

*Research*

BORDERS AND BORDER ZONES: DIFFERENCES AND EQUALITIES

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## **PAINTINGS BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE CANON: BULGARIAN CHURCHES AND MONASTERIES XVII – XIX CENTURY**

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**Abstract.** Traditions in the decoration of Christian temples on the Balkans are largely related to strictly established rules, deriving from Byzantium and developed in the theological ranges in the empire. The holy fathers like John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite announced themselves in defense of veneration of the icons (overcoming the crisis of persecution), something more – their theological insights and logically consistent studies give the possibility to artists to express their feelings and conceptions but taking into consideration the ecclesiastical rules – canons. The article explores process of breaking the boundaries of canon set by Church Fathers as a result of unpreparedness, ignorance and total aesthetic decline after Ottoman invasion. It is appeared various levels of naive art and breaking of the canon established

by the Orthodox Church. Many examples passing beyond the boundaries of ecclesiastical rules are presented.

*Keywords:* borders, Bulgaria, ecclesiastical rules, icons, Orthodox Church, Ottoman Empire, wall paintings

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The art of mural painting has long-lasting traditions on the Balkans, related to strictly established rules originating from the Byzantine theological postulates. According to the Holy Fathers of the Orthodoxy, the possibility to depict “The Undepictable” (God the Father) is lying in the depictions of Jesus Christ, the God-Man, who sacrificed himself for a general redemption of the sins. An example in this relation presents the sacral depictions of the Mandylion (preserved in the Vatikan) and the miracle with the print at the king Abgar’s. Some of the Holy Fathers – like John of Damascus and Theodore Studite defended the veneration of icons (while, at the same time overcome the crisis of the persecution) and furthermore their theological insights and logically consistent studies gave the artists the possibility to express their personal emotions and conceptions, while at the same time taking into consideration the ecclesiastical rules – the canons.

In a biblical aspect the word “canon” was derived from the Greek verb *κατανίσσω*, meaning establish or legalize.<sup>1)</sup> The word *Κανον* itself initially had the connotation of “right way” and consequently it was used for “rule” or “measure” or a thing that is a trial measurement for one’s deeds or opinions. With the former connotation it was used in the New Testament, the Epistle of Apostle Paul to the Phillipians 3:16 and the Epistle to the Galatians 6:16. The word also refers to decision, definition and formula for icon painting. In this relation, it is crucial to remind ourselves that primarily the canon of the Holy Scriptures was set, because all the books are God-inspired and true, and that is why they appear to be the fundament of the Christian studies. However, taking

this into consideration, it is needed to answer the question on the canon in the depictive art. Many Russian authors, as Иванов (1914), Покровский (1892), Лосев (1964), Флоренский (1972) and Бычков (1994), have published on the issue but nevertheless the topic is not exhausted yet. The researches made by Вагнер (1987), Лотман (1973), Померанцева (1973), Le Goff (Le Goff (1973) and Meyendorff (1979) are not less popular than the previously mentioned. The theme was benefited, as well, by the book of the eminent theologian Успенский (1989). More recent research has been done by Кузнецова (2012) concerning important questions on the application of the canon in the different periods of the Christian art.

Since in the different periods, after the final defeat of Byzantium in 1453, the depictive art evolved, it is important to trace if the canon was followed or not. This is the aim of the study – to benchmark some examples in this relation, which would show, although superficially, the forms and the visualizations from the churches in Bulgaria built or depicted in the period of XVII – XIX centuries, that are breaking the frame of the canon.

The first and the most important cause for breaking of the canon is the literature. In the XVI – XVII century, on the Balkans has been spread a specific type of religious literature, which was not officially approved by the highest priesthood. That is why; it was announced as being non-canonic. The texts that appeared were different apocrypha tales, eschatological themes and plots that enriched the traditional iconography and even added entirely new compositions. Many other facts inspired the artist's imagination to depict the otherwise traditional themes in a non-conventional way.

On the Balkan Peninsula, particularly in the Bulgarian lands, in XIV – XV century, because of the Ottoman invasion, in economic and political sense, things were turned over, leading to decay of theological ideas. The liturgies were served mechanically (by tradition), without understanding the sense of God's word. The thinking of icon-painters was changed naturally,

while fulfilling orders of high clergymen. After the end of XV c. the copied scenes on the walls of churches started to be changed – as a result of the lack of a proper training, ignorance and total aesthetic decline. Consequently were reached different levels of naive art and breaking of the canon established by the Orthodox Church.

