

# THE ORIGINS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF VOTIVE PAINTING

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**Abstract:** Votive painting is a theme inspired by some monetary emissions issued in some cities of Asia Minor conquered by the Romans. The pieces relate to the conquest of important fortress-cities as Smyrna, Perinthos, Tarsos, Nicomedia. In Byzantium, the theme of the votive painting adopts the idea that the autocratic emperor is Lord of the terrestrial church, but in the same time an ordinary mortal. The illustrations show the ruler in a kneeling or standing position founded in both the Catholic and Orthodox churches.

**Keywords:** votive painting, worship, divinity, *apocombion*.

The votive representation very well reflects the relationship between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar, between the Church and the State, the power relationship between the leaders of the two institutions and how Man belongs to the two worlds. Votive paintings are also the source of theological and political messages. The image of the founders in votive paintings provide information about physical stature and their attitude, about the aspect of the churches and the personages clothing, fashion time, but also about the ceremonial costumes of the rulers.

The etymological origin of the terms *votiv* and *ex voto* has in common the concept of “faith promise”, an offering of an object to divinity. Unlike the first term that comes from lat. *votivus* <*votum* meaning promise, *ex voto* includes the idea of offering an object to commemorate a vow or to express thanks for a favor received or a danger resolved positively<sup>1</sup>.

“ex-voto is a formula to denote an offering, a gift made to a deity, following promises. (<lat. ex voto)”<sup>2</sup>.

“votive, a adj. Which concerns a promise; which was given to divinity, to perform a solemn promise. Votive painting = painting fragment of a monument depicting the founders, usually with miniature monument in his hands. [See fr. votif, lat. votivus <votum - promise]”<sup>3</sup>.

“Votivus,-a,-um - adj. votive, promised the gods; wanted, pleasant”<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://dexonline.ro>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.archeus.ro/lingvistica>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.limbalatina.ro/dictionar.php>.

Votive painting is a theme inspired by some monetary emissions issued in some cities of Asia Minor conquered by the Romans. Such coins, medals and seals are relatively rare, with one side that represents the bust of the conqueror king and the other side with the protective deity in the act of dedication, holding the model of the temple<sup>5</sup>. These are examples of homage or consecration of an "object" to a person or deity, in general terms.

A monarch could worship a gift, a building dedicated to a deity. Such examples exist in Egyptian Assirian and Babylonian antiquity.

In Antiquity, the monarch was considered sacred, and he was the beneficiary of a veneration that was preserved and transfigured in time in the Christian church. The highest human virtues were attributed to kings, seen by the theologians as similar spiritual reason leading bodies<sup>6</sup>. The list of imperial virtues, inspired by classical ethics, comprised justice, bravery (courage and perseverance), philanthropy, generosity, chastity, love of truth, intellect (reason)<sup>7</sup>. In the Middle Ages, the monarch had to have the same religion as the majority in the state church to have adhesion people. Iconography conceived for the ruler's image was supposed to represent the divine right of his power by convincing formulas and to glorify his virtues and victories. The monarch's gesture of building a church was a moral duty and a fulfillment way of the ancient tradition virtue, the *kalokagathia*.

In ancient Rome, there was a custom, that the victorious generals will build temples, to which they will offer part of the spoils of war. These buildings constructed in the last centuries of the Republic are described as "monuments of victory" by modern authors. L. Pietilä-Castrens enumerates more than thirty such edifices built by victorious generals. More than 4-5 are temples<sup>8</sup>.

Many ancient religions consist of a continuous negotiation between humans and deities, more widespread in the Roman religion, and expressed according to the dictum *do ut des* ("I give so that you will give")<sup>9</sup>. One of the pivotal concepts of the Roman religion was *deorum pax* ("peace of the gods"), in which human freedom was in close relationship with the one of the gods, becoming equal partners with each other in a perpetuum mobile of mutual benefits and obligations. The idea of mutual obligation (*fides*),

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<sup>5</sup> Voica Pușcașu, *Actul de citorire ca fenomen istoric în Țara Românească și Moldova până la sfârșitul secolului al XVIII-lea*, București, 2001, p. 133; Mrs. Voica Pușcașu actually write that on these coins "Roman emperors appear in representations wearing in their hands the model of the temple dedicated to the protective goddess"; V. Lazarev, *Istoria picturii bizantine*, ed. Merdiane, București, 1980, vol. I, p. 294.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotel, *Etica Nicomahică* (ed. Stela Petecel, București, 1988), Cartea IV, 1122 b.

