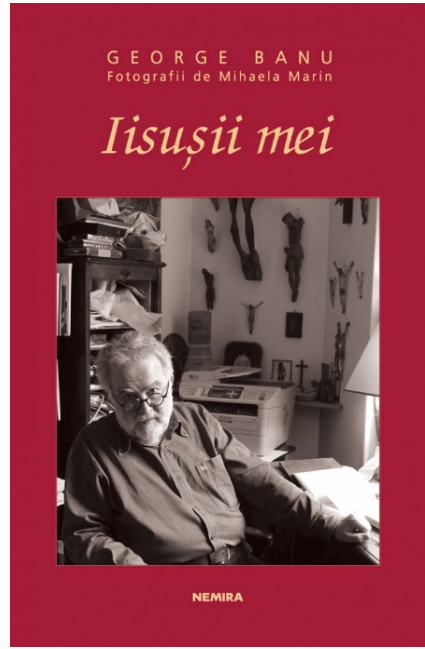


Jesus in Sacred Art through the Lenses of a Specialist in Theatre Studies

Ana-Magdalena Petraru*

George Banu, il. de Mirela Marin, *Iisuşii mei sau coexistenţa cu arta sacră/ My Jesuses or Coexistence with Sacred Art*, Nemira, Bucharest, 2018, 160 pages



Reputed professor of Theatre Studies living in France and teaching at Sorbonne, the late George Banu (1943-2023) devoted this book to the Jesuses in his home that also accompany him in some of the travels (to Paris, Normandy or Corrèze). They communicate non-verbally and were brought together by mere chance, their relation being dependent on the owner's state of mind (pp. 7-8). G. Banu confesses he was attracted by sacred art and Jesus's place in it, both as man and god; the Son of Man is situated *entre-deux*, neither familiar as human or estranged as god, neither from here or up there, being constantly accompanied by the shadow of the double, the sacred and the human, an omnipresent *l'autre face* which is never completely absent. His collection of Jesuses was gathered from various places of Europe (Slovenia, Italy, Poland, Romania, France and Portugal) and the world, they were gifts or purchases, mainly crucified ones, more ancient or recent. The purpose of the collection was the author's

* Ana-Magdalena Petraru, Lecturer, PhD, Faculty of Letters, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University from Iaşi, România, e-mail: alina.petraru@gmail.com

feeling of coexistence with the works of art (p. 9), he aimed at envisaging Him in the plural context of variants, as one sees the Hamlets of the world, not just one on the stage (p. 10).

Apart from the “Motivation”, the table of contents also comprises seventeen essays devoted to “Jesuses – presents and purchases”, “Figures of Jesus”, “Separation from the Cross”, “Minor crucifixions”, “Companions and solitude”, “Torture and mutilation”, “Silent suffering”, “From strict censorship to spectacular screaming”, “Melancholy of the crucified”, “Disaster of a descendance”, “A mother mourning and Christ’s seal”, “Figure and place”, “The Last Supper and other scenes”, “The promise of birth”, “Virgins with baby and cross”, “Ecce homo” and “Art as vehicle”.

The first item of the collection is a South American Jesus from Venezuela, a *pater familias* of the others, a little statue from an antique shop purchased at the end of the 1960s. The second one was a gift from the Romanian-American theatre director Andrei Șerban, another one from Italy and several from Venice, shipped by a famous antiquarian, Guido (this is the case of a 13th century piece, a part of a plate that showed a humble Jesus and a miniature Venetian one) (p. 26). The representations of Jesus are all different and define the eras, civilizations and confessions they belong to. In the beginning, Jesus on the cross was just a sign that emblematically symbolized crucifixion and it remained abstract, without individual incidence, a symbol of the act meant to sanction the Jews’ visionary king. Such archaic Jesuses are depicted as abstract, lacking identity, a concrete expression of the suffering that does not affect His expression of the body; they are impersonal, a materialization of a tragic situation, without any consequences on personal body reactions and on the collector that perceives them as foreign and distant, a vice of the western man who needs the testimony of the body, not just the designation of a condition (p. 30). Apart from statues, his collection also contains icons, one of them portraying Jesus triumphant who adopts the posture of ruler of the world, keeper of ultimate power exerted on the faithful that acquiescence His authority and respect his prerogatives (p. 31). The author admits that he is wearing no crucifix and does not say his evening prayers, yet his Jesuses are necessary to him and welcomed as representations of the sacred, not as religious objects. In sacred art, a special place is given to the relation between model and the mythological connotations associated to it since the painted or sculpted character disposes of a prototype of representation constituted in time,

