

18th Century Engravers in Romanian Art History. M. Striblițchi as a Case in Point

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Anca Elisabeta Tatay, Cornel Tatai-Baltă, *Gravorul Mihail Striblițchi (A doua jumătate a secolului al XVIII-lea) / Mihail Striblițchi, the Engraver (Second Half of the 18th Century)*, Mega Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2023, 350 pages.



The two art historians from Transylvania, Anca Elisabeta Tatay, and her father, Cornel Tatai-Baltă give us an accurate account of the life and activity of Mihail Striblițchi, reputed engraver of the 18th century in their latest book which came out two years ago. Rigorously organized in their research, the two art historians start with an argument, continue with a short overview of the engraver's life and activity, deal with the engravings, prints and apart from conclusions, they include comprehensive tables on books he contributed to, places where they are kept nowadays, engravings signed by him or attributed to him and his collaborators, the format of his books, printing houses they came out at and their illustrations, a general bibliography of the

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volume and another one on him, ending with reproductions of title pages, book covers, illustrations and ornaments.

According to the argument of the volume, their work was published in the larger context of an increasing interest in old Romanian books and their illustrations (1508-1830), included in the comprehensive treaty on art in our country from prehistory to modern times, i.e., *Arta din România. Din preistorie în contemporaneitate*, vol. I-II, edited by Răzvan Theodorescu and Marius Porumb (2018)¹. Three recent articles drafted by the authors lie the foundations of their endeavour² (pp. 9-10) and their gratitude is especially expressed towards two “distinguished ladies from Kiev, Alina Kondratiuk (Lavra Pekerska) and Valentyna Bochkovska (Museum of Books and Printing of Ukraine), reputed researchers who, in February 2022 (when Russia started the war against Ukraine), had to leave their own country” (p. 5).

Main contributor to Romanian culture, Mihail Striblițchi (ca. 1730-1805/ 1807), probably of Polish-Russian-Ukrainian descent, graduated from the Theological Academy of Kiev and distinguished himself as editor, engraver, translator and author, among others (p. 11). His engravings were (un)favourably discussed by few authors, Iorga and Balș (1922) arguing that he was ‘detestable in style, brutally reproducing Russian models in a time when old Byzantinism was contaminated by Western influences’, whereas Ștrempel (1956) praised his engravings as particularly ‘appealing’ and ‘suggestive’ (pp. 15-16).

¹ Cornel Tatai-Baltă, *Grafica de carte, sec. XVI-XVII*, in *Arta din România din preistorie în contemporaneitate*, vol. I, edited by acad. Răzvan Theodorescu, acad. Marius Porumb, București – Cluj-Napoca, Editura Academiei Române – Editura Mega, 2018, pp. 393-401 (Țara Românească), pp. 503-504 (Moldova), pp. 637-639 (Transilvania). Cornel Tatai-Baltă, *Grafica de carte, sec. XVIII*, in *Arta din România din preistorie în contemporaneitate*, vol. II, ed.: acad. Răzvan Theodorescu, acad. Marius Porumb, București – Cluj-Napoca, Editura Academiei Române – Editura Mega, 2018, pp. 53-57 (Țara Românească), pp. 77-79 (Moldova), pp. 105-108 (Transilvania).

² Anca Elisabeta Tatay, Cornel Tatai-Baltă, *Primele ilustrații ale unui calendar românesc (Iași, 1785, tipograf: Mihail Striblițchi)*, in *Apulum, Series Historia & Patrimonium. Supplementum* (Alba Iulia), LXI, 2024, pp. 121-149; Anca Elisabeta Tatay, Cornel-Tatai Baltă, *Ukrainian Sources of the Illustrations in the Gospel of Iași from 1762*, in vol. *Biblica et Philologica*, Konstanz (Germany), Harting-Gorre Publishers, 2024, in print; Anca Elisabeta Tatay, Cornel Tatai-Baltă, *Reprezentările Regelui David semnate de Mihail Striblițchi (1782-1794)*, in vol. *Zamferei Mihail omagiu*, ed.: Cătălina Vătășescu, Lia Brad Chisacof, Simona Nicolae, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Scriptor & Ed. Mega, 2024, in print.

It is believed that M. Striblițchi descended from a family of engravers, and he initially made the portrait of the preacher Nicholas Mauroeides from Kefalonia (1708-1788) in metal from his Greek book; it came out in Iași in 1756, and it was the first of its kind as he would continue his engravings in wood and leave metal aside. The authors note that it is also the first portrait of a local author in old Romanian books printed on our territory (pp. 18-19). The four evangelists bear his signature, and they are part of the 1762 *Gospel Book* of Iași (p. 20). For instance, Luke is said to have been engraved following the Baroque tradition in which the intense feelings of the character are grasped in movement, along with the folds of his vestments (p. 23). In 1777 at Iași, two books come out at the Metropolitan Printing House, *Catahisis* and *Book of Hours/ Ceasolov* and their marvellously ornamented title pages bear Striblitchi's signature (p. 25). The former also contains an illustration by Striblițchi on Jesus Christ which determined George Oprescu to label it as 'correctly drawn and beautifully traced'³. The Saviour is depicted as stepping on clouds with the globe on the cross in one hand, a symbol used since the Middle Ages to allude to Him as Master of the world and blessing with the other hand, also a feature of Baroque art, according to A. Tatay and C. Tatai-Baltă (p. 26). The latter shows the Annunciation in the margins of the title page frame, unusually rendered for the Romanian space, argue the authors, surmounted by God the Father with a triangular nimb, flanked by saints Joachim and Anne, a theme that had not been encountered in engravings in our country (pp. 27-28).

