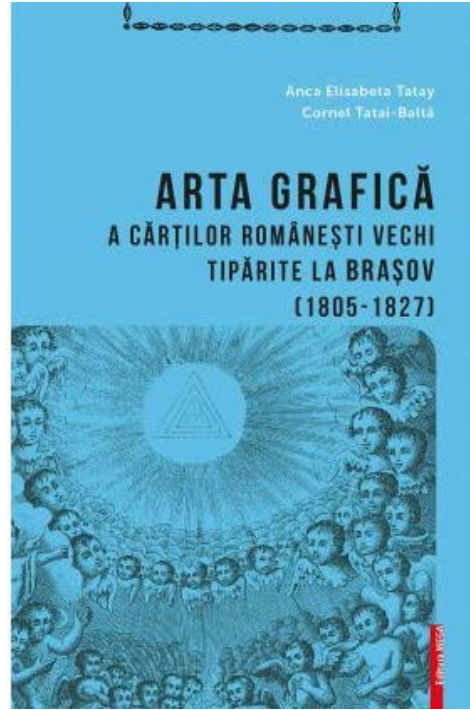


## On Graphic Arts of the Early Romanian Books Printed in Braşov in Romanian Art History Book Review

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Anca Elisabeta Tatay, Cornel Tatai-Baltă *Arta grafică a cărţilor româneşti vechi tipărite la Braşov/ The Graphic Arts of the Early Romanian Books Printed in Braşov*, Mega Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2020, 241 pages



Anca Elisabeta Tatay, distinguished for her merits in art history with the George Barişiu prize of the Romanian Academy (2013) and her father, Cornel Tatai-Baltă, reputed art historian, university professor and art critic from Alba Iulia co-author a series of volumes on old Romanian books and their art, interdisciplinary research pertaining to the history of the book and art history, in general and engravings and graphic art, in particular.

The table of contents starts with an argument and comprises three chapters, the first on Braşov as an important printing centre of Transylvania (1539-1827), the second on minor ornaments: title pages, frontispieces, vignettes, seals (1805-1827), the third on the illustrations of the books printed in Braşov (1805-1827), conclusions and a rich bibliography. The list of reproductions and illustrations occupy the second half of the book, followed by indices and the authors' bio notes.

In the argument, the authors claim that the history of the book and of Romanian print is tough, yet fascinating and according to the researcher from Iaşi, Elena Chiaburu, the documents from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century are so

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many, that it is impossible to conduct any research without narrowing down the topic. Moreover, the art historian Alexandru Busuioceanu drew attention to the fact that Romanian xyloengravings were of particular cultural and artistic value especially due to the previous investigations of the authors related to Neamț monastery (1940), Blaj (1995), Râmnic (1998), Sibiu (2007, 2018), Buda (2010, 2011) or Bucharest (2015), completing the studies in periodicals (p. 9).

Regarding Brașov as an important printing centre of Transylvania (1539-1827), it is argued that Gutenberg's printing press spread rapidly to the Romanian space and it was the hieromonk Macarie that printed the first books in Slavonic language at Târgoviște or Dealu Monastery (in 1508, 1510 and 1512, respectively). In Transylvania, the first Romanian book, the so-called Lutheran *Catechism* comes out in 1544 due to the efforts of Philip the Moldavian, whereas the *Tetrevangelium* of 1546 in Cyrillic alphabet is considered far more valuable than other European ones due to its xyloengravings (p. 11). However, in Brașov, it was Johannes Honterus, a reputed scholar with studies in Vienna, who printed the first books in 1539, along with his collaborator, Valentin Wagner, student at the University of Wittenberg. Together they print textbooks (Latin and Greek grammars), classical works (by Cicero, Quintilian, Seneca, Aristotle, Plato, Saint Augustin or Erasmus from Rotterdam) and some books for Lutheran propaganda. It is important to mention that some textbooks from Brașov such as *Rudimenta Cosmographia* by Honterus (Krakow 1530, Brașov 1542) were used as geography, astronomy and natural sciences textbooks in German schools at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century with many reprints in various European cities (pp. 11-12). As a landmark, Honterian engravings have an elegant title page pertaining to the style of Renaissance and Valentin Wagner's *Imagines mortis selectiores* (1557) was decorated with xyloengravings based on the famous images of death, i.e., *Bilder des Todes* illustrations of Hans Holbein the Young accompanied by original verses<sup>1</sup> (p. 13). In this period, deacon Coresi also distinguishes himself, working on dozens of religious books, in Slavonic, Romanian and bilingual editions. Apart from the orders that aimed at propagating the Reform among Romanians, there is also the return to the Orthodox faith and, according to the authors, the most illustrative work in this sense, is the 1581 *Evangelion* with the stamp of the patron, Lucas Hirscher (pp. 14-15). The first calendar in Romanian, printed in 1733 at Brașov was inspired by Serbian and Kiev models. The rise of the Romanian bourgeoisie at Brașov, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> cent. and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> cent. contributes to the rise of the history of (old) books and their art (p. 16). The pleasant graphic aspect of the printings from Brașov from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> cent. due to wood and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Răzvan Teodorescu, *Civilizația românilor între medieval și modern*, vol. 1, București, Ed. Meridiane, 1987, pp. 62-64, 66-70, fig. 15-29.

