From East to West – the Image of Saint George in the Art of the Middle Ages

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Abstract: *Among the representative figures of the Middle Ages, symbolizing courage, verticality, spirit of sacrifice, the Saint and Great Martyr George stands out by far. Considered a hero and a protector, the saint was an example to all those who showed their virtue and bravery in the fight to defend faith. Impressive is the large number of countries that settled under his rule, starting with the Kingdom of England, Portugal, Spain; almost the whole of Europe invoked protection through the flags and blazons dedicated to the Holy Victor. In this context, it was natural for a large number of religious edifices to be dedicated to Saint George, and his representations in sculpture, painting, embroidery, were extremely valuable not only from a religious point of view in invoking divine help, but also from an artistic one.*

Keywords: *Byzantine art, martyr, medieval knight, Renaissance, Holy Victor*

Saint George, the Great Martyr, lived in the 4th century during the time of the Roman emperor Diocletian. Due to his qualities, he ends up in the service of the emperor, as a soldier, and is familiar with the persecution of Christians, which began in 303. Saint George confesses his faith in Christ and is imprisoned, tortured and then killed by beheading.

What made him so beloved by Christians was, of course, his courage to confess his strong faith in Christ before the emperor, as well as the miracles that were performed during his passion[1]. As a sign of gratitude and appreciation, Christians bear his name, appoint him as the protector of cities, of many places of worship, and depict him in icons[2].

The present work aims to identify some representations of the Byzantine type, mainly belonging to medieval Moldavia, in order to then analyze several works of some important artists of the Renaissance from Western Europe. In addition to trying to identify some typologies of representation in the iconography of Saint George in the medieval period, the analysis also aims to emphasize the existing differences, beyond the very

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[1] *Viețile Sfinților* vol III (aprilie)/ *Lives of the Saints*, vol III (April), Publishing House of Episcopia Romanului si Hușilor, pp. 152-168.
[2] https://doxologia.ro/viata-bisericii/documentar/sfantul-gheorghe-iconografie

different social context of the two territories brought into the analysis, in the evolution of the image that the saint has in Byzantine art compared to Western European art.

In the area of Byzantine influence, the representation of Saint George in the iconography developed over time is presented by Dionysius of Furna, in his *Painter's Manual*: young, tall, beardless, with curly hair, reaching behind the ears[3]. As for clothing, the *Manual* refers to military garments and the red cloak that the Saint usually wears. Dionysius of Furna also dwells on certain important moments in the life of Saint George, guiding the iconographer in the realization of his works[4]. Thus, there are icons of the saint that depict him imprisoned, suffering torments or performing miracles. As the Saint met his end by the sword, he is sometimes depicted carrying his head in his hand or on a tray, as a precious offering to the Saviour.

Fig. 1 *Saint George the Martyr and scenes from his life*,
icon from *Saint Catherine Monastery*, 13th century

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[3]Dionisie din Furna, *Erminia picturii bizantine/ A Painter's Manual*, Ed. Sophia, Bucharest, 2000, p. 154.

[4] *Ibidem*.

The most common representation of the saint is, however, the one in which he is riding a white horse, piercing a dragon with his spear, a visual description of the legend in which Saint George saves the fortress of Silena, as well as the emperor's daughter, from a fearsome dragon. The image also refers to the fight against demons and sins; the thin spear having a cross at the top and remaining unbent, symbolizes the power and help of God, and the Holy Victor illustrates the model of courage in the fight with the devil.

An exceptional work of art is the statue of Saint George on horseback, in the victorious fight with the dragon, created by the Cluj artists Martin and Gheorghe, which can be found in Prague, in the courtyard of the palace of King Charles IV. Cast in bronze, the statue shows the jewel formation of the two craftsmen, which excels in rendering the quality of the figures and the elegance of the details presented[5].

Fig. 2 *Saint George on horseback slaying the dragon*,
Prague, equestrian statue, bronze (1373)

The rider's shield, now lost, bore an inscription preserved in a note, which specified the date of the work, the name and origin of the craftsmen. Made in 1373, the work is rendered slightly below normal dimensions, the Saint having a built size of a teenager and face traits that show his young age. The composition is simple and clear, and the three characters are rendered on a scale smaller than life size. The rider is represented at the very moment when he pierces the dragon writhing at the horse's feet with his spear, still managing to catch his tail on the horse's front leg[6]. The spear, today lost and

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[5] Vasile Drăguț, *Arta românească/ Romanian art*, Ed. Meridiane, Bucharest, 1982, p. 116.

