

Illusion and Allegory in the Baroque Art of the Banat: An Introduction¹

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Abstract. The present study aims to underline the particularities found in the Banat by means of reinterpreting some of the main creations of Central-European late Baroque, where the illusion of the Habsburg power and allegories of Catholic faith were employed in the unifying artistic discourse. The main methods used range from comparative-historical to iconographic, with a structural-semantic and formal analysis of the works presented as case studies. The epideictic rhetoric of these examples contributes to a better acknowledgement of the role played by art in every society, having in mind that the eighteenth-century artistic phenomenon was synergic with the Central-European evolution and the style was tributary to the late Baroque, one of the many variants with particularities of the so-called “Baroques”.

Keywords: so-called “Baroques”; the Banat; Allegory; Illusion of Power; Recontextualization.

[es] Ilusión y alegoría en el arte barroco de Banat: una introducción

Resumen. El presente estudio subraya las particularidades del arte del Banat del siglo XVIII mediante la reinterpretación de algunas de las principales creaciones del Barroco tardío que sigue las manifestaciones del estilo centroeuropeo. La ilusión del poder de los Habsburgos y las alegorías utilizadas por la religión católica vencedora de los protestantes se reúnen en el discurso artístico unificador. Los métodos científicos utilizados en este estudio convergen desde el comparativismo histórico hasta el iconográfico, con un análisis estructural y semántico de las formas de los monumentos artísticos a los cuales se refieren los estudios de caso de varios géneros, como la pintura, la escultura monumental y la del altar. La retórica epideíctica revelada en estas manifestaciones contribuye a descifrar el papel del arte en cualquier sociedad, en este caso teniendo en cuenta que este fenómeno artístico fue sinérgico con la evolución del centro de Europa a través de una variante estilística peculiar de los así llamados “Barrocos” locales.

Palabras clave: los así llamados “Barrocos”; alegoría; ilusión de poder; recontextualización.

Summary. 1. Introduction 2. “A question of style” Baroque and the so-called “*Baroques*”. 3. Art as an illusion of power. 4. Allegory as a concept and the provincial art of the Banat. 5. Conclusions. 6. Written sources and bibliographical references.

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1. Introduction

There is always a close connection between art and the historical context it reflects, and the beginning of the eighteenth century is essential in the development of modern coordinates for the Banat of Timișoara, as part of Central European history. Founded between 1552 and 1716 under Ottoman rule, this region received a stimulus from the Christian multinational centralized Habsburg Empire. The present study focuses on how this newly acquired province of the Habsburg Empire (*Neoaquisticum*) can be understood by studying the

art produced here, as an instrument of identity, power and religion. Reflecting the changes that occurred in the space where many civilizations collided, situated between the East and the West, the article aims to highlight the artistic phenomenon of European descent that is the late Baroque, reflected by comparative-historical, iconographic, structural-semantic and formal analysis studies, reevaluating the past through new interpretative expressions. A visible component of human life, art intertwines between different political systems and religion for the period in question, both the monarchy and the Catholic Church instrumenting historic-polit-

¹ The present study evolved from researches made on the Baroque heritage of the Banat, an insight to the art history approach, subjected to reconceptualization and reinterpretation.

