

THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF PALEO-CHRISTIAN PAINTING - BEFORE "PAIX DE L'ÉGLISE"

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Abstract

The present paper aims at describing painting during the first centuries of Christianity, when it was still considered a "religio illicita". Artistic representations begin to follow strict rules in order to fulfill their goal of transmitting a new and amazing message. Symbolism now replaces the interest of having a masterpiece, spiritualization is the most important feature of this composition which, especially, in the period before "The Peace with the Church" lays more emphasis on educating the viewer than on decorating space.

Keywords: *painting, representation, rule, message, symbolism, period*

Rezumat

Lucrarea constituie parcursul reprezentărilor picturale din timpul primelor veacuri ale creștinismului, când acesta avea încă un statut de „religio illicita”. Manifestările artistice încep să se supună unor reguli stricte pentru a-și îndeplini menirea de purtătoare ale unui mesaj nou și frapant. Simbolismul înlocuiește acum interesul pentru obținerea unor capodopere, spiritualizarea fiind caracteristica fundamentală a acestor compoziții care, cel puțin în această perioadă dinaintea „Păcii cu Biserica”, urmăreau mai puțin ornamentarea spațiului în care erau plasate și mai mult instrucția privitorilor.

Cuvinte-cheie: *pictură, reprezentare, regulă, mesaj, simbolism, perioadă*

At the beginning of Christianity, painting does not follow the traditional pattern, based on representing exactly the natural environment, the visible nature. Of course, the ways of expression, the instruments and the materials are the same: painting will be painting, and the painter is still an artist who has the mission to combine elements of visual language in a composition organized according to traditional rules, in which lines and colours connect figures. All these happen because the goal is to transmit the desired message to some people who are at the beginning of the process of understanding and accepting a new religion, Christianity. The first Christian representations were painted for them in order to facilitate knowledge by a more or less explicit symbolism, and also by a strong visual impact (if we refer to painting itself).

The beginning of Christianity is usually divided by the historians in two distinct epochs – before and after "The Peace of the Church"²⁷. Before 313,

²⁷In 313, Constantine recognizes Christianity as the state religion introduced by Theodosius who died in 395.

we can speak about a type of Christian art decorating churches and burying places with images from “The Old” and “The New Testament”. For the period immediately after Jesus, there was no place for art, Christian visual images were subject to controversies (anyway, the monuments of those times are rarely dated)²⁸. The origins of early Christianity are represented by Jewish Christianity, the first Jewish communities who have seen Jesus as Messiah²⁹; though, according to research, the Messianism of this religion is more extended, surpassing primitive Jewish Christianity. It is debatable whether the firstly discovered symbols³⁰ belong to a certain Messianism or they were used by isolated communities in Palestina and by the whole Mediteranean area, the same symbol may have different meanings because there were no fixed dogmas. Consequently, in addition to Palestinian influences, we can speak about Greek, Coptic, Roman influences, besides the primary image which is very important. Anyway, just like the other Jews, the believers in Jesus from Nazareth avoided representations and preferred symbols. (However, we must recognize the presence of images in the Christian religion even from the start, despite hostility directed towards Christians for fear of idolatry, as the literary sources of the time prove).

Consequently, the Paleo-Christian iconography used the pagan language of the Antiquity³¹, at the beginning the symbols, then the allegorical elements, such as the images of the Good Shepherd, of Hellios and Orpheus. Just like the multiple interpretations of the hieroglyphs, these first Christian images can also represent, on the one side, the shepherd who carries his sheep on the shoulders to the temple in order to sacrifice it or is taking it to the market to sell it (The Good Shepherd, known from “The Old Testament”, who represents Iahve’s concern for his people), respectively, the Sun-God (Hellios, “Sol Invictus”, “The Undeafated Sun” – a monotheist image of the IIIrd century A.D.), and Orpheus represents the “wizard” of animals through

²⁸If, a long time ago, people considered that Christian paintings belonged to the Ist century A.D. and Christian sarcophagus to the IInd century A.D., now it is thought that the first frescoes were done at the end of the IInd century A.D., and funeral bas-relief from the IIIrd century A.D (cf. Tristan, 2002, p. 11).