<sup>7</sup> D. Angelov, *The ideology of Imperial Government in Imperial Ideology and Political Thought in Byzantium (1204-1330)*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 134-155.

<sup>8</sup> L. Pietilä-Castren, *Magnificientia publica. The Victory Monuments of the Roman Generals in the Era of the Punic Wars*, Helsinki, Societas Scientiarum Fennica (Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum; 84), 1987.

<sup>9</sup> N. Zugravu, *Curs de istoria religiei romane*, partea I, Iași, 2001, p. 90.

assumed on the one hand the respect for the ancient religion, coming from the gods themselves ( it was the belief that the peoples who lived in ancient times were closer to gods<sup>10</sup>), and on the other hand, keeping the promises (*vota*, sg. *votum*) made to divinity - building temples, organizing games or festivities, worship offerings and so on)<sup>11</sup>. Thus, the act of worshipping objects is a form of establishing a religious relationship between the person who dedicates the offering and divinity, thereby recognizing the membership to a certain cult, and expecting a divine sign or answer in the same time.

On these exhibits, it stands out clearly what and who offers and the religious symbol of the city - the temple image - as well as the gratitude towards the one to whom the offering is made. The pieces relate to the conquest of important fortress-cities as Smyrna, Perinthos, Tarsos, Nicomedia (Fig.1, Fig.2, Fig.3, Fig.4, Fig.5).

Temples of worship exist in every town. Every temple is dedicated to one god (or pharaon). Inside it, there is a statue of the god, which represents the place of formal religious rituals.

For the Romans, there was a close relationship between divinity (Gods) and the imperial propaganda. The official numismatic iconography was seeking to spread worldwide the idea of universality and absolute power. In Byzantium, this power is reinforced by the total identity of the emperor with the divinity. The monarch validates his legitimacy in front of the world (Christian or not) with a magnificent gesture, building a cathedral, church or temple (before Christianity) (Fig.6, Fig.8).

A seal belonging to a private collection, Georgi Stoianov-Mokana, of Novi Pazar, has the icon of Virgin Mary with the Child in her arms, on one side and also a man wearing a tiara and laurel and offering the Virgin the model of a church. On the other side, there is a monogram. This is the only seal with the founder described not being a ruler. It seems that the male figure represents Andronikos Rogerios, the son of John Rogerios and Mary Comnenos. He was born in 1124, and in 1139 he married Irene Doukaina (Fig.7).

It seems that there are narrative sources which establish a close connection between this name and the seal. It is about the lyrics of a court poet, Theodore Balsamon who glorifies in verses the construction of Monastery Virgin Chrysokamariotissa by "sebastos" Andronikos Rogerios. By comparing the seal text with the lyrics text, it was established the connection between the founder and the name.

Adopted by the late Roman Empire iconography, the theme of the votive portrait became widespread in both the Western and the Eastern Empire<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, apud Cicero, *De leg.*, II, 11, 27.

<sup>11</sup> R. D. Weigel, *Roman generals and the vowing of temples*, 500-100 BC, in *CM*, 49, 1997, p. 122.

<sup>12</sup> V. Lazarev, *Istoria picturii bizantine*, București, 1980, vol. I, p. 294.

At the beginning, Christian art adopted imperial forms of art. Christ is represented as the Lord seated on the throne, surrounded by apostles and saints, ready to receive the law in His covered hands as demanded the ceremony at the imperial court. The emperor was His representative on earth, thus establishing a link between the Church and the State.

Paleochristian art has developed in the ancient Christian period (1<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century AD). In the early days of Christianity, in the catacomb paintings, we can notice the use of figurative and symbolic imagery (fish, pigeon, lamb), avoiding precise anthropomorphic representations. Later on, ecclesiastical art took secular symbols, especially those related to the imperial power, turning them into symbols of divine power.

In the middle of 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the first edict of acceptance allows the construction of house-churches in Rome (*domus ecclesiae*), but they were destroyed in the 4th century, during the last great persecution<sup>13</sup> (Fig. 9).

In votive painting, it is portrayed the donor in communion with the Church. This image was, therefore, a confession of faith particularly important for strengthening the authority of the Christian Prince.