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ical realities through art, transformed into a cultural code and a policy for assimilation and integration. How can one understand history if documented by art? The monument itself becomes documentary source revealing visual codes and instructions of society-integrated paradigms. The Baroque art became such a cultural code, flourishing in all countries found under direct or indirect control of the Habsburgs. Among the pillars of state authority in the newly acquired province, we find the Catholic Church. The methodological approach of this study aims to underline some of the main artistic traits of this cross-border region, developed in close connection with the absolute centralized power of the imperial Habsburgs. By reformulating and comparing some of the main ideas of art history contained in the literature, I will attempt to demonstrate how images worked in a period when art had tremendous didactic and moralizing features. The article will not only describe but also explain these facts, formulating judgments of value. Besides the critical cross-examination of some of the main sources, the paper focuses on how the Habsburgs used visual propaganda as a solution to underline their authority and legitimacy, after they succeeded in ruling over territories such as Banat and Transylvania. Enforcing the Vienna centralization was the subject of many debates³, still one may observe new meanings in the representations of the religious Baroque, free to exercise its true mission, of cultural and spiritual engagement. While in Transylvania the Catholic Church had to confront other denominations, such as the Orthodox and Protestant churches, in the Banat the Catholics encountered no opposition in spreading an iconographic *Propaganda fide* to followers of Rome's influence. Nicolae Sabău⁴ mentions that, in Transylvania, the Catholic Church was considered more bishopric than imperial, due to the specific conditions of this province, where Orthodox and Protestant cults were a majority and the dispute embraced an openly coercive approach, or a more subtle one, that had cultural and spiritual backgrounds.

The Baroque remains a visual confrontation, as it faces mentalities, ideas, philosophies, sociologies, and economics, unfolding a plurality of expressions, which is why there are so many attempts to decode and understand it. One tends to explain what was happening in a Europe of contradictions, where *Theatrum mundi* unfolded its scenery with visual force like never before. Renaissance art found new meanings in the intellectual approach, as opposed to the Gothic, when mysticism prevailed. The Baroque transcends the ideological limits of the Counter-Reformation and continues to dissimulate the new model of existence, at the break of a new age, of reason and modernity, of Enlightenment and boundless limits of knowledge. For the province organized as *Kronland* this meant profound changes

of mentality, new and modern social and political outcomes.

2. "A question of style" Baroque and the so-called *Baroques*

What style, other than the Baroque, could better illustrate such concepts? Only the exuberant, multi-faceted, multicultural Baroque, a style that became, by means of visual influence, a true experience of conviviality in times defined as uncertain, when centripetal tendencies came from the Mediterranean and Rome. In terms of style, the assertion that the Baroque dissolved into variations, cited as local *Baroques*⁵, is true, as we can speak of a central style and a regional style with the same emphasis; this is the case with such late artistic evolutions as those in the Banat area. The Baroque style had many doctrine-free expressions, if one examines the Antiquity, with the Hellenistic manifestations or the stylistic exaggerations in other artistic trends, regarded as 'baroque'. This artistic expression was intentionally perceived by art historians either as a 'historical constant'⁶, 'as a period of European sensitivity'⁷ when the extra sensorial gained evidence in connection with perceiving the divine. In our case study, we can extrapolate and consider the Baroque as cosmopolitan and provincial as the influences creating its manifestation gathered *'ex toto orbe Romano'*, thus creating a late manifestation of the style, a synthesis, given that the stages of the Baroque are not chronologically defined, but blended and miscellaneous. One may also take into consideration that the Banat had no prior artistic manifestations as coherent as the Baroque, which makes us think of it as the first modern intervention in terms of visual forms, with a translation of shapes and meanings. Our intention is to highlight some of the most important works realized by Central-European artists: the 'official commission episode' in which the illusion of power and allegory was the language most commonly used. Comparative means of interpretation have an important contribution in order to find similarities within the conglomerate of nations seeking an identity of their own through Baroque expressions, at the beginning of this complex historical process. However, the Baroque is to be viewed as the first international movement and the art it produced was the result of inner struggles of an age of profound changes. For the Banat, this age covered the entire eighteenth century only to dissolve in neoclassical tendencies after 1780 with the start of a new epoch dominated

³ See, Larry Silver. "Europe's Turkish Nemesis", in *The Habsburgs and their Courts in Europe, 1400-1700. Between Cosmopolitanism and Regionalism*, ed. Herbert Karner, Ingrid Ciulisová, Krista De Jonge and Bernardo García (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2014).

⁴ Nicolae Sabău. *Metamorfoze ale barocului transilvan. Sculptura I* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 2002), 310.