metal engraving attracted researchers such as Dragoş Morărescu or Ruxandra Moaşa Nazare (p. 19), Gh. Oprescu<sup>2</sup> arguing that wood engraving and the printing of religious books skyrocketed in Transylvania despite the hardships of the Romanian people from Blaj, Sibiu and Braşov during those times (p. 20).

As far as the chapter on minor ornaments is concerned, the authors proceed to a minute analysis of the title pages, frontispieces, vignettes, seals between 1805-1827. They analysed 32 title pages (two referring to the same book, the 1805 *Little Octoih*), out of which 15 were simple (made up of thin lines, sometimes accompanied by geometrical models), and 3 had only a little ornament at their base such as a child with a garland of flowers sitting on a shell or a child posing near a basket of flowers (p. 21). Seven title pages are included in simple frames, whereas the last seven ones have larger frames in the style of a Louis XVI gate, some hosting, under their arch, ornaments such as a writer at his desk, a child with a book and pen, a vase with vegetal elements. At their corners, the gates show Moses's tablets and Aaron's staff (alluding to the Old Testament) and the Bible and the Eucharistic chalice, respectively (alluding to the New Testament) (p. 22). For each description, figures are provided in the second part of the book.

In the contents of the books from Braşov, Anca Elisabeta Tatay and Cornel Tatai-Baltă identify a seal, 44 frontispieces and vignettes, i.e., the small ornaments that open or end a chapter. They encountered only two religious frontispieces with anthropomorphic figures, the former, of larger dimensions, showing Jesus Christ and the four evangelists in the aforementioned *Little Octoih*, in a rustic, yet singular composition, our Romanian art historians noting the solemn figure of our Saviour, standing, the cross in His hands, the stigmata of his hands and rib visible, and the animated gestures of the evangelists and their symbols; the larger one renders the supper at Mamre (*Euchologion*, 1811) as the Byzantine iconographic representation of the Holy Trinity. Two smaller frontispieces contain religious symbols, one, the motif of the wheat herringbone with the divine eye in the middle as symbol of the Holy Trinity and the other, consisting of vegetal elements surmounted by a little cross with Moses's tablets in the middle in an oval medallion and the cross, chalice and Eucharist bread specific to Catholicism as symbols of the Old and New Testament, respectively. Among others, the authors also identify frontispieces of geometric elements recalling Romanian art and the motif of the sun (*Little Octoih, The Horologion*) (pp. 25-26).

Out of the numerous vignettes, only two show Christian symbols, both from the 1806 *Horologion*: the eye of God in a triangle and a character sitting at the writing desk near a cross in an 18<sup>th</sup> century atmosphere. There

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<sup>2</sup> Gh. Oprescu, *Grafica românească în secolul and XIX-lea*, Bucureşti, Fundaţia Regală pentru Literatură şi Artă, 1942, p. 281.

are many vignettes displaying vegetal motives pertaining to the rococo style, very fashionable in 18<sup>th</sup> cent. Western Europe (e.g.: the 1810 *Psalter*, the 1811 *Euchologion*, etc.). In a very elegant manner, convex and concave curves are displayed, flowers fruits, a basket allowing art historians to draw parallels between the old Romanian books and other European ones of the time, also identifying gaps and additions (pp. 27-28). Alongside rococo, the influence of neoclassicism is also asserted, in the pipeline when the books from Braşov were printed (in a frontispiece with an owl and its spread wings, previously interpreted as symbol of wisdom, reflection, science and wealth (*ibidem*), a vignette showing a water fountain, a bust framed by two obelisks and the one portraying the goddess Minerva) (pp. 30-21). A rare element is the engraving of the seal of the Phanariot ruler Ioan Gheorghe Caragea, a circle surmounted by a crown with a cross with two garlands at the base, each comprising a six-pointed star and the emblem of the principality of Wallachia at its centre (pp. 32-33).

