

# Visual Prayer - The Sacred Dimension in the Art of the 1980s Generation and its Contemporary Resonances

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**Abstract:** *It is inconceivable to disregard the reverberations of the artistic manifestations of the 1980s, particularly regarding Romanian art and its tendency toward codification through a religious symbolic system inspired directly by the Church. This study follows precisely this subtle thread of the blossoming of an art that bears witness to God, an art in which visual representation acquires the status of a silent prayer, by focusing on the visual language elements capable of conveying the depth and subtlety of Christian spirituality. Set against a cultural backdrop shaped by the ideological dictatorship of the communist regime, such artistic expressions opposed the harshness of censorship concerning religious freedom, and are interpreted here through the conceptual lens of artistic neo-Orthodoxy, under which this particular period of the 1980s is analyzed. Artists such as Constantin Flodor, Sorin Dumitrescu, Paul Gherasim, Horea Paștina, Horia Bernea, Onisim Colta understood this movement as a form of re-sacralization of the image, in which artistic creation becomes a personal religious experience. Moreover, artistic collectives such as Prolog, which crystallized around some of these figures, functioned as vehicles of cultural resistance, transmitting this spiritual legacy into contemporary art through the recovery of an authentic religious sensibility. Thus, the present research constitutes both a case study of sacred visual expressions at the end of the communist regime and an investigation into the enduring echoes of this aesthetic in the contemporary artistic landscape.*

**Keywords:** sacred dimension, visual arts, religious symbolism, neo-Orthodoxy, Romanian painting.

## Introduction

We often find symbolism as a form of visual expression that offers the freedom of codification and the impulse to discover through the image. Sacred art is full of symbolism and strives to capture subtlety. Closely linked to the spirituality specific to the Christian religion, Byzantine art is oriented towards metaphysical, sensitive beauty. It is characteristic of Byzantine aesthetics that the visual arts move away from mimesis, even rejecting

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secular models. Thus the disproportion, the lack of volume and form, the absence of flesh, appear as a manifestation of the idea that the material world is the transient one. The canon and symbolism have the function of creating images of the divine and the world of the soul in opposition to the world of the physical. This aesthetics is connected with the dualistic religious attitude towards the world, an attitude that considers the terrestrial world as "incarnation", as Cătălin Gheorghe observes in *Estetica Artelor Vizuale*<sup>1</sup>. If God became incarnate in man, then the Christian has a duty to live in total likeness to Him, keeping faith and love as the way of knowing the world. The icon is the most representative image of the Byzantine direction: "And the Word became flesh" (John 1, 14). Jesus Christ is the divine form that took concrete flesh (and therefore also form), the first to be represented in iconography as the clear evidence of the Incarnation. Also, "[Christ] is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15).

There is indeed a sacred side to the earthly world. Eliade briefly highlights it in God's dialogue with Moses: "Do not come near here [...] but take off your shoes from off your feet, for the place on which you are treading is holy ground" (Exodus 3, 5). He also refers to the importance of living it, concluding that "the discovery, that is to say the revelation of sacred space, has an existential value for the religious man"<sup>2</sup>. Except that, in modern times, "man gives up looking upwards, his preoccupations turning exclusively to the horizontality of existence."<sup>3</sup> Onisim Colta addresses this subject in *Cu fața spre centru*, talking about the Center that Eliade also describes, that fixed point necessary for support, orientation. "The discovery or projection of a fixed point [...] is equivalent to the Making of the World"<sup>4</sup>. Many artists of the 1980s find this fixed point in Orthodoxy, so, starting with Paul Gherasim, we will see this subtle sacred space engraved.

At a time when the communist ideology imposed a regime of severe control over cultural and religious life, Romanian art in the 1980s generated a profoundly distinctive direction in which visual expression became, discreetly but firmly, a form of spiritual confession. This art was to become "an art anchored in myth and ritual, an art charged with meaning, built on a cultural code."<sup>5</sup> Away from the official discourse and aesthetics of socialist realism, a number of artists have found in the plastic language a way to re-sacralize the image, symbolically constructing an inner space in which the sacred can be present, lived and represented once again. This tendency has often been associated with what contemporary art critics have called artistic neo-orthodoxy or neo-Orthodoxy - an orientation in which artistic form