Another book that was published in Iași under the auspices of Mihail Striblițchi is the 1784 *Prăvilioara*, a collection of explanations on the seven Christian sacraments; it contains an engraving of the Metropolitan Gavriil (Gabriel) of Moldavia during the religious service accompanied by a priest (possibly Striblițchi himself) and an apprentice in a ceremonial composition animated by the characters' attitude developed on two registers, a heavenly and an earthly one: Jesus Christ is shown sitting on clouds, flanked by two military saints, George and Gabriel, a device often employed in Baroque art (pp. 38-39). *The 112 Yearbook/ Calendarul pe 112* (Iași, 1785) printed in

³ See Gh. Oprescu, *Grafica românească în secolul al XIX-lea*, vol. I, București, Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, 1942, p. 123, 302.

Romanian⁴ is richly ornated with various wood engravings, some signed by him and his son, others, less so; yet the authors suspect it was the work of father and son, as in the case of the frontispieces and vignettes (p. 42). The yearbook stirred much interest in its time, and the relation with the influences of planets and signs, all astrological and astronomic landmarks related to the measurement of the annual and monthly cycle, not to mention the meteorological implications adjusted to a defined space and its surroundings draw on Christianity and speak of the need to master the anguish of time that gave birth to divinatory literature in Antiquity. It is the authors' belief that despite the lacking signature, the engraving of the *Zodiac* belongs to M. Striblițchi (pp. 43-44). They further discuss the zodiacal signs and their interpretations, their governing planets and the various beings or objects that are specific to them (pp. 48-54).

His activity as translator is equally accounted for; he translated from Russian and published in Iași a physiognomy treatise, *Curioznică și în scurt arătare celor ce iubesc a cerca vrednice învățături din fiziognomie* inspired by the German model of Gaspar Lavater, *Von der Physionomik*, Leipzig, 1772⁵. It provides us the first notions of anatomy of the body in Romanian, Striblițchi drawing without signature, the head of a man, his forehead wrinkled within a rectangle of typographic ornaments and an inscription above his head inviting readers to reflection; nature, with all its facets (that would later become a phenomenological cube which would equally reveal and hide from us, based on our position) has been construed as a secret writing, a figure in the carpet in the Jamesian acception, a huge cryptogram of the Creator only wise men could decipher using several techniques (physiognomy, necromancing, hydromancy, astronomy, etc.) (p. 57). In 1785, other books come out at M. Striblițchi's printing house in Iași, namely *Hrisovul lui Alexandru I Mavrocordat Domnul Moldovei* and the *Evangelion* (or *Molitvenic*) (pp. 59-60). In the following year, an *Oktoikh* was published and the volume is elegantly decorated with the portrait of Saint John of Damascus, bearing the insertion and the coat of arms of Moldavia with the name of the typographer in question,

⁴ For further details, see Ioan Bianu, Nerva Hodoș, *Bibliografia românească veche (1508-1530)*, tom II, 1716-1808, București, Atelierele Socec & Co., Soc. Anonimă, 1910, pp. 301-302.

⁵ See also, Eugenia Dima, Gabriela E. Dima, *Traducătorii români și traduceri laice din secolul al XVIII-lea*, Ed. Universității "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" Iași, 2016, p. 45, 222.

Mihail Stribliț. Saint John of Damascus appears to be a bearded old man who has also grown a moustache, sitting at his writing desk inside; an inkwell, a rosary and an icon of the Mother of God with baby Jesus in her arms can be found on this desk. The saint is wearing Oriental clothes, similar to those of monks and, in the background, an open window invites us to a bird-eye view of the city, people walking (pp. 62-63). In 1789, three lay bilingual books came out at M. Striblițchi's printing house, *De-ale casei vorbe rusești și moldovenești, În scurtă adunare a numelor* both compiled by the engraver and *Lecciónes* by Toader Școleru with the first frontispiece containing stylized vegetal elements (p. 66). A *Psalter* is published in 1790 and here, old frontispieces and vignettes would be mixed with new ones along with a full page xylo engraving of King David II by Striblițchi (pp. 67-68). The depiction is obviously different from the many images of the creator of the psalms in old Romanian books⁶. Portrayed as standing and playing the harp, on the table before him there is an open book with music notes, the crown and the sceptre lying on a pillow in a monumental chamber with high columns that support an arch, and walls which have big lattice windows. God is represented as a sun, Yahve written on it, and the rays enlighten the saint (p. 69). Among his engravings, there is the Entombment of Christ of the 1792 *Book of Hours*, drawing on German graphic art in the era of Enlightenment; all characters around Christ confess a strong love and composed pain in a setting in which a natural display of feelings and the diversity of attitudes are obvious. Intersemiotically put, in a linguistic stance adopted by R. Jakobson in the definition of translation, M. Striblițchi professionally drew and engraved the biblical scene recorded by the Book of Books, similarly to Renaissance artists Albrecht Dürer with his 1509 *Small Passion Cycle* and Lucas Cranach the Elder's one (p. 74). M. Striblițchi was also a spy who had to leave Iași when needed, hence his activity at Dubăsari whose proven existence resides in the three works there, *Bucvar* (1792), of interest to all those who wanted to become literate, *Cântec după răposare preluminatului cneaz Grigorie Alexandrovici Potemkin Tavricescu* (1793), a book-length song following the death of the general, and the *Book of Hours/ Ceaslov* (1794), followed by the books printed at Movilău: *Istoria lui*

