

SUCEVIȚA MONASTERY. THE OVERPAINTING FROM NARTHEX AND EXONARTHEX. TECHNIQUE OF EXECUTION AND THE METHODOLOGY OF REMOVAL

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Abstract: The overpaintings found on the frescoes from Sucevița Monastery, date from periods that remain uncertain due to the rarity of written documents. Probably they were made because of the degradations that occurred in time or because of tastes. These interventions are made in oil technique or tempera, for that reason we can date them around the 19th century when there was this tendency of painting Orthodox churches in oil. The overpaintings are placed in key position, on the lunette, facilitating access from exonarthex to the narthex or from narthex to the tomb room. In terms of iconography, the overpaintings covered representations like: *Anastasis / the Resurrection; The Holy Trinity of the New Testament and Virgin Mary with the thief represented in heaven (detail from the Last Judgement)*. The present paper tries to make a comparison among the three surfaces with overpainting, bringing technical arguments regarding the differences between them. At the same time, the paper presents details about the methodology applied to cleaning the overpaintings and it highlights the original image that can bring nuances in the iconographic interpretation.

Keywords: Mural painting, Middle Ages, Sucevița Monastery, a fresco, oil painting, iconography, Descent from the Cross, Anastasis / Resurrection, the Trinity, the Last Judgement

Narthex, the east wall – *Anastasis / the Resurrection*

The research on the surfaces covered by overpainting began in 2011, when the restoration process started in these areas. At that time, the iconostasis that covered the eastern wall of the narthex was dismantled and on this occasion, a research¹ team started to discuss about the painting placed above the door that facilitates the entrance to the tomb room (Fig. 1). It is worth mentioning that this picture, having the representation of *the Descent from the Cross of Jesus Christ* (Fig. 2), at that time we believe that the overpainting from the “*a fresco*” surface has the same author with the iconostasis that dates from 1805².

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¹ The restoration of Sucevița's painting is done by CERECs ART SRL –directed by Phd Prof. Oliviu Boldura. The author is the coordinator of the restoration team. The chemical analyses are made by eng. Ioan Istudor, eng. Gheorghe Niculescu

² The inscription with the date was identified by the art historian Marina Sabados. It is written the documentation made for iconostasis (unpublished)

From the investigations carried out using direct and indirect light or UV, we observed original elements under the overpainting. It could be identified technological details specific to the “*a fresco*” technique: incisions of the first preparatory drawing and compass points which delimitates the groups of characters with halos.

As a result of physicochemical analyses, it was concluded that the overpainting on the mural surface was made in the “*a secco*” technique and has oil as a binder in which pigments like: iron oxide red, lead red, yellow and green copper, Prussian blue, and white lead were immersed. A comparative analysis of the pigments from the mural overpainting and iconostasis revealed that the colours used for the icons are different from those used on the “*a fresco*” painting. For this reason, we considered that the two works of art belongs to different authors. Although, the two interventions are different from the stylistic point of view, we believe that the reason the “*a fresco*” overpaint was made is because of the Baroque iconostasis, placed in 1805 on the eastern wall of the narthex and the date can be close to one another.

From the compositional point of view, the mural overpaint representing *the Descent from the Cross of Jesus Christ* is concentrated in the central plane, where Jesus is surprised in the dramatic moment when He is alight from the cross. At His feet, we can recognize the Holy Women with the Virgin Mary and also two soldiers (Fig. 3). On the one hand, the oil painting uses the *chiaroscuro* technique in which the portraits are treated very refined, with a divine light concentrated on the Virgin Mary and Jesus left as a very subtle detail of interest. On the other hand, the dark parts of composition were covered only partially and very carelessly.

In the first stage, we removed the deposits of dust and soot from the overpaint, to see the real chromatic scale of the oil paint. After a few cleaning test, it was decided that the best procedure is the one that combines the mechanical method using brushes, *wishab* and soft gums, and chemical solution – ammonia water or alcoholized water. Following these tests, we observed a discontinuity of the last layer of protection - varnish, that had consistent clumps due to a technical vice. Also, it has been observed that the 19th century paint layer was applied in a thin semi – transparent film. For this reason, the underlying paint layer was visible and we could see the original painting.