[6] Bogdan-Mihail Danielescu-Chirlomez, Anita Paolicchi, article *Statuia ecvestră a Sfântului Gheorghe ucigând balaurul* (Praga).*Considerații istorice și iconografice/ Equestrian Statue of Saint George Slaying the Dragon (Prague). Historical and Iconographic Considerations,* http://diam.uab.ro/istorie.uab.ro/publicatii/colectia_bcss/bcss_20/8 , p.130.

replaced, represents the central axis of the composition which seems to rotate around this axis.

What the great European artists of those times did not dare to do was to rotate the sculptural group in place: "We are dealing with neither the rigid static of the horses in the few equestrian representations of the Romanesque and Gothic, nor with the emphatic movement of the horses in the baroque era. It can be said that the sculptors from Cluj created here an authentic round sculpture and, at the same time, an admirable study of a horse in motion."[7] Analyzing the representation, one can see, even admire, in the rendering of the details, a jeweller's talent of the two artists. Historian Vasile Vătășianu emphasized that, through all its qualities, this work definitely indicates the formation of the two artists in a goldsmith's workshop. There they could acquire the necessary dexterity to render the details with refinement and finesse, to execute the elements of armor or harness with such precision.

In full harmony with the movement of horse and rider, "the supporting ground is agitated, the rocks that compose it being rendered with the flavor of representing a landscape in a miniature of those times. The two sculptors are not satisfied with creating a volumetric support for the main group, but tell with real pleasure everything that happens in the rocky landscape populated by small flowers, with lizards and snakes, so that the silhouette of the dragon that emerges from this natural environment acquires the virtues of verisimilitude." Also, the composition of a period armor was accurately reproduced, as was the type of harness and even the system of decorating the horse's croupe with circular movements; by means of all these characteristics, the work of the brothers from Cluj pertains to "the stylistic world of court Gothic"[8].

All these achievements constituted such an obvious novelty, that it was believed for a while that such an innovative work could not belong to simple Transylvanian craftsmen. But the presence of other similar works by the two artists led historians to recognize their incomparable value. Moreover, in the opinion of the researcher Béla Lázár, there are other representations of the iconographic programs that could be related to the location of the two craftsmen as being *from Cluj*. A conclusive example in this sense is the painting of the Mălâncrav evangelical church, whose patron saint is Saint George. The southern wall of the church presents a rather complex theme, and the upper register is reserved for a particularly beautiful representation of Saint George on horseback fighting the dragon, which, surprisingly, shows similarities in the rendering of the statue in Prague. Regarding the rider, the similar elements are the armor and the posture of the legs; with respect to the horse, the representation of the mane, the harness and the type of tail

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[7] Vasile Drăguț, *Arta gotică în Romania/ Gothic Art in Romania,* Ed. Meridiane, Bucharest, 1979, p. 277.
[8] Vasile Drăguț, *op.cit.*, p. 281.

connection are similar to those shown on the bronze statue. The dragon is also presented in the same way, the posture of the head, with the twisted neck, the representation of the nostrils, the wings, and, last but not least, the scales, which are circulations in both cases. There are also similarities in the stylization of tree trunks or in the rendering of rocky relief elements. It is assumed that the artist who painted the church was the father of the two craftsmen, from him starting this idea of representing the Saint. It should also be mentioned that the historian Vasile Drăguț did not share this opinion of the historian Béla Lázár, noting that it was necessary to be reluctant regarding the connection of the craftsmen with the painting from Mălâncrav, Transylvania[9].