In the middle ages the canon was not considered as a strict frame that manipulated the art, but more or less as the necessary measurement to the reliability. The regulations imposed by the Holy Fathers helped for the correct (although conditional) depiction of the Non-despicable – God the Father, His saint, angels, miracles. Thus, through the means of techniques, inscriptions and other methods, the iconic images gradually became more concrete. In this relation, a very helpful means were the “haermenias” – they conveyed the information correctly and fast and also helped for preserving the correct image and personal story of the saints. In a metaphorical sense, the canon in the art was a mirror for the ecclesiastical dogmas. The eminent Byzantologists – Curt Viezman and Victor Nikitich Lazarev are defining the idea that the canon is a list of rules that refer to the compositions in the iconography, the proportions and the colors. It was a matter of a personal choice, however, the number of the persons in the scenes on the church walls, as well as, the presence or the absence of inscriptions, which in the cases of absence could make the scenes’ recognition more difficult. The presence of an inscription in the icon or the mural painting was an attempt to complete the narration, to make the situation more understandable and to enrich the content with more episodes. This is why, very often the canon was to regulate and define the contents of the inscriptions (liturgical, prayer phrase, epithets and titles) which at its turn required strict following of compositional patterns and poses to reach the compliance between the idea, implementation and function of the image.

However, if for the multi-figured scenes there was a place for interpretation, the case with the main characters of the compositions was entirely dif-

ferent – their gestures and positions were strictly defined. For instance, Archangel Gabriel's obligatory exposure is with a raised right hand, gathering his fingers in gesture of blessing to the Holy Virgin, which compiles to the gospel's texts. If we refer more exactly to the canon of Byzantium from the age of the Paleologians we should accept that in it are framed and widely applied already approved ideas taken from reliable texts and sources. Never, in a work of the imperial art, we'd see less than twelve apostles at the Last supper, or a John the Baptist that would look plumpy or glutenous, as well as, there is no way to see naked, blushing cherubs with explicit genitals in the works of artists from XIII and XIV centuries. In fact the angel's garment was an obligatory element of the art, although the variants of the garment and the design could have been different. As Бакалова (1989) mentions, the canon of the Byzantium art was equal to the canon for the imperial ceremonial procedures, as well as to the clergy outfit, depending on the clergy rank saint. According to the same author, the canon should be viewed as a representative hierarchal system of many factors that are regulating the depiction itself is a kind of a *chanson de geste*, which is applicable to the manners and the tastes in the Byzantine society (Бакалова, 1989).

According to Маринска (1979) the canon defines the plot and the topic of the iconic scene. Speaking about setting boundaries of the Christian postulates on the personification of God the Son – Jesus Christ, His teaching, miracles, passions and the sacrifice and resurrection we also should ask ourselves about the authors of these postulates. These are the Church Fathers and defenders of the Orthodoxy, and active participants in the Seven Ecumenical Councils. The rules for the concrete way of representing the iconic personages are recorded, for sure which means that the Christian knowledge of these biblical events are transformed into the positive “we order”, which is registered in the so called Rules stated by the Councils, *cf.*

[L]et your eyes behold the thing which is right, orders Wisdom, and keep your heart with all care. For the bodily senses easily bring their own impressions into the soul. Therefore we order that henceforth there shall in no way be made pictures, whether they are in paintings or in what way so ever, which attract the eye and corrupt the mind, and inciteit to the enkindling of base pleasures. And if any one shall attempt to do this he is to be cut off (Says rule 100 from the Council of Trullo, in 962).

As it is known, at the Seventh Ecumenical council was issued an order for even stricter regulations for the depictive art thus preventing any wrong interpretation of the God's kingdom and all the saints, martyrs and righteous people. Although, not all of these rules were recorded, they turned into traditions, eg. the so called *isokefalia* (equal level of the heads), the thorn wreaths on the martyr's heads and palm branches, crucifixes, the light from inside out imitating the light of Tabor mountain, the gold halos and many other ways of depicting the non-depictable). That is why, many western researchers are not able to accept the icon as a theological expression or as a consideration in painting.

In this sense, one fact that deserves our attention is that in some churches in Bulgaria in XVII c. in the scene of "The Last supper" are depicted 11 apostles, not 12 which could be seen in the St. George church in Veliko Tarnovo. Other interesting detail is the appearance of a tray for counting coins in the scene "Repentance and self-hanging of Judas Iscariot" and "The expel of the merchants from the temple". This is repeated in three churches in the village of Arbanassi – "St. Athanasius", "Nativity", "St. George". Unusual is the way that the painter Nedio, worked in the naos of "Nativity" church in Arbanassi in 1681. He depicted the hanged body of Judas entirely naked, thus breaking the Byzantine and post-Byzantine traditions.