To remove the overpainting, we have made tests in the areas where we could see the presence of the original painting underneath. A favorable result was obtained using a mixture of solvents placed in a compress. The contact time for the compress depended on the state of the oil thickness that fluctuates from one area to another. To achieve a satisfactory result, the method of cleaning was alternated with compresses impregnated with a solution of ammonium carbonate. After a few cleaning tests, we agreed that the removal of the overpainting should be done differently, depending on the characteristics

of the oil painting but mostly of the original “*a fresco*” (Fig. 5). The strategy applied to remove the 19th century overpainting was influenced by the unaware of the conservation status of the “*a fresco*” painting and more specifically, if the color is detached from the support. For this reason, we preferred a cautious approach, progressing in the evolution of cleaning step by step, using a network of panels (Fig. 4).

In the end, after the removal of the overpaint, it was found that on the areas where the consistency of oil painting was big, the adherence to the original painting was much higher (Fig. 6). This phenomenon happened due to the differentiated impregnation of the surface that increased the absorption in the original paint layer. For this reason, it should be noted that the “*a fresco*” painting marked by the presence of the overpainting, will suffer degradations that are specific to oil painting (Fig. 7).

Finally, the restoration process managed to fully recover the original “*a fresco*” painting in which it was represented the feast icon of the church – *the Resurrection* (Fig. 8). Thus, if the overpainting from the 19th century presented *the Descent from the Cross*, an image to conclude that the events were dedicated to the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the 16th century painting brings to the community the representative image of the church that marks the transition from death to eternal life.

At Sucevița, the founders choose to represent the scene of *the Resurrection* in the version of *Anastasis* or the *Deliverance of Souls from Limbo*. Compositionally, the ample plan of the scene has as a focal point, Jesus Christ placed into *mandorla* and trampled on the gates of Hell. The gates are positioned in the shape of a cross, a symbolic element that is repeated in other areas of the scene. At the feet of Christ, it is represented Lucifer, flanked by angels with spears that stab him and keep him in chains. Unlike the depictions of the same kind from northern Moldavia where the same representation is in the nave on the register of *Passion*, at Sucevița, Jesus has the cross in his left hand as a clear reference to the sacrifice. Leaned to the left, Jesus is represented in the moment when he takes out Adam and Eve from the open grave with His right hand, a sign of victory over death and the original sin. Behind them, the proto parents are represented by extension, all saved by Jesus Christ through His deliverance from limbo. On the other side of the group, with a common gesture of movement towards Christ, there are represented the righteous of the Old Testament. Between them, stands Saint John the Baptist (Fig. 6). The novelty of this scene is represented, however, by the gold crowns hold by the characters that surround Jesus Christ.

Exonarthex – The Holy Trinity

Located at the crossing point from exonarthex to the narthex, on the lunette above the door, the icon of the Holy Trinity, in its New Testament version, was closely examined at the end of 2015, when the restoration process

started in this room (Fig. 9). Placed in the ample context of the *Last Judgement*, the icon of *The Holy Trinity* marks the moment when the believer passes from the preparatory to the sacred space, marking himself with the sign of the cross. Placed where it is generally painted the feast icon, at Sucevița, the founders choose to represent the icon in narthex and not in exonarthex.

After analyzing the scene from the scaffold, it has been observed that in this case, just as in the feast icon, the surface was covered with overpainting. This type of intervention in these areas is common in the churches from northern Moldavia and has been a predisposition in the 19th century, when the beneficiary tried to refresh the image.

Compositionally, the western representation from the 19th century of the Holy Trinity, presents two characters – Father and Son – standing on a banquette sustaining together the cross. At the intersection of the tow bars, it is represented the Holy Spirit as a dove, accompanied by the monogram of Christ and framed in a circle that scatters light rays. Behind each person on the banquette, it was painted a seraph with six wings and a human body (Fig.10).

In the lower part of the scene, at the base of the cross, we could distinguish the presence of an inscription that tried to date the intervention. Unfortunately, when the restoration started, only the last two digits were visible – 10 (Fig. 11).