Another representation of Saint George on a horse, next to Saint Demetrius this time, is the wooden bas-relief, on the doors of the Chapel at the Snagov Monastery, dated as belonging to the 15th century. The proportions of the execution are harmonious, the movements full of elegance, which give rhythm to the whole ensemble. The carved wooden doors with longitudinal opening have two leaves with three panels each, worked in bas-relief, representing biblical scenes or characters. The two wings are framed by inscriptions, which also separate the middle panels from the lower ones. The state of conservation is good, at the moment, and the doors are part of the heritage of the National Art Museum. Historians believe that, disregarding the Slavonic inscription on the doors, the work can be placed in a period of Italian creation from before the Renaissance, and has a beneficial influence on the sculptures made in Wallachia, in the following century[10].

In 16th century Moldova, one of the most original pages in the history of art was born – the exterior painting of religious edifices. Practiced in other countries only on small surfaces – for the decoration of the entrance portal – exterior painting knew its full development and power of expression only in Moldova, becoming an artistic phenomenon of universal value. Research in the field led to the idea that exterior painting gained such a large scale in Moldova due to the need to express the theological message used by the church in the religious education of the faithful. At the same time, if we are to refer to the historical moment in which the religious edifices were painted – the establishment of Stephen's successor, Petru Rareș, on the throne of Moldavia – we must consider as an important message of these paintings, the resistance against those who threatened the independence of the country and, the emboldening of the entire people. Thus, a more appropriate choice among the representations that could meet all these beliefs and hopes could only be the Great Martyr George. Not only embodiment of courage and military skills, but also the ability to make sacrifices in the name of faith, chosen by Stephen the Great to adorn his flag that was carried on the battlefield, Saint George was already recognized as the Defender of Moldavia.

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[9] Bogdan-Mihail Danielescu-Chirlomez, Anita Paolicchi, *op.cit.*, p. 133.
[10] Vasile Drăguț, *Arta românească/ Romanian Art*, Ed. Meridiane, Bucharest, 1982, p. 11

Therefore, it was only natural that the invocation of heavenly support for the defense of the country should be directed at one of the greatest military saints.

A frequently encountered component in the iconographic program of Moldavian exterior painting is represented by the lives of saints. At Arbore, the hagiographic legends of Saint George are rendered by an artist gifted with the talent of a good storyteller, capable of imprinting a narrative style on his works. Located in the niche on the west wall, the representation has a distinctive touch. The image most frequently painted in icons, *The Fight of the Saint with the dragon and the rescue of the princess*, is present here at the end of the cycle, and not at its beginning, as would be natural. Moreover, the scene is located in a less visible area – on the north face of the niche – being then followed by two other sequences: *The Saint's Journey with the Princess to the Citadel* and *the Meeting with the Emperor*. The following three scenes, unique in the Moldavian representation, are played to illustrate the emperor's conversion. The scenes are the Emperor, the Saint and a hierarch in front of the church, *The three on a synthon surrounded by crowds* – a fragment that occupies a large part of the register and the *Banquet offered by the emperor in honor of the holy savior*[11].

Fig. 3 Church from Arbore, *Scenes from the life of Saint George*,
detail of the western wall, fresco (date uncertain)

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[11] Corina Popa, Oliviu Boldura, *Arbore - istorie, artă, restaurare / Arbore – Art, History, Restoration,* Ed. ACS, Bucharest, 2016, p.120.

The painter seems to master both the Byzantine style of painting and the one with Gothic influence equally well. The traditional Byzantine style is evidenced in the rendering of slender figures with elegant, graceful postures. It is also found in the sumptuousness of the vestments of the saint or the emperor, which seem to reconstruct the Byzantine world to which they belonged. The painting of Gothic influence, more precisely the Italian one, is present both in the picturesqueness of the landscapes and in the costumes from the scenes with crowds; these are rich, diverse costumes, with details that are tastefully rendered. In fact, the two styles, Byzantine and Gothic, coexist, often functioning in a relationship of complementarity.

The range of pigments is generous. The chromatic richness can also be seen in the artist's mastery in joining shades of green with pink or blue with red, the preparatory drawing of the portraits, which was made in brown ocher and which enriches the chromatic expression. The faces are often modeled in warm or olive-green colors, executed with the meticulousness of an iconographer, and their white or colored costumes and draperies prove the ease with which the artist created them[12].

Inside the church in Voroneț, there is another special representation of the saint, who is also the patron saint of the church. There appears here, the image of the *Saint - great bearer of victory*. This iconographic type is interesting, Saint George seated on the throne with a sword in his hand, which represents the image on the battle flag of Stephen the Great, yet the dragon is missing[13].