In Byzantium, the theme of the votive painting adopts the idea that the autocratic emperor, which has divine power given by the Holy Spirit for earthly leadership, and blessed through unction, is Lord of the terrestrial church, but in the same time an ordinary mortal<sup>14</sup>.

In Byzantine art, the symbol of offering was represented in iconography according to the Roman tradition as symbolic image of votive objects held by the donor in his hands; in the case of religious worship buildings, the founder was featured holding the church *in nuce* in his hands and offering it to deity<sup>15</sup>.

The idea of presenting the founders offering the model of the edifice to the deity is reinforced in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and it will become classic for the Orthodox Christian world, concomitantly with the representation of *apocombion* (represented by a bag with gold coins) as an offering for a particular ecclesiastical edifice<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 9).

It is known that the Akathistos Hymn has an important votive connotation in Constantinople, even if we can not know for sure if the original purpose for which it was composed was votive or purely liturgical<sup>17</sup>. It represented a religious service for the Mother of God by "the city of Constantinople, following her release from the "enemies' tyranny" and from the greedy invaders' attacks. Military and patriotic symbolism is quite often

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.crestinortodox.ro/diverse/arta-primelor-veacuri-69639.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Voica Pușcașu, *Actul de citorire ca fenomen istoric în Țara Românească și Moldova până la sfârșitul secolului al XVIII-lea*, București, 2001, p. 134.

<sup>15</sup> Elisabeta Negrău, *Cultul suveranului sud-est European și cazul Țării Românești. O perspectivă artistică*, Iași, 2011, p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> Elisabeta Negrău, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

met in Byzantine hymnography, especially with reference to the Mother of God (Theotokos). This fact is obvious if we take into account the close relationship between the Church and the Byzantine State and the dedication of the imperial city to the Virgin, so all positive political events were attributed to her intercession.

The votive mosaics from St. Sophia present the imperial family participating in the ceremonies. The oldest of the two mosaics depicts Jesus sitting on the throne between the empress Zoe (1028-1050) and the emperor Constantine Monomachos (1042-1055). Zoe gives Jesus a scroll listing the donations for St. Sophia, while Constantine Monomachos, (Zoe's third husband), offers an *apocombion*<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 10).

On the other side of the window, the right and left part of the Virgin and the Child are decorated in the tradition inherited from the predecessors, John II Comnenus, with his first wife, the Hungarian Princess, King Ladislau's daughter, Pirisca, rebaptized Irene. Like Zoe, the Empress wears a list of donations<sup>19</sup>(Fig. 10).

The mosaic above the south entrance in the church St. Sophia of Constantinople (end of 10<sup>th</sup> century), depicts the two greatest emperor: Constantine and Justinian. Both of them have offerings for the Virgin, Constantine offers the city he founded, Constantinople, and Justinian offers the model of St. Sophia that he build<sup>20</sup>(Fig. 11).

The founder of the former Chora church, now called Kariye Djami, Theodor Metochites, appears kneeling in the traditional costume of ceremony, offering the model of the church (built approximately in the range 1315 to 1320) to Jesus, represented on the throne<sup>21</sup>.

The general motivation of the monarchs for the building of ecclesiastical edifices is the Christian duty to perform acts of piety. There was not a theology of Christian donation, however, in patristic writings, these acts of piety constitute ways of fulfillment, of mercy and sacrifice by the faithful<sup>22</sup>. The monarchs' mentality of respecting the personal duty to build a religious monument was based on the Scripture, on the example of the Kings David and Solomon, the founders of the Temple of God in Jerusalem, a concept that appears in Byzantium, in the largest town programs, belonging to the Emperors Constantine and Justinian.

Since the beginnings of ecclesiastical architecture, in Moldavia and Wallachia, it was used the procedure of painting of worship places, as

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<sup>18</sup><http://www.crestinortodox.ro/arta-bizantina/arta-bizantina-ix-xiii/panouri-votive-sfanta-sofia-constantinopol-67334.html>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> A. Grabar, *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin. Recherche sur l'art officiel de l'Empire d'Orient*, Paris, 1936, pp. 109-110.

<sup>21</sup> Voica Pușcașu, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>22</sup> Elisabeta Negrău, *op.cit.*, p. 21.

demonstrated during the archaeological research study on some churches<sup>23</sup>. Also, documented information such as the act issued after December 20, 1414 and before April 8, 1419, concerning the donation given to painters Nikita and Dobre shows this fact<sup>24</sup>.