Also, we could see that the overpainting from the representation of *the Holy Trinity*, has the same technique with the one from the narthex where it was painted *the Descent from the Cross* over the feast icon – *The Resurrection*.

In this case also, the overpaint was done directly on the original painting, without any other intermediate layer. The faces of the characters were partially covered: forehead, nose, cheekbones, preserving the original anatomy and drawing (Fig.12). Also, at the edge of the scene we could see clear areas with “*a fresco*” painting, just as in the narthex (Fig.13).

Chromatically, the pigments used for overpainting are the same as those from the “*Descent from the Cross*” in the narthex. All these pieces of information lead to the conclusion that the two overpaintings (*Descent from the Cross* and *Holly Trinity*) belong to the same author.

The methodology applied to clean the overpainting is the same as the one used for the feast icon in the narthex. At the beginning, the surface was cleared of suspension of dust and sooted to distinguish better the colors of the overpaint and after that it was removed the overpaint using the same network of panels. As the overpainting was removed from the surface, the original composition started to be more visible. In the end, it was found that the overpaint followed the original composition and color. Major changes were found on the right character (Father); if before, He was wearing a green cloth with black shadows, after restoration it was discovered that He was wearing white clothes with blue smalt drawing. Also, the halo was modified, in the representation from the 19th century, Father was depicted with an equilateral

triangle around his head. In the original “*a fresco*” painting, He appears with a halo framed by a star, such as *the Ancient of Days* (Fig. 14).

The character from the left side of the viewer who represents Jesus Christ, did not had chromatic changes, instead, after restoration He appeared with a cross inscribed in the halo.

A new detail that the representation of the Holy Trinity brings after restoration, are the seraphs that surrounds the three characters. Their presence makes the whole composition more dynamic. An additional element is that the entire composition is inscribed in a mandorla. All these elements make the whole composition gain an eschatological interpretation (Fig. 15).

Another novelty is the inscription that accompanies the representation. Thus, around the oversized cross and the two characters is written: “*In the name of the Father and the Son*”³ a reference to the beginning words of the prayer that summarizes the dogma of the Holy Trinity and it is less appointed to the characters in the image. The prayer is also the one that accompanies the sign of the cross that every Cristian makes at the entrance to the church. In this way, the accent in the composition is put on the symbol of sacrifice – the cross. A similar representation can be found at Sucevita on the triumphal arch that connects the chancel with the nave (Fig. 16). Here, the New Testament Trinity is placed in the middle of the Akathist Hymn and illustrates the verse 15, as the historian Constanța Costea says (*While fully present amid those below ...*)⁴. The composition in this case occupies a double space related to the other 16 scenes from the Akatistos, detaching itself from the context. If we look closer, the scenes repeat the same figurative composition. We have two characters seated on the throne, to the left is Jesus Christ with a cruciform halo and on the right is the Ancient of Days, dressed in white wearing a stellate areola and the inscription of Jesus Christ. The composition repeats the liturgical rite that takes place in the chancel and is connected with what is happening on the altar table, assuming a liturgical character.

Thus, if the scene is represented above the altar table, where bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, we can say that we have a scene in which Jesus Christ is represented as a Messiah (left) and like a Judge (right).

An important detail that underlies this interpretation is represented by the gestures of the two characters. Thus, with an identical act, they support the cross as if they want to underline the presence of the cross. In this way, the cross becomes the altar upon Christ *was offered once for all times to bear the sins of many; and the second time that He appears it will be apart from sin...*

³ The interpretation of the inscription belongs to PhD Prof. Tereza Sinigalia

⁴ Constantin Ciobanu, *Text și imagine în pictura românească din secolul al XVI-lea, Raport științific sintetic pentru întreaga perioadă de realizare a proiectului*, Bucharest 2016, www.medieval.istoria-artei.ro, 28.10.2016

(Hebrews 9, 28). The moment is present and repeats itself at each liturgy until *Parousia* like it is said in the Cherubic Hymn.

A similar form of representation of the Holy Trinity at Sucevița, was signaled by Victor Brătulescu⁵ in the Votive Painting in the north – west side of the nave, where the *Eucharistic* image is represented (Fig.17). Following the iconography, he saw in the upper plane the moment that depicts *epiclesis*. The composition is the same with the one from exonarthex.