⁵ A reference that arises on Renaissance and renaissances, as there are as many manifestations within a style evolution as there are local variants with specific characteristics, despite the fact that earlier renaissances can be classified as revivals, in that respect see, Erwin Panofsky. *Renaissance and Renaissances in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 1972).

⁶ Jean Phillippe Minguet. *Estetica rococoului*. (București: Meridiane, 1973), 52.

⁷ Alois Riegl. *Istoria artei ca istorie a stilurilor* (Meridiane: București, 1998), 23.

by Enlightenment ideas, during the reign of Joseph II, when the concept of the absolute monarch came to an end, and the new period of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire commenced. The Baroque finds new meanings as it unfolds a sequence of events, each artistic expression in synergy with the others, where all genres combine and create the composite reality of Europe in the 1700s⁸.

How art constructs identity is another question that lies at the heart of art history inquiry. That is why art is analyzed in its historical context, decoding the cultural artifacts of the period, when the monument becomes an authentic documentary source, unveiling significant gestures of authority and symbols, no longer recognizable today. This study favors interpretative discussions not on what is commonly agreed and known from written sources but on what can be deduced from formal characteristics of the art produced in the eighteenth century at the outskirts of an expanding empire. There are several limits to this attempt, as the main directions are present in all artistic genres, this is why we shall focus on the artifacts that render an allegorical discourse, comparing and re-evaluating some of the major outcomes, through stereotypical means of expressions, illusion and metaphor. These formal stylistic characteristics found their true addressability and usage as an instrument to assert authority. The case studies chosen belong to paintings, public and shrine sculptures, reflecting the interactions of mentality that set the coordinates at the core of the artistic phenomenon.

Beside the historical coordinates, the Baroque mind and sensibility fed on the Central European *Zeitgeist*, the human interest to express ideas, to find meaning to the sensibility of the period, which can all be understood with the help of the contextual analysis. The perception over the Baroque style of the Banat has had many historiographical approaches; of these, some capture our attention as they surpass the limits of re-assessing general ideas and coordinates of evolution⁹. We define the period that initiates the Banat modernity as baroque, having in mind those characteristics that underline the artistic style in most of the Central European territories, part of the vast Habsburg Empire. What one should have in mind in this context is that these characteristics in the Banat are remote from the trend-setting center and thus, theoretically, this style is to be regarded as late, almost dissimulated in classical tendencies. How can this re-contextualization contribute to understanding such a complex phenomenon, given that even the absolutism of the period was subject to reconceptualization?

3. Art as an illusion of power

We know from experience that Baroque art constructs identity and the illusion of coherence because the style emerged as a paradigm for Catholic renewal after the iconoclasm promoted by the Protestants. As an expression of victorious Rome, the style was translated into numerous reinterpretations and forms as the identity shifted from one region to another, reaching the Far East, if we consider '*Societas Jesu*' and their Catholic upheaval. By the time the Jesuit order was suppressed in 1773 under Clement XIV, the order had constructed a solid identity of Central-European origin that is recognizable in each intervention bearing their signature. Helped by the "*Exercitia spiritualia*" of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Jesuits contributed to Catholic faith in gaining new meanings and worshippers, especially among laymen.

Every aspect of the style is so clearly articulated that the equilibrium of the whole could not be maintained if any part of it were removed. The Baroque style was, thus, a true expression of unity in diversity, building up the vivid picture of how art instructs and reflects changes of mentality, how it shapes tensions and contradictions, even if, in content, it came to fruition as the universal language of the Catholic Church.

In 1718, the Treaty of Passarowitz opened a new era for the province that promoted the integration within the Habsburg monarchy. The ideas of French absolutism lay the foundation of all domains, even the style designed to accompany the conquerors as cultural politics suffered modifications accordingly. As one of the leading rules, the Trent Council visual reforms clearly stated that simplicity, clarity and intelligibility should be demanded from artists in order to stimulate piety. Awe was provoked by the new aesthetics in the newly colonized province, in the capital city, Timișoara, slowly shaping a new image of post-medieval traits, assuming the new role, that of a modern Christian European city.

