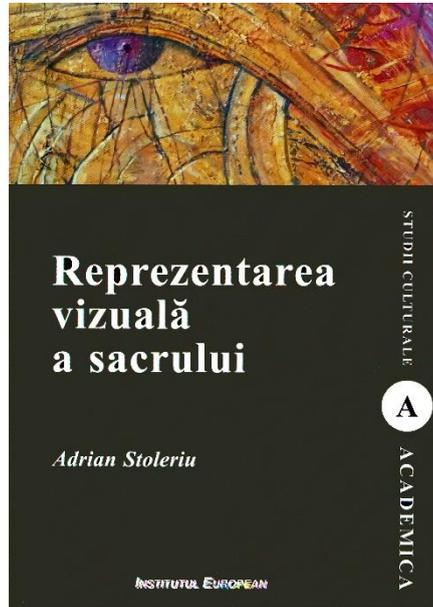


## On the Sacred and Its Implications in Visual Arts

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Adrian Stoleriu – *Reprezentarea vizuală a sacrului* (*The Visual Representation of the Sacred*), Institutul European, Iași, 2013, 186 p.



According to the author's confession in the Introduction, the elaboration of this theoretical work has its origins in "the need to find explanations for how the sacred category interacts with the field of artistic creation"<sup>1</sup>; thus, the relationship between art and sacredness is not seen only in a consecrated context, be it philosophical or religious, but as a manifest part of an extended area that offers the possibility of recovering artistic manifestations of a secular nature which may contain suggestions or concepts of a spiritual nature.

*The Visual Representation of the Sacred* authored by Adrian Stoleriu, visual artist, lecturer and Dean of the Faculty of Visual Arts and Design within "G. Enescu" National University of Arts from Iași, is a work that goes beyond a conventional approach to the complex issue of the *sacred*; this is achieved both by the extension of investigations on this fascinating concept, respectively by the pertinent analysis of its implications in art, in general and of the ways of representation in visual art throughout time, in particular.

The general vision that dominates this book is "that of a visual artist concerned with the various issues analyzed [...]"<sup>2</sup> who proposes an objective approach to investigating the spiritual world of sacredness, with the help of a long-term research activity that goes beyond the strictly religious or dogmatic framework, drawing on a vast informational content taken from both artistic

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Stoleriu – op. cit, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> p. 15.

and extra-artistic fields: religion, philosophy, history, mythology, psychology, sociology and economics. This interdisciplinary analysis aims to discover new interpretive stances of artistic creations derived from the chosen themes, inscribed in the conceptual sphere that includes the main notions studied – *the sacred, artistic creation and visual representation*.

The paper is divided into three main chapters: *I. A Possible Definition of the Sacred, II. Visual Representation of the Sacred, III. Sacred Art Today*, organized in turn in adjacent subchapters according to the topics addressed.

The first chapter, dedicated to the delicate and complex task of theoretical clarification of the concept of *the sacred*, presents studies of this notion from multiple perspectives of famous theorists such as Émile Durkheim, Rudolf Otto, Roger Caillois, René Giraud, Mircea Eliade, whose various theories oscillate between two distinct poles, namely the *divine* (as the highest form of the sacred), and the *human* (the sacred having here the role of mediation between the world of the divine and that of the *profane*). The forms of representation of the sacred can be synthesized, thus, in two essential categories: the *metaphysical* one, specific to a philosophical perspective and the *personified* one, proper to a religious vision, a *sacred* one to which the author himself adheres clearly, but in a personal way, by resorting to the concepts of *faith* and *revelation*.

Questioning the validity of the symbiosis between archetypes, myths and symbols, as a result of an older human preoccupation, he manifests even in the famous work of Paul Gauguin – *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we headed?*, the author proposes a possible solution to this dilemma in an original personal key: “[...] archetypes, as a result of *the infinite typical experiences of the ancestral line*, should indicate the origin from which we derive, myths – as ways of discovering and knowing history, culture, beliefs and civilizations – should reveal our identity, while symbols, through their constant search for meanings and interpretations, should show us the path we have to follow in the ideal the restoration of the primordial unity of man [...]”<sup>3</sup>. According to the author’s vision, artistic creation can be distinguished as a particular form of manifestation of human religiosity through practical correspondences in visual representations of the sacred, in which man, in the image and likeness of his Creator, can also give birth to an artistic creation under divine *inspiration*, this necessary data of creation. From this perspective, the sacred is a “channel” that can mystically connect the lower world with the upper, the divine revelation being a superior way of communication and collaboration between man and divinity as well as an infallible inspirational factor.