In the Votive Painting we find the Holy Trinity painted as the Ancient of Days⁶ on the right side of the viewer, on the left there are Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, Who is at the intersection of the bars of the cross. The presence of seraphs within the composition refers to the Revelation⁷ where it says: *they have no rest day and night saying: Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.*⁸

In this way, we can talk about a composition which seems to be a classic scene of Holy Trinity where the person of God the Father is signified by the Ancient of Days and the iconographic meaning is concentrated around the cross as a path to deification of man.

Exonarthex – Virgin Mary and the thief in Heaven (detail from the Last Judgement)

The last area covered with overpainting within the Church of Sucevița occupies only a part of the large scene of the *Last Judgement*. It is located in the part where it is represented the entrance to heaven (Fig.18).

Placed at the level where the viewer has access, the area has suffered from large degradation caused by the human factor. Although the entire area presents many losses of color, the overpainting covers only two characters: Virgin Mary and the Thief (Fig. 19).

If *the Descent from the Cross* and that of *the Holy Trinity* were made directly on the original surface, this time, the technique and the color range is different. Following the analyses made by the engineer Gheorghe Niculescu, it was found that over the “*a fresco*” painting there is an “*a secco*” one. Before they started to paint, they applied a thin layer of ground and afterwards, they painted in tempera (Fig. 21).

The chemical analyses have shown that the layer of ground is in fact a pigment – white lead, applied on the surface and over it they used a small range of pigments: blue ultramarine, iron oxide, green copper, black coal. Even from

⁵ Victor Brătulescu, „*Portretul logofătului Ioan Movilă (Monahul Ioanichie)*”, Ed. Mușatinii, 2013, p. 220-243

⁶ I.D. Ștefănescu, *L'évolution de la peinture religieuse en Bucovine et en Moldavie depuis les origines jusqu'au XIXe siècle, Nouvelles recherches. Etude iconographique*, Librairie orientale Paul Geuthner, Paris, 1929, p. 151

⁷ Apocalipsul, IX, 8

⁸ Victor Brătulescu make an analogy between the liturgical ritual and iconography of the Votive painting. *Ibidem* p. 255

the early start of restoration, it was noticed that the state of conservation of the painting is bad and the phenomenon of degradation is affecting both stages of painting.

After a visual examination of the surface, it has been found that within the “*lacuna*” formed in the overpainting layer, there are elements of the original composition and the color range is significantly different. Also, the proportions of both characters were quite different from those of the overpainting. This was more evident at the thief; in the 19th century version, he was constructed with a bad anatomy and untowardly.

The removal of the overpaint was done mostly using mechanical methods because of the thin ground applied as a support for the overpaint, for that reason we could easily detach the painting.

The operation started in the neutral area, between the two characters. During the process of discovering the original painting, we started to observe elements of drawing and colour. In the first stage, it was uncovered the grey background applied over the white, the one that symbolizes Paradise (Fig.20). In the case of the thief, we rediscovered a slightly oversized character with specific colors from Sucevița. In the upper area, he conserves the overlays of the base tone and middle tone and the lower part preserves a sensitive preparatory drawing with the base tone.

The overpainting of the Virgin Mary was removed applying the same methodology and in the end, the restoration process put in value a garment that respects the natural proportion, with a drawing that places the original painting in the post – Byzantine style (Fig. 22).

A particular detail of the scene is the crown worn by the Virgin Mary on Her head. As morphology, it falls in the same style found in Byzantine painting. The presence of the Virgin Mary with a crown on Her head in the scene of Heaven is an innovation of the founders from Sucevița. The idea of coronation of the Virgin Mary is repetitive in several scenes in the church: *The Ascension* in the chancel, *the Hymn* – “*They Enjoy You*” in the nave on the west wall and *Glorification of the Holy Virgin* represented at the exterior on the south wall.