This iconographic type is also taken over for the "Battle Flag" from the year 1500, i.e. from the last part of the reign of Stephen the Great, preserved today in the Central Military Museum in Bucharest. The flag, a rare and particularly beautiful piece, depicts Saint George, as the patron saint of victorious Moldova. The artist did not represent the saint on horseback, fighting the dragon, as tradition demanded, but enthroned in a see, with a sword in his hand and with his feet on a three-headed dragon, which is not killed, but seems to be under the saint's control. Two angels, carrying a sword and a shield, place a jewelled crown on the saint's curled hair, all of which is masterfully and minutely worked, on a background of red satin, with fine details traced with gold, silver and silk thread[14].

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[12] Corina Popa, Oliviu Boldura, *Op. cit.*, p.140.

[13] George Oprescu, *Istoria artelor plastice în România/ The History of Fine Arts in Romania,* Meridiane, Bucharest, 1968, p. 374.

[14] Vasile Florea, *Arta Românească de la origini până în prezent/ Romanian Art from Its Origins to the Present*, Litera, Bucharest 2017, p.112.

Fig. 4 *The battle flag of Stephen the Great,* Embroidery (1500)

Fig. 5 *Saint George on a white horse*, Voroneț, south facade fresco (1547)

The reason for the choice of St. George as the protector of Moldova by ruler Stephen finds a clear answer in the foundation of so many religious edifices, which have military saints as their spiritual patrons, obviously the most important place being held by St. George. The gratitude towards the divinity, but also the desire to pay homage to the soldiers who fell in battle, as well as the increase of the people's adherence to the ruler's military policy is also evident by invoking the help of the great victorious saint in this way[15].

The exterior painting of Voroneț, and even more so the image of *Saint George on a white horse slaying the dragon*, located in a key point of the architecture – on the wall to the left of the entrance – is not placed here by chance. The narrative character of the composition, the generous surface of the representation, the vivid chromaticism, the colors with great resistance over time thanks to the technique perfected by the Moldovan craftsmen[16], make this representation of the saint remarkable, along with the entire pictorial ensemble of Voroneț.

An original representation of the saint can be found in the nave of the church of which he is the patron, within the premises of the Monastery of *St. John the New from Suceava*. In the southern apse, in the lower register, Gheorghe appears next to St. Dumitru, in sumptuous brocade clothes, with

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[15] Ion I. Solcanu, *Artă și societate românească/ Romanian Art and Society,* Ed. Enciclopedica, Bucharest, 2002, p. 270.
[16] Tereza Sinigalia, Oliviu Boldura, *Monumente Medievale din Bucovina/ Medieval Monuments from Bucovina*, Ed. ACS, Bucharest, 2015, p. 195.

rich hair, of Byzantine inspiration[17]. The costumes here give the impression of secularity, of court ceremonial, perhaps bringing to the fore the splendor of the Imperial Court of Byzantium. The magnitude of the size of the register, the monumentality of the two characters, otherwise characteristics of the entire painting that adorns the church are elements that complete its beauty.

Fig. 6 *Saint George and Saint Demetrius*,
fresco - the nave of the church of Saint George, Suceava (1534)

In Moldovița, on the southern facade, on the pillar of the porch, three military saints are represented, all three on horseback, George, Demetrius and Mercurius. The strategic placement, the fact that each representation is framed by a border that highlights the compositions, each one separately, emphasizes even better the role and importanțce of the saints. Bearers of victory were once again invoked in the country of Moldavia threatened by the danger represented by the Turks and Tatars. As for the chromatic range used here, in Moldovița, it can be said that it is bright. We could say there is a lot of yellow, blue, red colors, which also have a certain sonority, necessary to accompany the message of the anti-Ottoman struggle[18].

If the Byzantine-inspired iconography of the medieval period presents Saint George in scenes that respect the church canon, recalling his

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[17] Tereza Sinigalia, Oliviu Boldura, *op.cit.*, p. 61.
[18] Vasile Drăguț, Vasile Florea, *Pictura românească în imagini/ Romanian Painting in Images,* Ed. Meridiane, Bucharest, 1970, p.63.

martyrdom, or proving his military skills, in the representations from Western Europe, the saint acquires all the attributes of a knight, being otherwise perceived as patron of knights, par excellence.