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<sup>1</sup> Cătălin Gheorghe, *Estetica Artelor Vizuale*, Ed. Artes, Iași, 2010, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Sacrul și profanul*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2005, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Onisim Colta, *Cu fața spre centru*, Editura Brumar, Timișoara, 2008, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Mircea Eliade, *op.cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Onisim Colta, *op.cit.*, p. 24.

becomes the bearer of theological and spiritual values, not through the conventional illustration of religious themes, but through a deep interiorization of the visual language and symbols of the Orthodox tradition. In this framework, art is no longer an ideological or aesthetic discourse in itself, but it is transformed into an act of visual prayer, a gesture of withdrawal from the contingent and opening towards the transcendent. It becomes, as Mircea Eliade says, a veritable hierophany<sup>6</sup>. "*Hierophany reveals a <<fixed point>>'*".

### **The general context of culture in the 1980s and the infiltration of the neo-Byzantine spirit**

"Towards the end of the 1970s, the general situation in Romania showed signs of regression on all levels, resulting from the return to a neo-Stalinist political rigorism."<sup>8</sup> The 1980s in Romania have been considered by Magda Cârneci in *Artele Plastice în România 1945-1989. Cu o addenda 1990-2010* as a real return to the past, full of "stagnation and decadence"<sup>9</sup>, marked by a tightening of ideological control exercised by the communist regime over all forms of artistic expression. In this climate of repression, in which any manifestation of a religious nature was suspect and frequently forbidden, visual artists faced a fundamental dilemma: how to express an authentic spirituality in a context hostile to the sacred? In the absence of direct freedom of expression, painting became a medium of subtle resistance, a vehicle through which the religious dimension was camouflaged, disguised or transfigured into symbolic language." Socialist realism was, for a long time, the only accepted plastic expression."<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically, in the field of art, a revival of spirituality is taking place, with artists using themes and symbols in the spirit of Christian art in their language.

The official exhibitions privileged socialist realism or anodyne themes, while any attempt to reintroduce religious symbols was considered ideologically inappropriate. That "state kitsch [...] is embodied in an art <<of apparatus>> that resolutely turns its back on even the previously academizing modernism in order to regain a kind of socialist neorealism."<sup>11</sup> The thematic lines are, for example, portraits, allegorical compositions, figures of great leaders, historical figures of Romania, folklore. There is also a mass

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<sup>6</sup> hierophany - the act of manifesting the sacred. The word is formed by joining the Greek adjective hieros (Greek ἱερός; sacred/holy) with the verb phainein (Greek φαίνειν; to uncover/bring to light).

<sup>7</sup> Mircea Eliade, *op.cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Magda Cârneci, *Artele Plastice în România 1945-1989. Cu o addenda 1990-2010*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2013, p. 111.

<sup>9</sup> Magda Cârneci, *op.cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> TVR- Adevăruri despre trecut: Arta sacră în epoca de aur - artiștii, 15 decembrie 2022, Gheorghe Preda.

<sup>11</sup> Magda Cârneci, *op.cit.*, p. 115.

"culturalization" of the people, with the national festival "Song of Romania", which discourages professional art by involving amateur and naive art. A return to history also persists, with historically inspired themes that are nevertheless distinguished by a qualitative aesthetic, such as the work of Vasile Gorduz or Paul Vasilescu. Onisim Colta calls this orientation a danger of defining man as a "historical being"<sup>12</sup>, instead of a being with vertical aspirations. Historiographical consciousness is brutally and inappropriately encouraged, not so much to know our past and our forebears as to stifle the future.

Paradoxically, it was precisely this ideological pressure that fostered the emergence of a deeply interiorized art, and artists found in sacred art a source of inspiration that not only allowed them to tap into a rich visual tradition, but also to introduce into the plastic space a set of perennial spiritual values: humility, inner light, contemplation. In this way, religiosity was not rendered through explicit narration, but through the quality of presence: a "visual silence" that functioned as a mute prayer. The first notable group to combat the communist spirit was the "Păltiniș group", a group of intellectuals formed around the philosopher Constantin Noica. They considered high culture "the only valid form of resistance to political aberration"<sup>13</sup> Andrei Pleșu, Gabriel Liiceanu, Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, open a perspective to which many authors in the plastic arts are also affiliated. A thin thread connects these lovers of culture, namely spiritual awakening, which remains the only dissidence that the regime has not been able to destroy, despite its attempts. In an interview with Cristina Chirvasie, Dan Mohanu recalls the rapid demolition of 23 churches in Bucharest in the 1970-1980s, the first of which was Enei Church. "Until the demolition was decided, [...] we improvised a small site and extracted a few fragments from the porch, the only place where we had old paintings from the first half of the 18th century."<sup>14</sup> By this manifest desire to break down all forms of exaltation, the neo-Obizantinist current is born precisely contrary to it.