The reason why the Virgin Mary has a crown on her head only in some scenes is closely linked to the idea of incarnation of Jesus Christ from Virgin Mary or to the idea that God emended the tree of life in Virgin Mary. The idea is sustained by a detail found after the present restoration, namely, in the center of the crown is painted the development of a grapevine. The argument is the same as that of the *Tree of Jesse* (exterior, south wall) or the representation – *Christ as a Vine Plant* (inside, nave, north wall).

In this way, we can say that the current restoration puts in value the original painting and in the same time brings new elements for the iconographic interpretation and completes the general image of the painting from Sucevița.



Fig. 1. Sucevița Monastery, narthex, general view with the iconostasis from the eastern wall, before restoration.



Fig. 2. Sucevița Monastery, narthex, image with the representation "The Descent from the Cross of Jesus Christ".

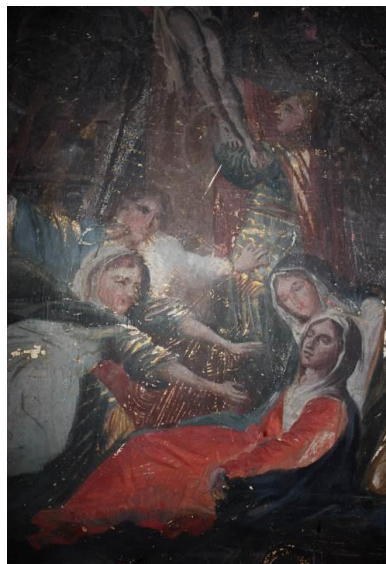


Fig. 3 "The Descent from the Cross of Jesus Christ". Detail



Fig. 4. Sucevița Monastery, narthex, detail during the work



Fig. 5. Sucevița Monastery, narthex, the representation “the Descent from the Cross of Jesus Christ” detail during the work.



Fig. 6. Sucevița Monastery, narthex, a comparative image with areas covered by overpainting and with the original “a fresco” painting.



Fig. 7. Sucevița Monastery, narthex, a comparative image with areas covered by overpainting and with the original “a fresco” painting – rediscovering the original image of Jesus Christ.



Fig. 8. Sucevița Monastery, narthex, image with the original painting.
The feast icon – Anastasis / the Resurrection.



Fig. 9. Sucevița Monastery, exonarthex, general view with the entrance to narthex



Fig. 10. Sucevița Monastery, image with the Holy Trinity, before restoration



Fig. 11. Sucevița Monastery, exonarthex, detail with the inscription from the overpaint of the Holy Trinity.



Fig. 12. Sucevița Monastery, exonarthex, image with the overpaint of the Holy Trinity



Fig. 13. Sucevița Monastery, exonarthex, at the edge of the scene
we could see clear areas with “*a fresco*” painting



Fig. 14 Sucevița Monastery, exonarthex, rediscovering the original image of the Father



Fig. 15. Sucevița Monastery, exonarthex, , the original image of the Holy Trinity

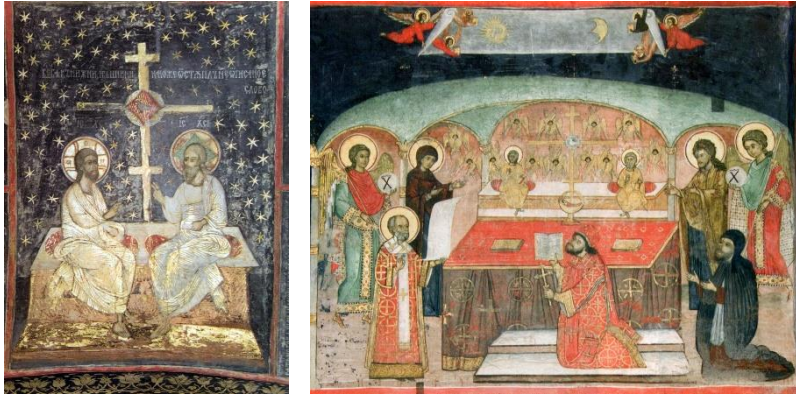


Fig. 16. Chancel (left) the triumphal arch that connects the chancel with the nave. Fig. 17. Nave, the north-west wall, the Votive Painting.