²⁹The specificity of those times is recognized by only a few Jews, who were waiting for a Messiah similar to the profecy of Isaiah, a king who shall bring freedom to people.

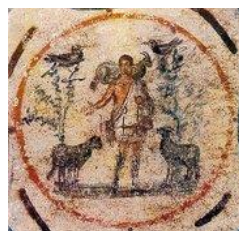
³⁰in Hebron, Nazareth and Jerusalem, in 1953 (cf. Tristan, 2002, p. 17; Danielou, 1998, pp. 5-6).

³¹If a Christian scene was similar to a parallel theme which existed in Antique art, then it was taken. “There are many such cases: the angels derive from Victories; the Apostles, the Prophets and certain representations of Christ are similar to pagan philosophers standing up; the Evangelists from seated poets; Eve from Venus; Joan from Endymion; David from Orpheus; The Creation of Man from the myth pf Prometheus” (cf. Gowing, 1995, p. 360).

music taken from mythology (who descends to Hades in order to save a soul), but, on the other side, they can be the representation of Christ (The Good Shepherd, Heliios, Orpheus – now, the tamer of souls, of the passions of the soul, who descends to save Adam and the saints³²) or David, in the Jewish tradition (Orpheus). In painting, besides the representations of Heliios and Orpheus having Christian meaning, (the last of them, in the “Catacomb of Saint Petter and Marcelino”, II.1), the image of the “Good Shepherd” in a pagan context can be found in “Capella della Velata” from the “Catacomb of Priscilla”, Via Salaria, Roma (II.2); the image of Heliios is represented on a wall from a pagan monument of Fannia Redempta, “Tomb B” underneath the “Cathedral of Saint Peter”, Roma; and David, as a pagan Orpheus – in the baths at Ouda, Tunisia, cca 300. The gnostic words which say that redemption can be obtained by study found an echo in Christian religion: in art – beginning in the IIIrd century A.D., the figure of Christ became more and more predominant, especially, with the frescoes from Dura – the figure of Christ with beard and the gesture with the hands which is specific to the teacher, an equivalent of the Greek philosopher. “He is dressed in a white shirt and the garment over it is also white. He wears sandals, he holds the scroll of a book in the left hand, while the right is raised just like the Ancient orator used to hold his hand; two fingers are stretched before, both the ring finger and the little finger are collected on the front palm” (Nyssen, 1975, p. 29).



II. 1



II. 2

a) The first examples – among the ones that reached us, of course – of the existence of images in the centuries from early Christianity (which clearly show that there were no prohibitions), are represented almost entirely by the underground art of the catacombs offering the biggest surface of paintings which survived from Paleo-Christian times. From the East, the underground cemetery was adopted in Italy by the pagans, later on by the Christians. Catacombs were graves of the lower class – some of them built graves belonging to very wealthy families (for example on Via Appia). Nowadays, it is believed that the first catacombs were carved in the year 200, while the first paintings are appeared in 250. Primitive symbols, which were traditional for the pagans, the Jews and the Hebrew, due to this fact that they represent a code language are not considered art, even though the ornamen-

³²The icon topic “Anastasis”, the descent into Hell (cf. *Grands ...*, 1989, p. 55).