Unexpected and ungrounded in dogmatic sense (regardless to the circumstances of the epoch) is the depiction of pagan philosophers with haloes as a part of the scene “Tree of Jesse” in the narthex of the same church, painted in 1638 (Маринска, 1979). In fact, the idea to represent antique philosophers (their names in Greek are: ΛΙΣΙΠΠΗΣ, ΑΣΤΑΚΟΡ[ΑΣ], ΣΟΛΟ[Ν]ΗΣ, ΖΗΛΙΓΓΗΣ, ΠΗΘ(Α)ΓΟΡΑ[Σ], ΣΟΚΡΑ[ΤΗΣ], ΟΜΗΡΟΣ, ΑΡΙΣΤΟΤΕΛΗΣ, ΓΑΛΙΝΟΣ, ΣΗΜΒΙΑΑΣ, ΠΛΑΤΟΝ, ΠΛΟΥΤΑΡΧΟΣ), was not connected to the Renaissance developments but more to the return to the ancient Greek culture and language. Their presence was a result of the phanariot agenda, in favour of the Tzarigrad patriarchate, the Greek culture and language (Мутафов, 2010).

In the context of these novelties, the Herminia (manual with models for icon painting) of Dionisyus of Fournas recommends their presence in the narthex of any big and eminent catholicon (Успенски, 1868).

In the same church is represented "Wheel of Life", the earliest known image on the Balkans. Optional is the subject matters carried over from pagan Roman literary thought and adapted in the Christian sense - showing the vanity of human life, easily wasted by wealth. So is the inscription: Ο ΠΛΟΥΤΟΣ ΤΗΣ ΔΟΞΗΣ translated *the power of riches /fortune/*. Same is the topic of prof. Elka Bakalova who reveals the prototypes of the iconography, the literary sources and their interpretations (Bakalova, 2003).

It turns out, that in the XVII century, on the Bulgarian territory there are a lot of scenes that are breaking the canon as it was stated by the theologians and the clergy of Byzantium. In one of the registers of the murals in the St. Elija church in Boboshevo there is an unusual combination of scenes, in between these from the Good Thursday and the Great Friday and above is to be read „Η ΠΡΟΣΕΥΧΗ ΤΥ Χυ”, i.e. “The Prayer of Christ” combined with the Temptations of Christ at the Jericho dessert” (Künstle, 1928; Nygren, 1968). The apostles in the non-canonical scene should be viewed at as wit-

nesses of the impertinent temptation, according to an apocrypha called “The argument of Jesus with the devil”, from the Index of Pogodin, translated into Greek in the XII – XIII centuries (Петканова, 1981). In the first few sentences of this work it is said, “And there came Lord in the Olive-tree mountain and told his disciples: Let’s fast forty days! And that is how Jesus started to fast, together with his disciples, to out-with the Devil” (Трендафилов 1998). Such things, of course, have never been approved by the church. Another detail makes the scene even more interesting – under the Devil’s feet is depicted a cracked rock and a dark pit under it. The detail could be referred to the last part of this tale :”And God said, again: Let the Earth opens and reveals four earth pits – and go down Devil to see what it is down there!” (Трендафилов, 1998, pp. 333–334).

A rather radical sounds the opinion I am going to cite here: If there is a Byzantine empire – there is a canon, no empire – no canon. Having in mind the numerous examples from the XVII – XVIII this idea makes sense.

Beyond the boundaries of the canon are the numerous depictions in icons from Tryavna and paintings of saints in life-size, as some of them are shorter, with unnaturally curved bodies. Such examples can be found in many of the XIX century icons painted by artists - primitives stored in Regional Museum of History – Veliko Tarnovo. Actually the rule for the so-called *izokefalia* (equal heads), established in Byzantium, is broken. In the following article many other examples passing beyond the boundaries of ecclesiastical rules are presented. For instance, one interesting detail in an icon from Tryavna with an image of forefather Noah with the ark for salvation from the flood (Събев, 2011). This ship sailing on the endless water resembles a mussel shell and is related to the concept of ancient pagan thinkers about the creation of the new life.