Neo-Byzantinism did not confront the regime with a frontal opposition, but created a form of silent defense, in which the image, despite the restrictions, continued to bear witness to a transcendent reality. "These artists proposed a twofold form of resistance through art, on the one hand through culture, through a personal example, to an alienated, atheistic and aberrant political system, and on the other hand through an extremely audacious attempt to create an enclave at the heart of a world characterized by entropy, by syncretism devoid of any trace of sacred thrill."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Onisim Colta, *op.cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Magda Cârnecki, *op.cit.*, p. 117.

<sup>14</sup> Dan Mohanu în *Lemnul viu. Revoluția Modelelor*, Cristina Chirvasie, Ed. Fundației Culturale Memoria, București, 2023, p. 183.

<sup>15</sup> Onisim Colta, *op.cit.*, p. 33.

This style developed as a symbolic dimension of great refinement, in which spirituality is not ostentatiously asserted, but discreetly suggested, inviting the viewer to a meditative reading of the canvas, enclosing an assumption of simplicity as a spiritual value. In opposition to visual spectacle or descriptive realism, such as that proposed by historical socialism, the artists affiliated to this direction choose an essentialized visual vocabulary, based on archetypal forms such as the circle, the cross, the square, the vertical and horizontal line, symbolic geometry. Sorin Dumitrescu's "hypersigns" use geometry as a language to emphasize that there is a deeper space, as Colta also remarks, "in his <<soaring>> architectures verticality, elevation is invoked"<sup>16</sup>. The restrained, sober palette, inspired by Byzantine iconography: muted reds, ochres, lime whites, dark blues or deep blacks, emphasizes vibrancy and presence.

### **The Prolog Group and contemporary echoes of religious symbolism**

"Sometimes God may dispose the matter of the world to utter through it human words, or to form a human face. But those words or that face are not so necessary and appropriate a form to him as they are to the human soul. In general, however, God manifests Himself through the world, through the ordinary forms of its existence, far more inadequate to render the divine life."<sup>17</sup>

What Father Dumitru Stăniloae expresses theologically starts from the inadequacy of the material world to express divine life, but this theory develops by also focusing on God's readiness to manifest himself through any form of life. It is precisely this disposition that has a special resonance in the context of the Prolog group. The artists of this movement do not aim to render the Divine in an illustrative way or to make the sacred message accessible. On the contrary, their approach aims to reveal humility, free from any visual spectacle. In line with Father Stăniloae, the group develops a poetics of discretion and transparency. The name "Prolog" is not accidental, for it suggests a series of symbolic beginnings, a form of opening towards new meanings. Prolog has never functioned as a strictly organized movement, but rather as a loose communion of spiritual intentions, in which each artist kept a voice of their own, but worked in accordance with a common inner "listening". Prologue " is a soul connection, a bond in spirit and truth, I would say, that is strong, enduring and holds them together. There is nothing formalistic about it."<sup>18</sup> This attitude was in resonance with

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35

<sup>17</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *O teologie a icoanei/ Studii*, Editura Fundației Anastasia, Editor Sorin Dumitrescu, 2005, p. 91.

<sup>18</sup> Dan Mohanu în *Lemnul viu. Revoluția Modelelor*, Cristina Chirvasie, Ed. Fundației Culturale Memoria, București, 2023, p. 174.

the Orthodox ethos, with the Isist teaching, but without being closed in a religious literalism and without any aesthetic doctrine. The group's spirit could even be seen as daring from two points of view that Magda Cârneci captures. On the one hand, compared with the international context of art at the time, the painters' choice of a figurativism adorned with a system of religious symbolism shows their indifference to the inflation on the international market. On the other hand, active participation in the Orthodox Church can be seen "as a gesture of moral courage and spiritual independence"<sup>19</sup> reported to communist propaganda.