tal intention is obvious from the beginning. Sacralization transforms them into instructional³³ lessons for all Christians, both from the East and the West (that is why, it has become certain that their role is not only funeral, even if everything that has remained comes from this space...). "More complex information which starts from the tradition of the first Judeo-Christian clergy is added to basic teaching. The most important is the one referring to the notion of Glory. It is not contained in the "Thav", consequently, in the light cross which is not only the witness of resurrection, but also the one which announces Parus. Oranta no longer represents only the soul, just like the dove does. The oranta is that body of Glory. Shady oases are no longer just the *refrigerium* side, but the Paradise at the end of times, meaning the Jerusalem from the sky. The garden is not only the present Church, but the eschatological assembly. The bunches of grapes no longer represent only the Eucharist, but the eternal fruit of the Tree of Life. So, here we are in front of a double reading: the first, having as target the faithful, to appease the fate of her/his deceased and to prepare the faithful for the last journey; the second, which is a speech in pictures, is addressed to God himself, for Him to be willing to meet the promises made to ancient Israel, which were received by the church as an inheritance" (*ibidem*, pp. 132-133).

The Jewish colony from Rome carved catacombs decorated with wall paintings, following the model of the rooms inhabited by the pagans. The symbols of Messiah can be found here: the palm branch, the grapes, the amphora, the pigeon, the pea, the anchor, the lighthouse, the chandelier, the fish. The richest Jewish catacomb in Rome is the one on "Villa Torlonia", Via Nomentana (II.3), where the vault of the funerary chamber is covered with paintings, with "Menorah" and the dolphins with a trident in the four cardinal points – the pagan motif of the dolphin with a trident appears in the Christian environment, without a trident in the Jewish environment – consequently, we have the same Jewish root of the Messianic symbols, and also the influence of the pagan images. Most often, Messianic symbols had an equivalent when they came after the expansion of the Judeo-Christian world, as a result, the people who were not Jews became believers in God, bringing their own interpretations – such is the case of fish, vine and fruit. Therefore, the analysis of these symbols in the Christian environment has in view the Jewish and the pagan substrate, and also the interpretation which is specific to Christianity.

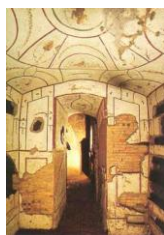
So, the Jews from Rome and also the Christians understood that a religious brotherhood could hide behind a funeral association; the catacombs represented

³³Scenes from "The Old" or "The New Testament" in the catacombs, which are used from the IIIrd century A.D., together with the symbols which will gradually replace them. It is interesting that anecdotal figurative paintings in Jewish catacombs appear in the same century (cf. Tristan, 2002, p. 148).

funeral and gathering places for both communities, they were not designed for hiding, their existence and location were known by the authorities. The epitaphs and symbols³⁴ were either painted or graved on the the wall made of marble tile or brick enclosing individual graves (*locul* carved in the vertical walls of the catacomb) or on the horizontal slab, enclosing a larger tomb (*arcosolium*³⁵). Most painted decorations were found in the *cubiculum*, a room only for wealthy families (compared to the poor ones that buried their dead only in the recesses of the passages). Later, the crypts for martyrs and popes will be decorated with paintings or mosaics. In general, because of lack of space and natural light, the background is lightly coloured (either white or yellow); the representations are arranged in frames obtained by dividing this background through a network of painted lines (red, green, black, white)³⁶ (for example, the "Cubiculum of the Good Shepherd", the "Catacomb of Domitilla", Il.4), in the lower part there is a painted socle, and the walls also have painted pillars. Above the network, a belt suggests a cornice and the ceiling paintings depict a construction of beams, including figurative representations (as those of the network panels) and even the sky. We cannot determine the religion of the deceased by studying the tomb of one person or another, we cannot distinguish between the Christian and the pagan hypogea - if such clear religious signs as the cross³⁷, the fish, the anchor are missing. The oldest is probably the "Catacomb of Comodilla" (Il.5) (it is assumed that St. Paul was buried there and there are two ancient Christian inscriptions dating back with the end of IInd century A.D., adorned with the representation of two loaves and two fish).