Particularly interesting are the frescoes executed by the painter Mihalko Golev in "St. Archangel Michael" Church, Leshko village, Blagovegrad, in

1893. It is representative of the icon painting school of Bansko. On this topic are significant publications by Elena Genova (Генюва, 1999). The images are unconventional with instructive character – as a woman who uses lipstick to beautify, and indeed to the devil makeover other – witch who steals the harvest moon and shrinks. On this topic Asen Vasilev has devoted a number of comments, mostly in his book "Social and patriotic themes in old Bulgarian art" (Василиев, 1973).

Finally I would like to introduce you to an extraordinary beautiful naked woman at the center of unknown composition. This is the Church of St. George in the village Zlatolist, Blagoevgrad. Such a thing can rarely occur in the context of strict rules. Obviously, it is about a “modern” iconography which totally breaks Rule 100 from the Council of Trullo in 962 since the female-martyr is depicted with tempting, naked forms that attract the visitors’ sight instantly.

In conclusion, we may say, that having in mind all these examples we should reconsider the concept about the application of the canon in the Orthodox art. Numerous examples on the territory of Bulgaria are confirming my idea and give rich material for further researches and interpretations. What is of great importance, as well, is to clarify the reasons for these deviations which were repeated numerous times by the generations of artists. In fact, the world of depictive art is a field for self-expression of the artists. The canon cannot cover the whole territory of depictive art, even though the works are purely religious by function and content.

#### NOTES

1. [http://www.pravoslavieto.com/bible/docs/bible\\_canon/1.htm](http://www.pravoslavieto.com/bible/docs/bible_canon/1.htm)

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APPENDIX



**The Last Supper, St. George Church, Veliko Tarnovo, XVII century**



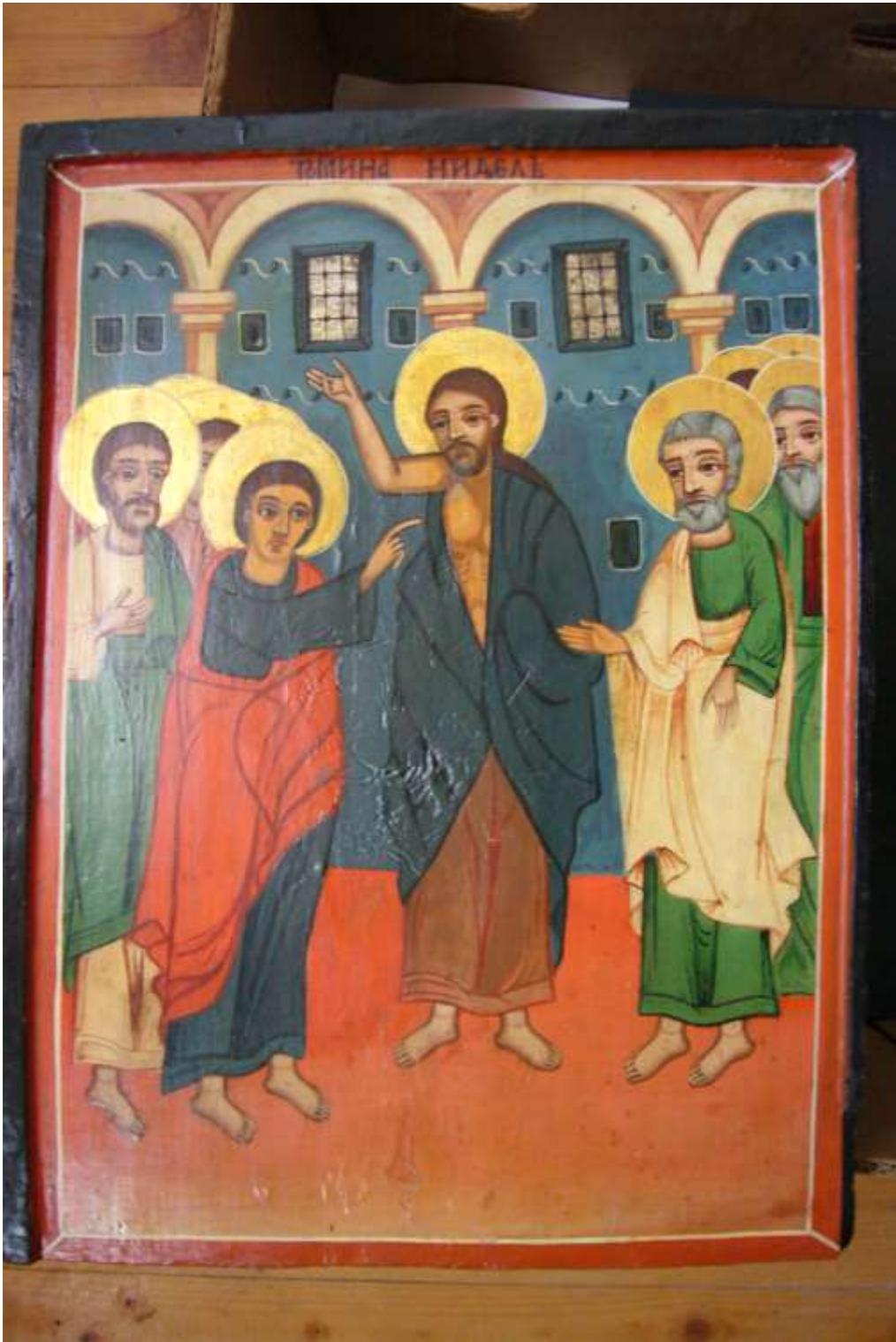
**Temptations of Christ at the Jericho desert, St. Elija church in Boboshevo, XVII century**