⁶ According to the authors' previous research, i.e., Cornel Tatai-Baltă, Anca Elisabeta Tatay, *Instrumente muzicale în xilogravura de carte românească veche (sec. XVII-XIX)*, in *Transilvania* (Sibiu), nr. 5-6, 2018, pp. 30-36.

Alexandru cel Mare/ History of Alexander the Great (1796), *Psaltire/ Psalter* (1796) and another *Bucvar* (1800), to which a volume of poems can be added, *Poezii noo* (1795?) that came out at either Dubăsari or Movilău. The Dubăsari *Bucvar* of 1792 contains an engraving of the Holy Trinity by Striblițchi, in its Western drafting, also frequent in the Eastern world, in general and the Romanian one, in particular (pp. 75-76). In addition, the authors deal thoroughly with the nine illustrations of the 1794 *Book of Hours* (pp. 78-88). After 1800 or to be more precise, following M. Striblițchi's death which occurred in 1805/1807, three engravings were recorded in books from the Neamț monastery and the authors attribute one of them to the clergyman tackled by the current volume (p. 89).

A 'rare and curious' clerical figure⁷, priest M. Striblițchi was definitely involved in the work of many covers of church books for the Metropolitanate of Iași and the monasteries of Moldavia, and the results will most likely surface in the future⁸ (p. 93). The authors found the oldest source on Striblițchi's activity in Moldavia to be the skin cover for *Apostegmata adică Cuvinte vitievești sau filosofești* (1755), a text translated from Russian into Romanian by Vartolomei Măzăreanu at the request of the Metropolitan of the time, currently in the collections of the Mihai Eminescu University Library in Iași (p. 94). The oldest *Pomelnic* of the Putna monastery still kept in its library and dating from 1756 has the cover bearing the signature of priest Mihai from Iași and the initials M.S. can be encountered on the front. The central circular medallions differ, the front being marked by the representation of the Crucifixion, whereas the back proposes a Western theme, not encountered by A.E. Tatay and C. Tatai-Baltă so far in the graphics of old Romanian books, the Mother of God in pain. Here, the Virgin whose hands are joined in prayer, holds her head down and glances with great sorrow at the lifeless body of Her Son, lying on His grave. The pain is similar to the sword that pierced His heart, also depicted by the craftsman. Behind Her, a barren cross rises and, on the background, we can grasp the city of Jerusalem. Both scenes are surrounded by flowers (pp. 95-96). Among the book covers of lay books, there is the one of the French-Turkish Dictionary (1805), with

⁷ Dumitru Furtună, *Preoțimea românească în sec. al XVIII-lea: starea ei materială și culturală*, Vălenii de Munte, Ed. Neamul Românesc, 1915, p. 165.

⁸ Dimitrie Dan, *Protopopul Mihail Striblițchi (schită biografică și bibliografică)*, in *Candela* (Cernăuți), 1912, p. 7.

the Moldavian coat of arms on the front and the Wallachian one on the back (p. 99).

To conclude, the volume presents M. Striblițchi's life and activity for the first time in our country. The authors' research led to the following results: 30 titles of the books he contributed to are kept in today's libraries and 10 volumes for whom he gave us marvelous skin covers. They analysed 45 engravings, all in wood, except for one in metal, besides the frontispieces and vignettes of the books he had a part in between 1777-1800 (p. 102). Out of them, 41 bear his signature in various ways. He tackled mainly religious themes as priest and exarch of Moldavia during his time at the printing house of the Metropolitanate in Iași. However, his lay prints, which fill a gap, are poor with respect to ornamentation, except for the 1785 *Yearbook*, a phenomenon encountered where Romanians lived at the time (p. 103). Undoubtedly, he was the most important editor, typographer and engraver of the second half of 18th century Moldavia (p. 104); last but not least, we should cherish him for his engravings that were role models for some miniaturists active on Romanian territory at the time or afterwards (p. 106). Thus, we recommend the book to all art historians, specialists and amateurs interested in old Romanian books and their engravings, the history of the book and print in our country and neighbouring ones.

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