Il. 3



Il. 4



Il. 5

When representing scenes, it is undeniable the lack of interest of the first Christian artists towards the refinement of the classical Greek period or Hellenistic virtuosity (although painters did not "dress" new artistic iconogra-

³⁴In Greek and Latin, which confirms the fact that this Christian community was composed of different nationalities (cf. Gowing, 1995, p. 359).

³⁵Carved under an arcade (cf. Tristan, 2002, p. 49).

³⁶We find in this division less valuable (simplified) in a Roman source, having the panels in the ornamental painting in the IVth Pompeian style as starting point.

³⁷The cross did not appear from the beginning as a Christian symbol in Rome, being associated with the execution of criminals for a long time (cf. Piper, 1991, p. 53).

phy in new clothes, they kept and borrowed all they could, particularly, the imagery from the pagan art, just avoiding important mythological gods). Stylistically, however, this kind of painting does not carry forward the ancient Greco-Roman tradition. By the technique of "impressionism" sketched (Croix *et alii*, 1996, p. 251) in quick touches³⁸, the sketched paintings from catacombs (for example, "The Three Young in the Furnace of Fire, the Catacomb of Priscilla", Il.6) did not seek, as we will also see in the case of monumental painting (from Dura), making a work of art³⁹. Neither anatomical fidelity nor portraying (the three young men) was the main interest, but rendering the expression. It is not fixing the episode in a specified time and in real space that is important, but narrating the event in a simple and persuasive manner, without dramatizing things and using as few artistic fireworks as possible, which are considered worthless (or even having the purpose of diverting attention from the spiritual message!); moreover, it is important to clean the stage from all the details which are not essential for understanding parables, the moral message: the power and mercy of God. Consequently, now we are facing a symbolist tendency, in which naturalism slowly fades; we may even talk about a new abstract spirit, in which the synthesis of the entire elements forming a whole allows treating figures in a realist-traditionalist manner. We may no longer meet any ancient suggestion of the depth of the painting, though as empirical and lacking the scientific foundation having no scientific basis as we were accustomed to; neither light which was inconsistent until then, creates volume, but it is diffuse, neutre; space is no longer disturbed in depth of the instinctive application of an aerial perspective, neutral background now closing the scene. (Recall that the removal of reality in art was not invented by Christian artists. A scene of sacrifice in the first century A.D. painted in a temple of the Palmirien gods of Dura Europos (the place belonging to the Parts) and representing "The Sacrifice of Conon" (II.7) (the main character is the tribune of the local garrisons) foretells - and even applies! - the basic principles of the future Byzantine art. We find here a strong contrast between the characters and the playing talent willfully neglected of the illusion

³⁸Moreover, using this procedure makes out of these paintings the "poor relatives" of those from Pompei and Herculaneum, which are Hellenistic (cf. Gowing, 1995, p. 359; Gombrich, 1975, p. 44).

³⁹Neither the manufacturers were so skilled, nor the place was appropriate for an artist to create wall paintings of high quality as far as the position of the artist is concerned, taking into account the fact that it was not naturally illuminated, having a high degree of humidity and decomposition (cf. Croix *et alii*, 1996, p. 252).

of space – not to leave, on the one hand, the concept of parietal decoration and, on the other hand, to communicate just one message (without setting the action in space and time) as easily perceived. We use clarity in artistic expression for this – both for the altar and the simplified architecture and equally, for the three characters: shown from the front, without any relation to each other or with the other elements, but in relation to the viewer, facilitating one’s understanding).