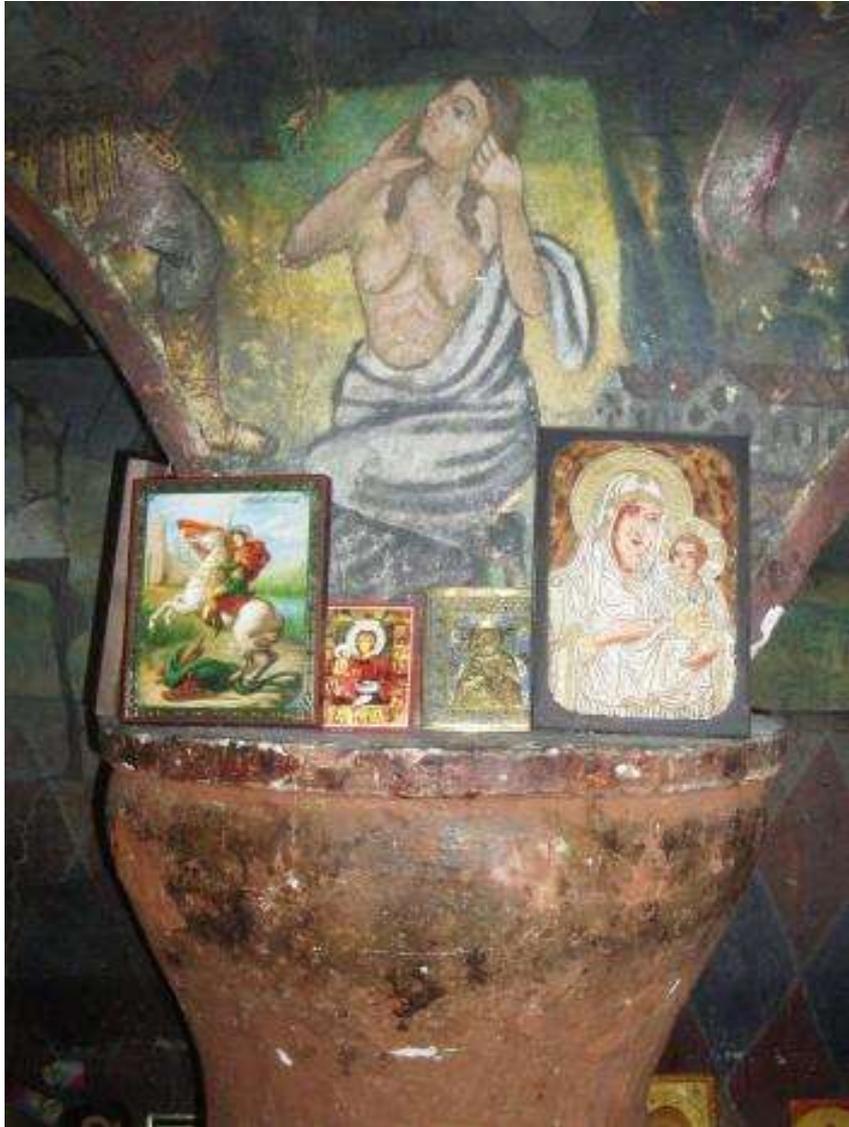
**Repentance and self-hanging of Judas Iscariot. St. Athanasius Church in Arbanassi, XVII century**



**Wooden tray for coins counting. XIX century**



**The Belief of Thomas. Triavna school, XIX century**



**Mural paintings from the St. George Church, Zlatolist village,  
Blagoevgrad**

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