a known legend that designates his or her exceptional unique identity, a mythical image mobilizing these aspects. This makes the author regard Buddha differently from Jesus, the former being simply a sacred art object for him, whereas in the latter, he associates aesthetic satisfaction with the emotion of biblical bibliography. Thus, it is the transcendence of the mundane by art and the plus of spirituality brought by sacred art that truly fascinates him (pp. 36-37).

G. Banu also separated Jesus from His cross as a precaution of air travel, leaving the antiquarian with the cross, whilst keeping Jesus for himself. He praises the cross associated to Jesus and symbolic founders of Christian faith arguing that with very few exceptions (in Velasquez, Goya, Philippe de Champaigne) where Jesus is portrayed alone, most often He is accompanied symmetrically by the two thieves, crucified too, which testifies to the subaltern value of the cross. Herein, Jesus is the hero of the sacrifice, being placed centrally in visual representations and the cross signifies torment, Ascension and Salvation (pp. 40-41). He came to prefer to be sent Jesus without His cross; as a man of theatre, he felt that in this way, Jesus distinguished Himself as a suffering character without the physical instrument of torture and sacrifice attached to Him. This also allows the collector to have an affective dialogue with a cultural hero, and not a confessional leader. Without His cross, Jesus is seen by G. Banu as a moral must, an exemplary leader (pp. 42-43).

In “Minor crucifixions”, he stresses the fact that, unlike exemplary Jesuses, the metallic crucifixions around him cannot be dissociated by their Jesus. They evoke ecclesiastical practices, hold a minor place in the collection, as compared to the statues, preserve the canonical device and are like punctuation marks among the other, more important items (p. 47). These modest miniature crucifixions entertain the presence of the sacred in one’s private space like groundwater. A decorative plate was exiled in a corner since the collector felt disgusted by the perversion of the crucifixion, whereas he keeps a little closer the same scene painted on a wooden egg (probably Italian, yet found in Bucharest) (pp. 50-51). At the opposite pole, the collector is very satisfied to find the crucifixion scene painted on the metal cover of a bible since herein, God’s sacrifice increases the value of the book, image and text being associated and taking the symbolic impact to a new level. The collection also comprises the photo of a cross without its Jesus, an anonymous one, the lay cross of Ludwig II of Bavaria, a

king possessed by art and Wagner's music, a madman and a visionary (pp. 53-54).

With respect to the iconographic tradition, the crucifixion circumscribes to it, yet it also benefits from contrasting devices of representation. Bringing into play Breughel that awarded the event a collective dimension, sacrificing its sacral resources in favour of the social, community spectacular, G. Banu emphasizes the character of the people grieving at the basis of the Saviour's cross, far from the madding crowd in any city; thus, the Crucifixion is reduced to a marginal territorial event despite its symbolic centrality as the citizens of the city mind their daily business ignoring Jesus's sacrifice. The collector is an amateur in painting who simply admires such a scene depicted on a painting he bought from Budapest (pp. 54-55). Another canvas shows the relation between Crucifixion and night in plain day that occurred in the historical moment and terrified the Jews. Later, Shakespeare will use this panic as frequent device that marks the resonance of the weather with human acts: tempests, flooding, eclipses – extreme events correlated with man's crimes and the night of punishment to follow for it disturbed world order (pp. 56-57). Of the figures that mourn Christ on the cross, G. Banu cherishes Mary Magdalene the most, similarly to a contemporary martyr, a woman whose photo was taken on a modern battlefield in the heart of the tragedy. She is ennobled by her mourning at the feet of Jesus and gives us a lesson of dignity against the background of extreme sorrow (p. 60).