The third and most comprehensive chapter, on the illustrations of the books printed in Braşov (1805-1827) thoroughly discusses 31 books that came out during this period, including them in a table at the end of the chapter for quick reference. The first one is *Bucoavnă, 1805*, inter alia, the authors dealing with the xyloengraving showing St. Nicholas, a figure that spreads kindness which made him so beloved. Wearing church vestments, he has a contemplative attitude and the cloudy sky highlights him (p. 37). St. Nicholas also completes the new xyloengravings of the second book tackled, *Horologion, 1806*: Jesus, Great Archiereus on the clouds, the Annunciation, the Dormition of the Mother of God and the Seraphs' Hymn (pp. 39-40). The authors link Braşov prints to others, in this case noting that there has been an institutional collaboration between Braşov and Buda since the wood plaques of two of the engravings, the Annunciation and the Dormition of the Mother of God are unsigned and engraved by Carolus Fridericus Hederich Frigyes according to the documents of the University of Pesta printing house (p. 41). The illustration of King David decorates the *1807 Psalter*, the third book dealt with by the two art historians, as well as its subsequent editions of 1810 and 1816. Naively treated, the engraving has the inscription of the prophet and king David, elegantly dressed in golden clothing similar to the Flemish ones of the 15<sup>th</sup> cent or Stephen the Great in some portraits, he is praying on his knees, his arms spread, an aureole on his head, like the saints. The engraver found inspiration in a work from Dosoftei's 1673 *Psalter* (p. 45). *The Little Octoih, 1810* has the resurrection as illustration with an indecipherable signature in which Christ rises triumphantly from a ray of light surrounded by clouds, blessing with His right hand and holding the flag of the resurrection in His left hand, two sleeping soldiers at His feet, a Western type of representation in iconography, equally spread in the Balkan area (p. 46). Ioniţ Ion Voinea signs a crucifixion xyloengraving on the 1811

*Euchologion* on which the dead Jesus Christ is depicted with His eyes shut, a common device in the Byzantine art of 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> cent. (*ibidem*).

More comprehensively discussed is *Uşa pocăinţei/ Door of Repentance*, 1812 translated into Romanian from Greek by monk Rafail who dedicates it to the metropolitan Dosithei of Wallachia and illustrates it with five copper engravings (the angel of God, death, judgement day, heaven and hell) that could have benefited from more artistic craft (pp. 49-50). The authors argue that the European art of the Middle Ages is full of images of hell, the one in the book with an almost naked devil riding a monster in flames resembling the miniature from the *Winchester Psalter*, also known as *The Psalter of Henry of Blois* from the 12<sup>th</sup> cent., currently located at the British Library (pp. 60-61).

Other illustrations accounted for are from *The Paraklesis of Saint Haralambos*, 1815 which renders the saint as an old man who inspires respect as protector against the plague and other diseases (pp. 66-67), the 1816 *Bucoavnă* (The Holy Trinity, also present in the subsequent editions and in the 1826 *Horologion*), the 1824 *Bulgarian Bucvar*, a collection from other spelling books compiled by Petru Berovici with illustrated animals for children, namely a monkey, an elephant, a rhinoceros, a stag, a beaver, a crocodile, a hippopotamus, an ostrich, a crane, a whale and a dolphin (pp. 69-70). The last ones are the 1824 *Paraklesis of Saint Haralambos and of Saint Mina*, the illustration of the former resembling the 1815 one, the latter being depicted as a Roman soldier since he was part of the troops sent to the East (p. 72), the 1826 *Horologion* that also contains the illustrations of The Life-Giving Spring and the Holy Communion, apart from the ones of the previous editions (p. 74) and the 1827 *Metrical Psalter* illustrated for Ioan Prale (1769-1849) from Iaşi showing King David (p. 76).

Anca Elisabeta Tatay and Cornel Tatai-Baltă conclude that their interpretations of the 24 illustrations from the books that came out at Braşov between 1805-1827 reveal that religious and lay themes were approached, the authors of the wood and more rarely employed metal engravings mainly remaining anonymous. The iconographic topics are Byzantine, sometimes with Western influences, with an impact on the glass painted icons from southern Transylvania. Less popular than the ones from Blaj and Sibiu, they compensate though the novelty of the themes tackled. The book is, therefore, a must read for all specialists in art history, history of the (old) book in its graphic dimension, students and anyone who wants to get acquainted with the topic.