Many of the ecclesiastical buildings have disappeared, and among those who remained, many do not preserve the original painting which in many cases was removed and replaced. In addition, recent investigations emphasized the great ecclesiastical known edifices. Too little references are made to other edifices which hold important data regarding this research.

In the ecclesiastical mural painting from the Romanian space, takeovers of the Byzantine culture medium - direct or mediated - were made creatively and not mimetic, as evidenced by the existence of an exploratory stage, in terms of the location of the votive painting in churches' iconography. Another element found in paintings was in the presentation of the donation act, which was inspired by the European Orthodox context<sup>25</sup>.

The Argeş church preserved some of the oldest examples of such paintings. The prince Nicholas Alexander is presented kneeling in the same place in the church, as in the votive painting of Kariye Djami. Both paintings are considered votives, but the Romanian voivode appears in the Deisis scene. He does not hold a model of the church in his hands, unlike Theodor Metochites' paintings, which worship Christ in the Chora church (Fig. 12).

Thus, in the narthex of St. Sophia in Constantinople, Emperor Leo VI (886-912) is depicted miniaturized in the *proskinesis* act at the feet of Jesus<sup>26</sup>. This gesture of deep devotion is related, at its origin, with the custom of kissing the feet of the emperor, or symbolically, of those of Christ (Fig. 13). In iconography, this gesture represents kneeling with the body bent to the ground in front of Christ sitting on the throne<sup>27</sup>. Such scenes are spread in the iconography of the mosaics, wall paintings and in the Byzantine icons<sup>28</sup>.

The mural painting of Giotto in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua (1305), presents the donor Enrico Scrovegni kneeling, as he offers the model of the chapel to the Virgin Mary. For the first time one hundred years before Van Eyck, in the painting of Giotto, Virgin Mary and the saints have the same size. This painting did not become an artistic convention at the time, but much later<sup>29</sup> (Fig. 14).

Some examples are found in Wallachia, in the portrait of Nicholas Alexander, already mentioned, and in Moldavia in the votive paintings from

<sup>23</sup> Such researches has been conducted to Putna, Probota, ancient Humor, ancient Moldovița, Neamț.

<sup>24</sup> DRH, A, I, pp. 55-57.

<sup>25</sup> Voica Pușcașu, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>26</sup> V. Lazarev, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.galeriadearta.com/dictionar>.

<sup>28</sup> Voica Pușcașu, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.pinpush.com/painters/Giotto-Di-Bondone.htm>.

Bălinești<sup>30</sup> and Părhăuți<sup>31</sup> churches. In these paintings, the ruler is represented kneeling and his portrait is described in a smaller size compared to divinity and holy intercessors. There are no examples of rulers represented in this position in the worship act in the votive paintings in Transylvania.

At Bălinești, the votive painting is similar to the funeral representation with a votive significance of logothet Tăutu from Arbore church. The miniatural stature, the schematic style, but characterized by a rich colourful palette with gold accents, also characterize the painting of Arbore church.

The church model representation respecting the essential characteristics of the monument as well as the meticulous description of the founder's family costumes give those votive paintings a documentary value.

In mural votive painting in the Romanian space, this system of representation was abandoned relatively early (faster in Wallachia) - as evidenced by the votive paintings from Cozia and Cotmeana monasteries and those dating from the period that begins with the reign of Stephen the Great for Moldavia<sup>32</sup>. Besides, except the already cited cases, in which the founders are represented in kneeling position, all votive paintings preserved until today comprise only representations in standing position.

The existence of a phase of searches before the crystallization of a system of representation is proved by choosing the place where the votive painting is located. Votive paintings are placed in Byzantium in various locations of the building, from the altar to the narthex and the chapel. During the 9th and 10th centuries, as changes occur in the arrangement of scenes contained in iconographic representations, "portraits of founders are transferred from the nave to the narthex<sup>33</sup>. However, in 1118, in St. Sophia Cathedral, it is made the votive portrait of John Comnenus and his wife, Irene, mentioned above, placed in the southern tribune.

