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THE ART OF MEDIEVAL TRANSYLVANIAN ALTARPIECES (1450-1550)

Ph. D. Thesis
Abstract

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Key words: medieval art and liturgy, altarpiece, polyptych, altar, church furnishing, panel painting, artistic patronage, artists of the Gothic and Renaissance, engraving, woodcut.
The visual practice played a crucial role in the religious life and experience of the Christian men and women living in late medieval and Renaissance Europe. This fact is proven not only by the visually-centered concepts that pervaded the essentially religious culture of the epoch, but also the dramatic and performance-like character of the divine service (public worship) and the nature of personal devotion which operated on the basis of concrete images and mental visions (private worship). Added to this there is also the impressive heritage of material imagery, again mainly religious, produced in different media using different techniques and which survives until this day.

In modern times, images became the “appanage” of the art historians. Certain exquisite masterpieces in particular, which stood out for their bright colors, masterly design, high sensitivity towards object surfaces, power to create illusion, lavish appearance and skillful craftsmanship are responsible for the bulk of the modern studies in the field of history of art. That said, for a long time now, these images have not only been considered beautiful art objects to be placed somewhere on the chart of stylistic evolution, they have also acquired a more sophisticated status thanks to the evolution of the discipline. Different kind of inquiries, different approaches and methodological orientations helped bring out various layers of meaning and interpretation, providing us with a more subtle, if not more appropriate, understanding of the artistic phenomena.

The present Ph.D. thesis represents an attempt to approach medieval and Renaissance images not only from the point of view of the evolution of artistic forms, but by considering them in their original context. The context means here the liturgy, the architectural setting, the public, the social milieu which intended and financed images and, of course, the artists themselves. The images that will looked at belong to the “class” of the altarpiece, one of the most spectacular and elaborate forms of Western art, which was used to decorate the inner space of Catholic churches and chapels, visually highlighting the “presence” of the divine in liturgical spaces centered around altars.

The corpus of survived medieval Transylvanian retables is yet to be published in its entirety. The Second volume of the present thesis provides the most complete catalogue with its 59 altarpieces and fragments treated as monographs. Each piece is considered from the point of view of its origin (the exact original emplacement), iconography, patronage, attribution and artistic connections. The volume contains also a number of altarpieces (30) attested by medieval written sources and other documented by modern information but meantime disappeared. With its 91 entries, the volume represents the most comprehensive repertory of medieval and Renaissance Transylvanian altarpieces.
The **First volume** intends to offer a synthesis of the subject. In the first instance it makes a necessary overview of the main methodological approaches attempted in Western literature, highlighting the most important contributions to the knowledge of the altarpiece as a “class” of artistic and liturgical objects. The altarpiece as a category has lately become a “fashionable” topic of study. The assertion alludes to the important scholarly research into both the altarpiece as a class *sui generis* and regional or limited material. Although the view that the altarpiece is a “valid category” is in many ways problematic, it nonetheless gave rise to a fair number of new perspectives on medieval art.

A second section of the thesis focuses on the generalities concerning Transylvanian altarpieces. It considers the material of the Repertory, dating back from ca. 1450-1550, and interrogates on how the sources, both visual and written, reflect the original “dimensions” of this kind of art. The analysis of some case studies led to the conclusion that the most part of the original repertory is now lost.

An important chapter of the thesis is dedicated to the historiography dealing with Transylvanian medieval altarpieces. The literature, consisting both of syntheses and monographic studies, mainly deals with matters of form and style, artistic connections with Western art, problems of dating, workshops and masters. It also includes iconographic descriptions and interpretations of content. Very few studies use the altarpieces as historical sources *per se*, to reconstruct the social involvement in liturgical art, or to emphasize devotional trends, and even fewer focus on their liturgical implications and functions. The analysis of the literature leads to the conclusion that a new approach became necessary.

The next chapters in the thesis represent in depth analyses of the typologies of Transylvanian altarpieces (including their structure and specific terminology), the overview of the iconography, the attempt to reintegrate the preserved examples in the original liturgical matrix of churches, the investigation of the patronage and finally the reconstruction of the artistic milieu.

The annexes of the volume include the most extensive catalogue of artists, painters and carvers, active in Transylvania between ca. 1430-1560. Another important section is dedicated to the identification of visual models (mainly engravings and woodcuts) which local artists used in the production of images.