Fig. 7 Donatello, *Saint George*, Bargello National Museum,
Florence, Marble sculpture, 209 cm, (1515-1417)

Donatello has among his works a sculpture, with which it can be said that he reaches a compositional peak – *Saint George* – located in the Bargello, Florence. The saint, with a simple but firm figure, unmatched among artistic representations, energetically supports his body on both legs. Our attention is also drawn to the shield, on which the cross appears in relief, but also to the frowning gaze of the Saint, directed at the imaginary opponent in the distance – the dragon. "The triangular position of the legs and the combination with the inverted geometric shape of the shield, the way the cloak thrown over the shoulder connects the left shoulder with the top of the right foot, the fall, not without a potential strain, of the right arm and hand all fit into a composition in which the plastic conception, as well as the ethical expression of the figure, have reached a harmony that can be called perfect; no unnecessary detail disturbs it"[19].

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[19] Virgil Vătășianu, *Istoria artei europene- Arta din perioada Renașterii/ History of European Art - Renaissance Art*, Ed. Meridiane, Bucharest, 1972, p. 28.

Fig. 8 *Saint George Freeing the Princess*, Pisanello,
Church of Saint Anastasia - Verona, fresco (1433-1438)

Pisanello's masterpiece, "Saint George Freeing the Princess", painted in the church of Saint Anastasia, in Verona, between 1433-1438, brings to the fore the meticulous rendering of people, animals, extravagant architecture, all combined with emotion, poetry, giving life of medieval chivalry[20]. Figures and animals are represented plastically in the foreground of the work. The background, instead, presents, as in a nightmare, a magical fortress, with gallows next to it.

Saint George prepares for the fight with the dragon to save the princess, and the serious and controlled looks of the two protagonists, with attitudes of forced calm, betray the complex feelings of mutual affection, shadowed by the approach of a fatal moment. Pisanello actually illustrates here not the deed of St. George, but a page from a novel of chivalry.

Another work by the same artist, *Madonna with Saint Anthony and George*, now at the National Gallery in London is also full of subtle emotions and fairy tale atmosphere. And here the artist captures the costume of the knight heroes, as extravagant as their exploits[21].

In the same tone of knightly representations, the saint is depicted by Bernat Martorell, a Spanish artist belonging to the Gothic in Catalonia, an

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[20] *** *Enciclopedia picturii italiene/ Encyclopedia of Italian Painting*, Ed. Meridiane, Bucharest 1974, p. 181.

[21] *Ibidem*, p. 70.

artist also close to the Flemish style. His works have great technical precision, Martorell using a meticulous brushwork and a special coloring, which makes his works true historiographical documents.

Fig. 9 Bernat Martorell, *Saint George Slaying the Dragon*, tempera on panel, 155 x 98 cm (1434-1435)

The work *Saint George slaying the dragon* is a tempera on wood, part of an altar made by the artist between 1430 -1435 and which is currently distributed between the Chicago Museums and the Louvre. The central panel shows the saint fighting the dragon to save the princess and is considered a work of great plastic beauty, which "looks like a wonderful illustration of a fairy tale" [22], but also has the virtue of showing a knight in complete armor from a historical moment of which few vestiges of it are preserved.

Using an interesting perspective, the artist managed to provide a complete view of the scene, ensuring that everything is perfectly arranged in three different planes: the entrance to the dragon's cave, where the fight between the saint and the beast takes place, the area where the princess is seated, accompanied of a ram grazing quietly, oblivious to danger. In the background you can see the walled city by the sea, with the king seated in the place of honor and his subjects watching the scene with interest. The dragon, in the foreground, a rare creature, is represented as having quite small dimensions, but sufficiently dangerous, as evidenced by the bones of people and animals that can be seen around.