Beside the portrait of Nicholas Alexander, already mentioned, in the north of the western wall of the nave of the same royal church Argeș, it is made the votive painting of Vladislav I and of his wife, Ana (repainted in the 19th century), who supports the miniaturized model of the church on both sides. Above the picture, in the medallion, Jesus appears blessing<sup>34</sup>.

In the two already mentioned cases, Bălinești and Părhăuți, the votive picture is placed in the nave, on the west wall, while at Dolhești<sup>35</sup> the same scene is painted under the south window of the same room.

Later, from the 16th century, the iconographic program began to readjust to indoor architectural changes, replacing the wall between the nave and the

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<sup>30</sup> Corina Popa, *Bălinești*, București, 1981, p. 20.

<sup>31</sup> Bogdana Ieremia, *Semnificația picturilor murale de la Părhăuți*, RMM/MIA, I, 1976, p. 57-66.

<sup>32</sup> Voica Pușcașu, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>33</sup> V. Lazarev, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

<sup>34</sup> Voica Pușcașu, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

narthex with arches supported by columns; this led to the search for solutions in the iconographic program. For the first time, at Galata Church, the dividing wall between the nave and the narthex was replaced by arches supported by columns. In this case, the votive picture was located on the north wall of the nave<sup>36</sup>. From the 17th century, in the Romanian countries, the votive paintings were placed in the narthex area on its western wall<sup>37</sup> as it is the case of Cetatua and Three Hierarchs.

The portrayal of monarchs shows the eloquent proclamation of political legitimacy and their main protector situations: as a supporter of the Church, the source of law, the father of the people<sup>38</sup>. The political messages contained in their founded edifices had to be understood directly by masses. The votive images and inscriptions were frequently used by rulers to legalize their donation act. "Word has accompanied thus artwork in the form of inscription, but the relationship between visual and verbal, between image and inscription in Byzantine art wasn't primarily one of comment, but it was double function"<sup>39</sup>.

Votive paintings have a documentary value. An important aspect is the portrayed painted character<sup>40</sup>. The physical description and the ruler posture in votive paintings are the only representations of the characters involved. The same can be said about the images of the founded model churches<sup>41</sup>. The depiction of the characters' clothing in votive images brings to light much information about fashion at that time. It also shows the ceremonial costumes of the rulers.

The worship act conferred prestige, authority and helped the rulers and nobles in the political arena.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 138.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> A. Eastmond, *The Functions of Royal Imagery*, in *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998, pp. 187-200.

<sup>39</sup> *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, vol. 12 (1988), Editor: Peter Mackridge (St Cross College, Oxford, UK), Ruth Macrides (University of Birmingham, UK), p. 47.

<sup>40</sup> Voica Pușcașu, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*.

**Illustrations:**

Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

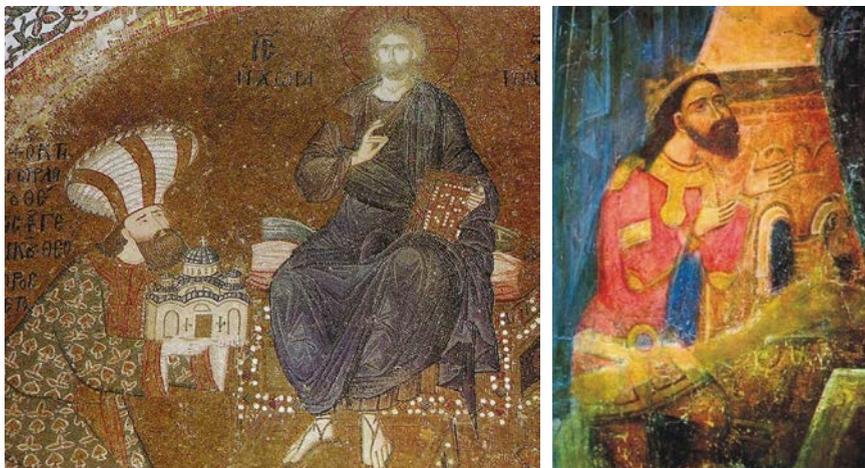


Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



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### **List of abbreviations**

NAC: Numismatica Ars Classica

CNG: Classical Numismatic Group

BMGS: Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies

DRH: Documenta Romaniae Historica

RMM-MIA: Revista Muzeelor și Monumentelor. Monumente Istorice și de Artă,  
București

DOP: Dumbarton Oaks Papers, Washington DC

C&M: Classica et Medaevalia