4. Allegory as a concept and the provincial art of the Banat

It is not our intention to define allegory as a tool for Catholic evangelism, but to discover the intricate ways in which it reveals its visionary power in the case studies analyzed. Despite the orientation of Renaissance art to intellectuals, the Baroque age elicits a genuinely popular response, spreading its message through the written word. From miracle books that reflected the gradual extension of literacy to the lower levels of society, to academies of art, knowledge penetrated all walks of life.

There is a common perception among art historians that the Baroque art makes use of allegory to express abstract concepts. These abstract concepts become conventional images to which symbols, signs and emblems complete the scenery. Decoding these messages is a difficult task, understanding is even

⁸ Erwin Panofsky. "What is Baroque?" in *Three Essays on Style*, ed. Irving Lavin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 17-90.

⁹ A list of sources refers to the style as cosmopolite, decoding its variations in style, shape and imagery, for details see, Francis Haskell. *History and its images. Art and the Interpretation of the Past* (London: New Haven, 1993); Günter Brucher. *Die Kunst des barock in Österreich* (Vienn: Residenz Verlag, 1995); Wilfried Hausmann. *Baukunst des Barock: Form, Funktion, Singehalt* (Köln: Du Mont, 1978).

more difficult, this is why iconographic guidelines are necessary to comprehend otherwise cryptic imagery.¹⁰ Baroque painting is like music, full of rhythms and impressions (coloristic, tonal, and symbolical), in which the way one can perceive the whole and project an idea is the result of cultural background. For someone not familiar with the inspirational sources of the Baroque art (the Old and New Testaments), it would be impossible to decode the complex meanings without the help of indicating symbols. Such symbols make up the transition to the entire concept, as, for example, in any art work, the keys that construct the identity are art concepts. Let us take these notions further and illustrate how these concepts work on a mental level, bearing in mind that those who benefitted from these artworks were monarchs, clergymen, high officials of the Habsburg administration, labeled as 'connoisseurs'. To the common person, these images would have seemed rather impressive by means of techniques suggesting continuity of space, drama and emphasis. The key notions documented the scene and introduced the viewer into the realm of iconographic discourse. The art promoted by the Habsburgs in the Banat, characterized by normative ideology, opened the experiment consisting of connecting the periphery to the center, a phenomenon carried successfully as the main opponent of the absolute monarch, the hereditary nobility, was absent from this province. It has previously been argued in the literature that the visual arts of the region reflected this particular situation, as compared with Transylvania and Hungary, for example. We might be led to assume that the Banat Baroque art was primarily official, as there are cases when high officials like Empress Maria Theresa commissioned works of art by renowned artists of Viennese descent. That was the case with Michel Angelo Unterberger from Cavalese (Tyrol), whom she rewarded with the highest title of that period, that of '*Rector academicus*'¹¹, and invited him to decorate the interior of the Catholic Cathedral of Timișoara. The allegorical language used illustrates St. George defeating the Dragon, an allegory on the victory over Satan. The key symbols are, in this case, the dragon for Satan, the laurel wreath for victory, putti, clouds, sun beams, the spear, the equestrian composition, each integrating the scene and revealing its true meaning. The antithesis between Good and Evil, in the shape of a Christian martyr defeating evil, can be interpreted as the victory of Catholicism over Protestantism, for the Central-European space. In the particular case of the province with no heretics, either before or after the annexation to the conglomerate of states that constructed the composite identity of eighteenth-century Europe, this representation stands merely as the victory over the Ottoman Empire (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Michel Angelo Unterberger, Saint George slaying the Dragon, 1754. Source: Catholic Diocesenum Archivum Timișoara archivum_dioecesenum_tm@yahoo.de

This art was official until the end of the century, when a category of artists emerged, singled out from among the colonists who had settled in urban and rural areas. They were provincial artisans, bound to rely on their own resources and having no academic formation, just the desire to copy prototypes with modest means of expression.