Fig. 18. Sucevița Monastery, exonarthex, detail from the Last Judgement



Fig. 19. Sucevița Monastery, exonarthex, detail with Virgin Mary and the thief in Paradise, with overpainting.

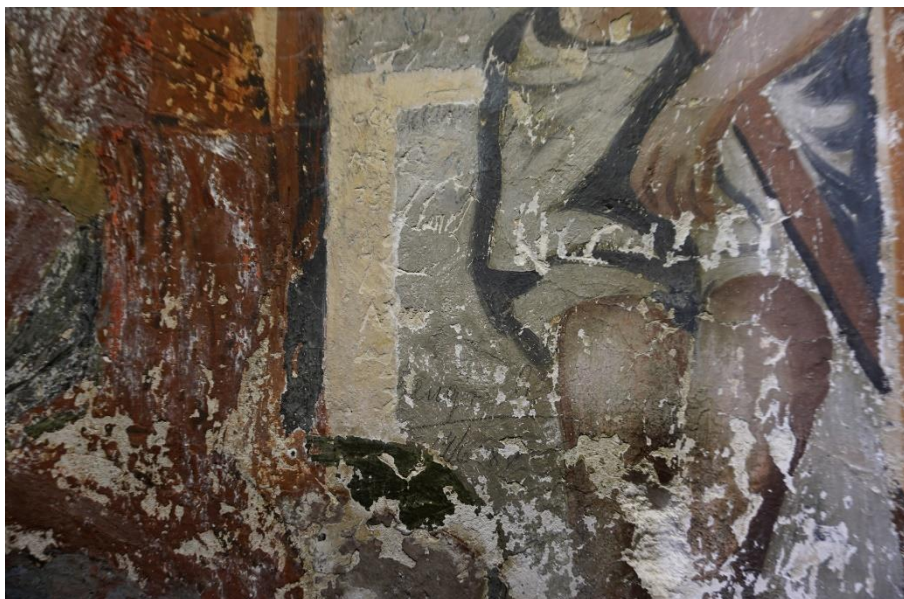


Fig. 20. Sucevița Monastery, exonarthex, detail during work.

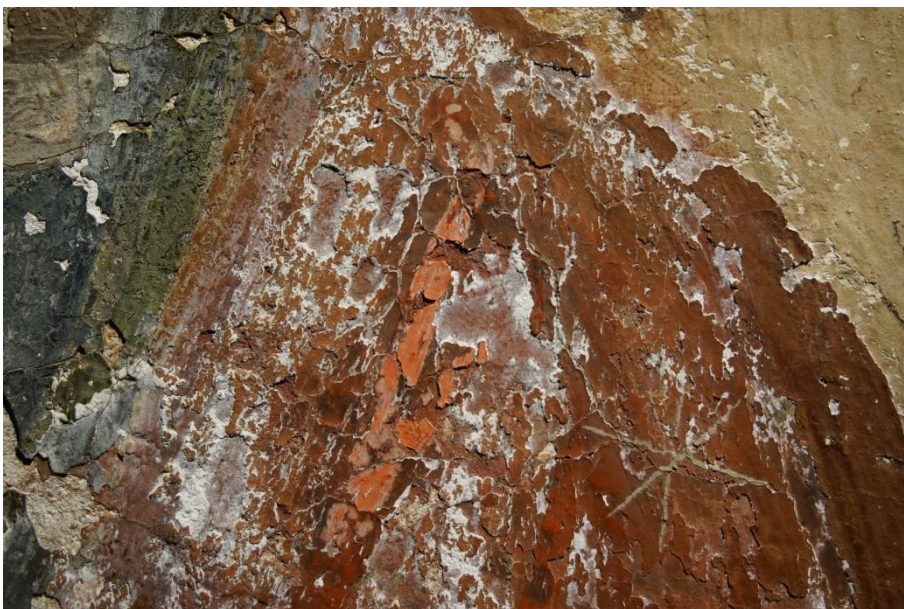


Fig. 21 .Sucevița Monastery, exonarthex, detail from the clothes of Virgin Mary



Fig. 22 Sucevița Monastery, exonarthex, Virgin Mary and the thief in Paradise, after restoration.

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