### Paul Gherasim – born 1925

Onisim Colta calls Paul Gherasim "the most significant artist constantly living in the Myroritic spatial horizon of the group of those chosen to prefigure painting in ritual, in doxological act"<sup>20</sup>. Of course, the entire Prolog group considers him the father of Neo-Byzantine painting, being the eldest among them. The peasants in Gherasim's painting are transfigured into totemic, essentialized figures in a universe of liturgical contemplation. So are nature and flowers. Two directions of his artistic style can be identified, one of them stemming from the inspiration of iconography, as we can see in Figure 1, with a specific coloring of ochre and blue. He is recomposing the iconographic canon, using tinges specific to the expressionism of the time. The artist understood the artistic act as a spiritual work, where the plastic form is inseparable from the spiritual content. The second direction can be seen in his pure symbolism, where his chromatic range is dominated by "leaden grays that dramatically charge the composition" and balance is achieved with "pigments of purplish reds or muted crimsons"<sup>21</sup>. His work, though less long-lived, is marked by its strength.



**Fig. 1** Paul Gherasim - *Martyrs*, 2005

<sup>19</sup> Magda Cârneci, *op.cit.*, p. 133.

<sup>20</sup> Onisim Colta, *op.cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 102.

### **Constantin Flondor – born 1936**

Constantin Flondor is both the founder of the Prolog group, together with Paul Gherasim, Horia Paștina and Mihai Sârbulescu, and of the "1.1.1." and "Sigma", starting in theory from "some constructivist experiences, with an emphasis on teamwork"<sup>22</sup>, Onisim Colta's observation which reveals the origin of the dominant group spirit of the Neo-Byzantine. In fact, "the need for solidarity, to be together with others may be one explanation"<sup>23</sup> says the artist in an interview at Elite Art Gallery, Bucharest. Flondor's artistic search combines happening, action, installation, photography, film and performance, later returning to painting as a re-encounter with the self, the essence of nature being captured in works such as the Veranda series (Figure 2). Flondor pursues delicacy, transparencies but also spontaneity.



**Fig. 2** Constantin Flondor -  
*Veranda*, 2012



**Fig. 3** Horia Bernea -  
*Prapor*, 1982

### **Horia Bernea – born 1938**

Horia Bernea was a member of the Prolog group representing a figure of post-war Romanian art, not only as a painter, but also as a cultural reformer as director of the Romanian Peasant Museum. He integrated in his work signs and structures inspired by traditional iconography, redefining the relationship between art and faith in an uncanonical but deeply orthodox way. The "Prapori" series, including Prapor 1982, Figure 3, is considered by Onisim Colta to be inexhaustible, as it is not "a variation on the same theme",

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<sup>22</sup> Onisim Colta, *op.cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.eliteart-gallery.com/interviu-constantin-flondor/>

but "an obsessive repetition of its formulation"<sup>24</sup>, being surprised by the relentless joy of each beginning.

### Sorin Dumitrescu – born 1946

Quoting Magda Cârneci, we can confirm about Sorin Dumitrescu that "he remains without a doubt the guiding spirit and the most active theorist of the group."<sup>25</sup> His exhibition "Hypersigns" from 1980 includes drawings, paintings, sculptural objects of great visual and poetic force, in the opening of the exhibition Dumitrescu enjoying the choice words of Nichita Stănescu. As one of the members of the Prolog group moving towards an increasingly purist orthodoxy, he transforms his works "in the direction of a high religious aestheticism, synthesizing elements of Byzantine and post-Byzantine iconography from the register of the icon"<sup>26</sup>. Dan Mohanu saw this strong turn towards the icon as a way of turning its back on contemporary art, which has been in danger of falling "into a kind of epigonism without substance, of mannerism" since the period of the "hyper-signs"<sup>27</sup>.



**Fig. 4** Sorin Dumitrescu -  
*Church*, 2004



**Fig. 5** Onisim Colta –  
*Holy Book*, 2020

<sup>24</sup> Onisim Colta, *op.cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Magda Cârneci, *op.cit.*, p. 133.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 134.

<sup>27</sup> Dan Mohanu în *Lemnul viu. Revoluția Modelelor*, Cristina Chirvasie, Ed. Fundației Culturale Memoria, București, 2023, p. 169.