The author argues that it was the Spanish and Portuguese Baroque that indulged the visibility of Jesus's bodily wounds, signs of physical aggression and mutilation he was subjected to. He has a Jesus from Peru and the head of a Portuguese one in tears as illustrative instances. A Christ resurrected recalls the author the encounter with a lover returned from a death camp as in Marguerite Duras' *La Douleur* or Solzhenitsyn in the Gulag (p. 67). G. Banu complains that his private collection caused disputes with his wife, Monique, who was more marked than him by what Claude Lévi-Strauss understood by "the science of concrete" and its thinking as she personally felt the aggression of Christ's expressions in her home. Therefore, the serene ones were placed in her vicinity, whereas the most troubled and tortured ones in his (pp. 73-74).

The collector also speaks about the silence of Jesus on the cross as consolation for us, humankind, foretelling that man cannot be

entirely destroyed; the crucifixion is an act of cruelty, as in Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty, yet the main character does not surrender or betray Himself (pp. 81-82). He quotes François Boespflug's study, *Le regard du Christ dans l'art* to back up his theory about the different look in the eyes of his statues and paintings showing Jesus (e.g., *sufrans* vs *triumphans*) (pp. 84-85). There is a certain melancholy attached to Him, a Jesus who is tired and would inspire Grotowski's 'constant prince' (p. 86). He would join the family of melancholics, also starring Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* or Chekhov's sisters. They all aim at something unusual, yet never abandoned, a horizon that cannot be reached despite the comfort and salvation it brings us (p. 92).

Then he shows his lack of preference for Jesus being taken down from the cross, instances he did not include in his collection. This descendence evokes sad memories of dead relatives in coffins. He finds the Nordic artists' representations most tragic and inconsolable (i.e., the Dutch ones of Rogier van der Weyden or Dieric Bouts) as compared to those of Italian artists that bring some solace (pp. 93-94). He loves the *Pieta*, showing a mother's love for her son, particularly favouring a naïve painting on glass he bought from Transylvania as the fluid and sad relation between mother and son becomes a noble lamentation, a traditional folk song (pp. 102-103). He is also very fond of a Last Supper in his collection, of Transylvanian origin (p. 118); to him, the ultimate representation and role model is Leonardo's in Milan. He confesses that the first painting he bought in Paris was a Nativity one, then a lithographical representation of the scene, one that needed restoration from Sibiu and then several others, out of which one with red dominating it, is his favourite due to the colourful exaltation affirmed to celebrate the coming of Christ into this world (p. 126). The Mother of God holding Jesus as a baby in Her arms in various paintings is part of the collection, as well; the author is bewildered by the motherhood of a devoted and disarmed child virgin (p. 128). A Mother of God he found in Iasi is of interest to him because of the crown on Her head whose gold had gradually faded and which consecrated Her as Christian queen (pp. 130-131). Some of these Mothers look like women from Romanian villages, peasants G. Banu was familiar with from our country, i.e., a statue, an icon painting showing Her praying for Her son on the cross, represented in the right corner of the canvas (pp. 134-135).

To conclude, the author motivates the impulse that determined him to start his collection by a philosophical story or parable, *ecce*

homo, the search of a man, a project he was initially sceptical about, drawing on Diogene (pp. 140-141). He found Jesus as a man of theatre leaving aside perspectives that never appealed to him such as Alfred de Musset's (who demanded sitting comfortably in one's chair to enjoy it) or Maeterlinck's (renowned for the invisible component he advocated); on the contrary, he sought the theatre that gave him the concrete pleasure of the materialisation of phantoms and fictions, the representation of biblical scenes during insomnia nights (p. 144). Art as vehicle overcomes itself, is directed towards an imprecise and necessary elsewhere, an in-between aesthetic and religious component, the beautiful and faith, the author's Jesuses belonging to it in Goethe's *streben* of sacred art, a movement towards something external and salvific (p. 155).

We recommend the volume for its essayistic introspection on sacral art, in general and representations of Jesus, in particular on various media, from sculpture to painting, from the beginning of His life, the Nativity, to the end marked by the crucifixion. It is also useful for anyone interested in theatre and the perspective of a specialist in the field that comes with theatrical and philosophical intertextuality.