In the second chapter, aspects related to the visual representation of the sacred in various forms throughout the history of religious art are treated,

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<sup>3</sup> p. 45.

after a preliminary definition of the concept of *representation*, as a universal phenomenon manifested in the psychic and practical form of the human being; in this case, the human being is seen as a particular form of creation, generated by multiple external factors with a determining role, “a special form, ideal or subjective, of reflecting the informational content inside the individual”<sup>4</sup>, respectively. The visual representation of the sacred can thus be seen as a religious process – *imitatio dei*, on the one hand and as an artistic one, through which one can capture the energies and qualities of divinity, in order to transmit them to the whole world, on the other hand. Then, the interactions between the sacred and the artistic creation are analyzed, these being exemplified with particular forms of image representation, as a form of visual representation of the sacred; they are supported by the presentation of significant features of the sacred in the field of artistic creation, starting from rudiments, yet deeply spiritual representations of the prehistoric era<sup>5</sup> and reaching the contemporary art of the twentieth century. The latter “*evokes the spirit of its time*”<sup>6</sup> – the extremely rapid succession of current artistic movements and currents leading to a constant reconsideration of religion, a potential desecration and implicitly to a possible disappearance of the traditional religious visual language.

The final chapter, “Sacred Art Today”, pays special attention to the presentation of various theories on the concept of sacred art, belonging to contemporary theorists – *sacred art = art of icons, art of religions, art of the Church, transcendental art* or *true art*, to mention briefly only some of these<sup>7</sup> theories to which the author also contributes; he achieves this by accepting that sacred art is “the expression of divine perfection and harmony reflected through the possibilities of material-spiritual expression of the human”<sup>8</sup>, constituting “a superlative value of artistic creation whose subject is the visual representation of the sacred”<sup>9</sup>. Against the background of art trends of breaking with traditions and favoring experiments, there are mutations of taste that have caused *an apparent crisis of art*; in this case a crisis of viability of spiritual values occurred, aspects analyzed in the subchapter given the same title, whose purpose stated by author, is to challenge the reader – i.e. the beneficiary of the artistic act – to a discernment cultivated in the evaluation of current creations “claiming to fall into the category of sacred art”<sup>10</sup>. This is, in fact, one of the necessities that justifies the very

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<sup>4</sup> p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> The author refers to a true “visual sincerity” of the forms of visual-artistic expression used during this period.

<sup>6</sup> p. 133.

<sup>7</sup> pp. 141-142.

<sup>8</sup> p. 144.

<sup>9</sup> p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> p.14.

existence of this book, including the need to deepen the cognitive sphere in which the concept of sacred art falls, a need to which the author explicitly agrees: “we are convinced that sacred art could constitute the emblem of the level of spirituality of the society and the expression of the experience of the religious feeling in contemporaneity<sup>11</sup>, sacred art being understood as a special spiritual opening and as a special form of knowledge of the world”<sup>12</sup>.

*The Visual Representation of the Sacred* by Adrian Stoleriu, visual artist, theorist and lecturer, which came out at Institutul European Publishing House in 2013, is an original contribution to visual arts. The book content, spread on 186 pages – illustrated with high quality inspiring visual documentation –, invites the informed reader not only to a simple reflection on the extension/ (re) valuing of some creative meanings from the secular sphere belonging to the concept of *sacred*, but also to its re-connection with positive spiritual concepts, generating ART; through them, the divine spark/ the revelation of sacred origin, acquires new creative valences, as the author himself confesses, in a true *creed*: “[...] the visual representation of the sacred and sacred art – in particular – can and must offer the solutions imposed by the needs of our age, opening new ways of knowledge by evoking the endless nostalgia of the sacred time, on which visual arts have been trying for so many millennia to bring it back into images”; the visual representation of the sacred is, thus, “an aspiration for perfection and last but not least, [...] a possible form of communication between man and divinity”<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> p.162.

<sup>12</sup> p.163.

<sup>13</sup> p. 89.