Il. 6



Il. 7

Generally speaking, the topics of the paintings from the catacombs are: the miracles of divine intervention – from “The Old Testament”: the release of Jonah, Noah escaping the flood, the sacrifice of Abraham⁴⁰; from “The New Testament”⁴¹: the healing of the paralytic, the resurrection of Lazarus, the multiplication of loaves, the serenity of the world beyond, rendered as a heavenly garden with flowers and birds; a rare (and the oldest) example came to us, of the “Virgin with the Child, the Catacomb of Priscilla” (Il. 8), and the salvation of the souls – of course of the faithful –, but even the idea of salvation in teaching (such a complex scene, belonging from a stylistic point of view to the IIIrd century, is represented in the “Catacomb of Priscilla”, Il. 9). A typical example of the way in which pagan imagery is reinterpreted, acquiring a new meaning, is the ceiling of the “Catacomb Saint Pietro and Marcellinus” (Il. 10), whose structure itself suggests the basic symbol of faith – a big circle in the middle – the vault of Heaven, with the Good Shepherd, a circle inscribed in a cross ending in four telescopes, semicircular compartments showing the story of Jonah, one of the miracles of Christ. It is represented in the center, thereby creating contact with His rescue powers. Between telescopes, the orantes⁴² are the members of the Church, in prayer for divine mercy.

⁴⁰The presence of the scenes from “The Old Testament” is surprising, given the fact that at the beginning, pagan neophytes were suspicious of the recognition of the Hebrew Bible. Probably, these scenes had been taken by the Christian painter from the environment of emigrant Jews, of those from Diaspora (cf. Vătășianu, 1967, p. 25).

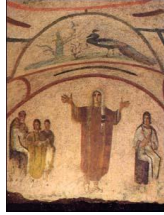
⁴¹The topics which interpret Christian texts appear in Roman catacombs later, at the beginning of the IIIrd century A.D. (*ibidem*, p. 26).

⁴²Images of piety in pagan environment (cf. Croix *et alii*, 1996, p. 251).

All these Paleo-Christian themes and issues derived from the prayers of the Jews and the Christians, especially those of the funeral ceremony⁴³. In all these representations, the epic leaves way for evocative symbols, the story itself is purged of any unnecessary surpluses in order to reach a maximum of spiritualization. Moreover, there are only symbolic images: baskets full of bread (the "Catacomb of Domitilla", Via Ardeatina), a fish with a red bread basket in the back near a red spot that probably is the symbol of wine ("Lucina's Crypt", the „Catacomb of Domitilla" (Il. 11)), a table and baskets of bread (the "Catacomb S. Calixtus", Via Appia).



Il. 8



Il. 9



Il. 10



Il. 11

b) Monumental painting. In Dura Europos, a Hellenistic Roman frontier garrison on the Higher Euphrates abandoned around 256 in front of the Persian threat, in 1930 there were excavated a synagogue and a private house (probably around 230 or 240)⁴⁴ in a place of worship (both dating from before the year 256). The decoration, partially preserved, of the house⁴⁵ (the wide space where the first Christians used to meet, having no such places of getting together, they also baptized in that place, this is the place where a niche in the main hall was discovered, with a little basin, consequently a baptistery place), with specific themes clearly belonging to Christian art⁴⁶ (scenes both from "The Old" and "The New Testament"), is not more naive, but more simplified, being totally different from the frescoes of the Synagogue from Dura, more elaborate in order to be more explicit and more convincing.

⁴³Against this explanation, some opinions refer to raising arms in Antiquity as a magical gesture used by Osyris to give human kind the soul, the *ka*, even the hieroglyphs that represents this gesture has the form of the orant. That is why, in Egypt, the orant will be kept for a long time in the Coptic art, while in the Western art it slowly became specific only to Virgin Mary (cf. Vătășianu, 1967, pp. 20-21).

⁴⁴What makes these paintings, from the Eastern border of the Roman Empire, contemporary with the beginning of the catacomb art is the extended domain of representations surpassing the thematic field of Roman catacombs art (cf. Gowing, 1995, p. 360; Vătășianu, 1967, p. 27).

⁴⁵...it is sure that this is not the only one... and this happened when Mitraeum and the temples of Baal and Zeus were decorated with pagan images (cf. Turner, 1996, p. 362).

⁴⁶What makes us suppose that some houses were also for worship, preceding churches.

