 2012, pp. 461-472.

⁶ Miroslav TIMOTIJEVIĆ, *Radanje moderne privatnosti. Privatni život Srba u Habzburškoj monarhiji od kraja 17. do početka 19. veka*, Clio, Belgrade, 2006.

⁷ Saša BRAJOVIĆ and Jelena ERDELJAN, "Praying with the senses. Examples of icon devotion and the sensory experience in medieval and early modern Balkans", in: *Zograf* 39 (2015), pp. 57-63; Vladimir M. SIMIĆ, "Pogreb i posthumni portret Pavla Nenadovića: crteži Teodora Kračuna i Zaharije Orfelina", in: *Saopštenje* 50 (2018), pp. 161-174.

⁸ William H. SEWELL, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago – London, 2005, p. 74.

(novelties into the landscape, portrait, and interpretation of nature)⁹. The overall visual was rounded and new.

The development of Baroque aesthetic principles and artistic expression techniques continued in the second half of the 18th century. At the start of the seventh decade of the eighteenth century, artists turned to Western European art educational centers. The changes must be viewed as a synchronized genesis of societal modernization, first and foremost trade and craft development, civil society formation, and the establishment of educational institutions where intellectuals were trained for the process of adapting and adopting new models of thought and behavior. The picturesqueness and qualities of late baroque painting in religious themes, as seen in the works of painters educated in Western European educational institutions, confirms that religious themes can be presented within the framework of historical painting as well¹⁰.

In the early centuries of Christianity, art was more abstract than in the later times of Byzantium and Baroque art. The art of the early centuries possesses a clear direction of the beginnings of the later great centuries of realistic figures, striving to express the Great Wisdom of Christianity through mathematically regular forms of crosses and highly schematized figures of saints. The stars made of tesserae shine with mathematically brilliant clarity in the starry sky of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, imitating the Christian indescribable theology. “This grand and wondrous universe, with our conscious selves”, as Charles Darwin put it, arose with the existence of God. The mathematical clarity comprised in the sound of the bird and the natural world could also be felt in the early mosaic tesserae of Thessaloniki’s Virgin of Ahriopitos. The concept of need for cognitive clarity was defined by Kelman and Cohler (1959) as “the degree to which a person is made uncomfortable by ambiguity and incongruity, which motivates him/her to restore a state of cognitive clarity in which the different elements fit together and make sense”. They propose two cognitive styles for dealing with ambiguity and incongruity: “clarifiers” (seeking new information for clarification) and “simplifiers” (avoiding or

⁹ Cf. TIMOTIJEVIĆ, *Radjanje moderne privatnosti*, Beograd 2006.

¹⁰ *Srpska umetnost XVIII veka: Slikarstvo ranog baroka*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3ymFg754PU>, accessed: 14.03.2023.

rejecting incongruous information)¹¹. Perhaps the search for mathematical clarity (as seen in early Christian art) is a perfectly normal neurocognitive solution in the ambiguous diversity of the ancient heritage.

Continuing in this context, the Crucifixion icon follows the standard iconographic scheme. On the right side of the cross clarity (Fig. 2), the Mother of God is depicted as *Stabat Mater*, and John the Apostle on the left. The gracefulness of the figure's pose and movement, technical virtuosity and rich coloring give this icon a significant place in Orthodox Baroque art. However, it should be emphasized that, generally, the whole structure of the composition of the Crucifixion has not changed much since the time of its creation. Tradition holds that Christian paintings of the Crucifixion did not first exist until the fifth century, and that prior to that, the topic was actively avoided by the artist (although more recent research has questioned this thesis¹²). Christian painting, however, deepens and acquires three-dimensionality as science approaches man in humanism in the West. With the influence of world science on Christianity, such desires were transmitted to the Orthodox West during the Baroque era¹³. The Crucifixion reflects natural environment emotions, as in El Greco's Crucifixion, or expressed pathos, as in Rembrandt's Crucifixion (Fig. 3). Nonetheless, the basic iconographic scheme adheres to the early centuries' shematism and mathematical clarity.

And on the example of the icon from Kraljevac, it can be seen that Baroque painting highlights emotions, especially in the theme of Christ's sufferings and his redemptive sacrifice. In Baroque religious poetry, there is a revival of the traditional theme of lamentation, which was of great importance in the development of the pictorial representation of emotions in Central European painting. In the image of Christ, the painter emphasized his divine nature and victory over death, and in the image of

¹¹ Eric Ping Hung LI, "Cognitive Styles and Personality in Risk Perception", in: Gerard EMILIE, Rolf WEITKUNAT, Frank LÜDICKE (eds.), *Consumer Perception of Product Risk and Benefits*, Springer, Cham, 2012, p. 269.