Saint George riding a white horse is seated in a light saddle, but which gives the rider a safe and firm support; the fully extended legs are supported by stirrups in a type of mount, characteristic of heavy cavalry that could keep the knight as firmly seated as possible, to increase his strength and effectiveness at the moment of collision with the opponent. The air of "modernity" of the representation of the knight is striking. He appears to us dressed in an armor that follows the most innovative styles, apparently imported from the specialist centers of Italy, possibly Milan. The armor, completely black, owed its color to a technique by which the metal was protected from corrosion, at the same time giving it a pleasant appearance, in contrast to the golden elements that adorn it. The saint is protected with a type of helmet that covers his entire head and is equipped with a folding visor and a collar to protect his face and neck. The helmet is also of Italian origin. It is possible that this work is one of the first artistic representations of this type of helmet in the Iberian Peninsula. The cuirass that protects the knight's chest is partially covered by a cloth, on which the "Cross of Saint George" appears, in red, on a white background.

The metal protections for the shoulders present an important novelty – they are asymmetrical; the one on the right is small so as not to interfere with the movements of the knight's arm or the support of the spear during combat. The one on the left is larger, to better protect the most exposed part of the fighter, to the opponent's attack. Arms, elbows and forearms are perfectly covered. So are the hands, with Italian-style gloves and metal finger

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[22] J. A. Gaya Nuno, *Istoria artei spaniole/ History of Spanish Art*, Ed. Meridiane, Bucharest, 1975, p. 157.

guards. Also, the legs are protected by metal pieces, perfectly joined and placed, noting the long golden spurs, symbols of the knight, so necessary when he rides.

The weapons carried are beautifully represented, also highlighted by the contrast with the black of the armor. In his left hand the knight holds the reins of the horse, while with his right hand he holds the spear with the insignia of Saint George at the very moment of launch on the dragon. On the right side, on the hip, a dagger with prismatic faces can be seen, extremely effective against opponents covered in armor, and on the left side there is a sword, of which only the golden hilt can be seen. The shield is not represented, the new knight feels invincible with its metal protections, properly reinforced at all vulnerable points[23].

Paolo Ucello, in *Saint George slaying the dragon*, oil on canvas, dated 1456, found in the National Gallery, illustrates the famous legend of the rescue of the princess, interpreted here with originality. Saint George does not kill the dragon, but tames it, and the princess brings it on a leash to the city, where all the inhabitants quickly convert to Christianity. Interestingly, the saint attacks the dragon, supported by the eye of the storm, located in the extension of the spear, thus suggesting the presence of the divinity. Also interesting are the image of the horse that seems to have just been brought from a carousel, but also the way of representing the landscape, the grass growing in geometric shapes – perfect rectangles[24].

A work belonging to Andrea Mantegna, Saint George, captures the very moment when the dragon's conqueror can be declared victorious, as after a real jousting tournament. Moreover, the artist dresses the saint in armor produced in Italy, specific to 15th century knights[25]. Both the metal protections and the details with which the artist decorates the knight's armor, make the Renaissance painter's work a true historiographical source, necessary in the analysis of the evolution of medieval knights.

A less common appearance can be found in Coreggio, in an altar panel made in 1532, a work that is today in the Pinacoteca in Dresden. The scene is a select, demanding one, and is treated with ease and courage; it conveys to the viewer enjoyment of life, enjoyment of beauty, but, perhaps strikingly, physical attraction as well.

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[23] https://caballerosyarte.blogspot.com/2014/02/san-jorge-y-el-dragon-por-bernat.
[24] Manfred Wundram, *Painting of the Renaissance*, Ed. Taschen, Koln, 1997, p. 26.
[25] Lawrence Gowing, *The Encyclopedia of Visual Art*, vol. 4, Ed. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Oxford, 1983, p. 652

Fig. 10 *Madonna and Child with Saint George*, Coreggio,
oil on panel 285 cm -190 cm (1530)

All the artistic representations presented create the image that Saint George had in the medieval era. Handsome, slender, always a young soldier or knight, savior, protector, characteristics that once again prove the admiration and respect he was given, both in the church and in the secular space. From early times, seen as a symbol of courage for keeping his unshakable faith, the saint was a model and protector of those who fought for the right faith. The very name of Victor, attributed to the Saint in the area of influence of Byzantine and post-Byzantine art, proves the gratitude and admiration for the Saint's fight with the ultimate evil.

Translated by Ana-Magdalena Petraru, lect. PhD

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