### **Onisim Colta – born 1952**

"Light has always fascinated me precisely by the power of its immaterial presence, by its imponderable content, perceiving it as an essential element that announces the presence of spiritual energies that hold things together."<sup>28</sup> Light is also that Center considered by Eliade the supreme balance of man. This is Onisim Colta's way of thinking, with repercussions in plastic art. This presence of light helps him to create huge volumetries in contrast with the shadow, volumetries of objects of worship, objects with sacred or liturgical significance, as we can see in *The Holy Book*, 2020 (Figure 5). Marcel Tolcea also captures another side of light, "it is the Absence of light, the window, beyond the columns, the beehive, the persistence of the shadow, the book's tabs, the celestial wake of the footprint. But what is truly fascinating in his art is how this Absence paradoxically becomes Presence. [...] Onisim Colta constructs a visual discourse about an Absence - Presence constructed in a sacred space of expectation."<sup>29</sup>

### **Horea Paștina – born 1956**

An echo of the Prolog group is also represented by Horea Paștina, recognized for his iconically simple paintings, in which floral, vegetal or domestic motifs are transposed into contemplative, sacramental registers. His works are distinguished by the delicacy of his pictorial gesture and a luminous palette dominated by white, ochre and warm tones. Within the Prolog group, Paștina is the gentle voice, close to the philocalic spirit and the blessed silence of forms reduced to their essence. In an interview with Cristina Chirvasie, he describes his humble activity himself, "my paths were: to the Father<sup>30</sup>, in church and at home[...] Father worked every day. I tried to do the same thing at the easel."<sup>31</sup> From the close friendship with Father Dumitru Stăniloae emerge a series of "transparent" portraits, the human features getting lost in the unsaturation of color, revealing precisely that sacred vibration of the Father. One of these can be seen in Figure 6, created in 2019.

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<sup>28</sup> Onisim Colta, *op.cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>29</sup> Marcel Tolcea, speech at the opening of the exhibition *The Birth of Light, Onisim Colta*, 10 mai 2023, appeared in the catalogue *Nașterea Luminii / The Birth of Light*, Muzeul de Artă Arad, Ed. Alutus, Miercurea Ciuc, 2023, p. 32.

<sup>30</sup> Referring to Father Dumitru Stăniloae.

<sup>31</sup> Horea Paștina în *Lemnul viu. Revoluția Modelelor*, Cristina Chirvasie, Ed. Fundației Culturale Memoria, București, 2023, p. 207.



**Fig. 6** Horea Paștina -  
*Father Dumitru Stăniloae, 2019*



**Fig. 7** Horea Paștina -  
*The Stone Cross, 1991*

### Considerations

As a cultural legacy, we can understand that the painting of the 1980s took shape as a profound act of cultural and spiritual resistance. Manifesting itself in an oppressive climate dominated by the atheist ideology of the communist regime, we could observe the neo-Byzantine infiltrations of artists who still believed in a strengthening center that was faith. The members of the Prolog group reconfigured the meanings of painting, reconnecting with Christian-Orthodox values and cultivating an aesthetic of visual silence that can be read as a visual Prayer. The legacy of the Prolog group and the socio-cultural context of the 1980s is also reflected in contemporary art, where the preoccupation with the sacred continues to generate forms of plastic expression that glorify the inner beauty. In the context of a universal postmodernism marked by conceptual art, the function of painting is in a state of crisis, questioning its traditional role. This aesthetic climate seems to confirm the considerations of the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, who proclaimed the "death of art"<sup>32</sup>, understood as an end in terms of its classical form. Hegel anticipates "the shift of emphasis from the understanding of art as a response to social needs [...] to its autonomous status"<sup>33</sup>, which ends in a growing distance from the Church. Thus, in spite of the fragmentation of artistic

<sup>32</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Prelegeri de estetică*, vol. I, Ed. Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, București, 1966, p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> Adrian Stoleriu, *op.cit.*, p. 145.

discourse, the sacred does not disappear, but is recreated in new forms, retreating in the form of symbol.

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\*“Arta sacră în epoca de aur – artiștii”, emisiunea „Adevăruri despre trecut”, TVR, 15 decembrie 2022.