The wall paintings from Dura⁴⁷ are the only ones and the only example of a painting having a non-funerary character before “The Peace with the Church”. They depict scenes from the Gospel on the walls (“Curing the paralytic”, Il. 12, The Samaritan, Il. 13), and on the baptism basin, the “Good Shepherd” (Il. 14). The frescoes were painted in two periods, the last painted ones covered the previous frescoes partially. It is interesting the fact that in the area having the older fresco, “The Sacrifice of Isaac”, probably the oldest representation of this kind in Jewish iconography⁴⁸, the painter avoided representing human faces: Abraham is shown from the back, Isaac is sketched, from heaven we can only see the hand of God (Croix *et alii*, 1996, p. 251).



Il. 12



Il. 13



Il. 14

Despite the prohibition on representing images⁴⁹, Jewish colonies from Eastern cities started embellishing⁵⁰ their synagogues with scenes taken from “The Old Testament”. The ornaments of the synagogue from Dura (Il. 15), though more “artistic” than those of the Christian house, do not represent Works of art, but a document of time. The painter’s aim was not to present reality in a skillful manner, by transgressing the command, that is why the style is a little awkward, flat, things are not linked⁵¹, but to clarify to the viewer the significance of the specific episode (in the given examples, it is shown the momento when Moses hits the rock, out of which the twelve miraculous springs appear, each of the peoples of Israel receives its part (Il. 16); on the West wall, Orpheus is represented, he is identified with David, the

⁴⁷Worship place between 245-246 d.Hr (cf. Tristan, 2002, p. 228).

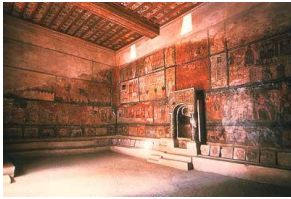
⁴⁸Some of them entered Christian art – like this one –, but never in the form we have here... (cf. Gowing, 1995, p. 360).

⁴⁹The momentary absence of the Jewish interdiction of using images is probably linked to the Jewish tendency of changing from national faith into universal by the missionary activity amongst non-Jewish. (notice some inscriptions from the paintings, inscriptions which are in Greek) (cf. Janson, 1986, pp. 195-196).

⁵⁰Though at Dura, the art of the Jewish had a less ornamental role (cf. Gombrich, 1975, p. 44).

⁵¹It is explained by the painter’s use of symbolic older images, because he did not have a clear image on the tradition of Jewish religious painting (cf. Janson, 1986, p. 196).

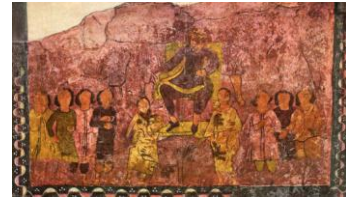
autor of the "Psalms" (Il. 17). The perspective is hierarchical, forms are rarely superimposed, there is lack of space and light.



Il. 15



Il. 16



Il. 17

"Painting shows to the eye not only what exists, existed or may exist, but also what never exists, existed and may not be", Tatarkiewicz said (Tatarkiewicz, 1978, p. 153). Consequently, painting is a language, "it cannot be done with images traced in reality. Poetry does exist only in words, painting needs forms. By appealing to a privileged sensation, that of lines and colours, and a significant place, the surface, painting is complete in an artistic action which asks for our participation" (Berger, 1975, p. 125). But it is a type of language which spiritually rebuilds the world by means of the transmitted emotion, the artistic image is not just a copy of reality. Of course, the artist puts her/his fingerprint, by her/his gift and ingenuity, being the keeper of a particular culture and of a particular moment. In the case of the Paleo-Christian period, the artist interprets reality symbolically, rebuilding it. The obtained pieces of work, very distinct from the ancient ones just like the medieval ones are, yet, so close to the previous two, have a special place in the history of art, continuing to live due to the charming beauty of the search period of the beginning and the greatness of the transmitted ideas.

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