¹² Cf. Gunnar SAMUELSSON, *Crucifixion in Antiquity*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2013, Robin Margaret JENSEN, *The Cross: History, Art, and Controversy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2017.

¹³ Cf. Richard VILADESAU, *The Beauty of the Cross: The Passion of Christ in Theology and the Arts, from the Catacombs to the Eve of the Renaissance*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006.

the mother, pain was overcome by respect for God¹⁴. The painter's feelings and understandings are revealed in the dramatic gradations between the human and the divine. The victory of the spirit is even more impressive thanks to the baroque realistic description of Christ's body, as well as Christ's heroic attitude and muscularity, which speaks of the new baroque idealization whose supporter was obviously the painter of this icon.

The Virgin dressed in a pink drapery and the disciple in a blue chiton are pictured in the role of actual participants in the event. Their bodies stand out against the darkening sky, while their refined features betray a sublime spirituality. John is grieving, he expresses his feelings with a gesture, but as in Byzantine art, he does not change his facial expression. And for him, when parting with his teacher, dogma is more important than human grief. With very long folds on the clothes, the painter imposes solemnity and elegance. The studious execution of the drawings and the present painter's confidence indicate that he is a very talented painter.

Although the similarity at the level of the gracefulness of the figures, the dramatic background and the attitude of Christ can be underlined with a large number of painters (such as the painter Jakov Orfelin), the baroque work from Kraljevac shows great similarities with the works of the Vršac artist Nikola Nešković. As a Baroque painter, Nešković was a solid master, and he has his place among the constellations of excellent Serbian painters and artists Jakov and Zaharij Orfelin, Kračun, Češljarić and other trained painters of that time. His first known work was created in Vršac: a copy of an old icon from the Šemljuga monastery, which represented the despot Stefan Branković, the despot Angelina and their sons. That icon is his only signed work. The same motif appears as a kissing icon on the proskomidia of the church in the Krušedol monastery, painted by "Nikola Neškov" from Vršac in 1753. The next known work of his in 1762 was the illumination of a manuscript called "Paraklis to Stefan Dečanski". The most significant painting by Nikola Nešković is preserved in Vršac, on the iconostasis of the dark court chapel in the Bishop's Palace. This work was completed in 1763¹⁵.

¹⁴ Richard VILADESAU, *The Beauty of the Cross...*, p. 133.

¹⁵ Cf. Branislav TODIĆ, *Srpski slikari od XIV do XVIII veka, I*, Platoneum, Beograd, 2013, p. 31.

The great similarities with Nikola Nešković are indicated by the overall color, incarnate (with dark circles around the eyes), as well as the pronounced features of the face (especially the eyes). The voluminous drapery is also another characteristic of Nešković's work (Fig. 4). The graceful holding of the hands, as one of the special characteristics of the Baroque, can be seen especially in the paintings of Nikola Nešković and the icon of the church in Kraljevac. Observed from the perspective of formal characteristics, the icon represents a significant work, and more detailed future research, which could also include diagnostic examinations of the icon, could include it in the oeuvre of the most significant Serbian baroque works.

According to recent research, the attributive method is related to an individual's cognitive potential¹⁶. The method by which the researcher's cognitive capacities are directed to the explanation of the unidentified in terms of the attribution of the artist's work is still unknown, while the attributive method is one of the most complex in the history of art. As a result, extrapolating about the origins of artistic conceptions of images may be premature. Nonetheless, as famous neuroscientist Eric Kandel claims, the field of neuroscience is in its bandage¹⁷, and perhaps someday we will be able to put the attributive method on a firmer foundation. "See the excitement coming!" as said by Nikola Tesla¹⁸.

¹⁶ David FREEDBERG, "Why Connoisseurship Matters", in: Katlijne van der STIGHELEN (ed.), *Munuscula Amicorum: Contributions on Rubens and his colleagues in honour of Hans Vlieghe*, Brepols, Turnhout, 2006, pp. 29-43.

¹⁷ Dragan MARINKOVIĆ, *Biološke osnove kognitivnih funkcija*, Fakultet za specijalnu edukaciju i rehabilitacija, Beograd - Izdavački centar.

¹⁸ Nikola TESLA, *The Transmission of Electric Energy Without Wires*, <http://www.rastko.rs/rastko/delo/10800>; accessed: 14.03.2023.



Fig. 1 Icon of the Crucifixion, Kraljevac



Fig. 2 Icon of the Crucifixion, Kraljevac, croquis after the original
(by the artist Mihajlo Vojnović)



Fig. 3 Icon of the Crucifixion, Rembrandt, S.Vincent du Mas-d'Agenais



Fig. 4 Icon of the Crucifixion, Nikola Nešković, National Museum in Belgrade