We shall explore from the range of subjects of the Banat Baroque provincial art those expressions illustrated by means of illusion and allegory in some of the most suggestive paintings and sculptures using this thematic approach. Of the works carrying a sort of camouflage unveiling its true meaning, assuming a degree of sensibility and a certain moralistic didacticism, designed to inculcate Christian values, we will focus on those who combine contradictory elements of content in a unified composition, for example the subjects presented with double connotation, adjustable in different historical contexts. They call the attention on how iconography works on a semantic level. Truly defined as pictorial, these artworks present an abundance of illusionistic techniques destined to capture a fragment of an illusion, a frame of the intricate relation space builds around the action. Stage-like settings, into which the grouping of the figures invites the viewer as active participants, these are the rules to be followed, adding light from behind, revealing the coarse materiality of the scene. One would think that such scenes were not familiar to common worshippers of the period, but they are explained by the Catholic revival propaganda, which turned visual. Vastly augmented by the senses, the church interior was the

¹⁰ Manfred Bukofze. *Allegory in Baroque Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1947).

¹¹ Title reflecting Unterberger's position as Director of the Imperial Art Academy of Vienna.

perfect stage where to envision dogma, overwhelmed with emotion, transforming spirit into matter. To be credible, heaven had to resemble earth, and sight was the supreme faculty because mysteries had to be revealed to the outward eye. These visual effects were obtained with all the artistic means, architecture, sculpture and painting, united in a fusion of texture, light and color, a consequence of the Baroque expansiveness derived from the conquests of space in the sixteenth century:

The heavens are more and more within reach; Galileo and Newton will penetrate them to find the laws of their movement. The clouds of heaven are not simply the seat of angels; the seventeenth century discovers that they are water vapor. The bright air through which light is propagated has density and weight. As the heavens become physical, so man may dream of taking possession of them someday by flight; not the flight of the soul, but the flight of the body¹².

Commissioned as a distinctive gesture of authority, these artworks can be easily decoded due to their emotional content and pathos. Miraculous and mystical events were typical examples of thematic approaches used by Baroque artists to counteract the Protestant aniconism. The Revelation of St. John the Divine provided one such example, with the victory of Archangel Michael over Satan, a theme of doctrinal importance for the Jesuits, who considered the Protestants as heretics and the Reformation as the work of the Devil. Thus, the subject, a motto of the period, a pledge that the powers of darkness can be overcome if only the worshippers returned to divine faith, is rendered with allegorical devices by Michel Angelo Unterberger upon Maria Theresa's demand, adapting the scenography by presenting St. George, patron saint of medieval Timișoara. The painter was familiar with the rhetoric of such subjects as we find him present in Transylvania, at Târgu Mureș,¹³ where he created another composition using allegorical devices for the Jesuit church.

In this respect, it is worth calling the attention to the apotheosis of the divine as a primary source of inspiration, as the sketch¹⁴ presented to Empress Maria Theresa so vividly presents (Fig. 2).

This votive altar painting depicts the eighteenth century patron saint of Timișoara, St. Nepomuc, floating on ascending clouds, helped in his attempt by an angel and dancing cherubs, setting the stage for the divine intervention at the top of the composition, where the Immaculate steps over the crescent. In this case, Unterberger exploits the aura of Nepomuc and associates him with the Marian cult (the abstract notion of the Immaculate Conception), both subjects treated with specific Baroque iconography so common to the realm of Catholicism. The cult of St. John of Nepomuc inspired the grandest ceremonial of the age, as a cult promoted

from below, by the fervor and the oblations of the simple, country people of Bohemia. Nepomuc replaced St. George, the former patron saint of Timișoara, with the aim of suggesting the victory over the Ottoman Empire. This apotheosis scene renders Nepomuc floating over the Vauban citadel on motifs consisting of clusters of fluffy clouds, helped by the ascending angel to intercede salvation to the Virgin Mary. This 'chiasmus' composition has illusionistic devices exercised with talent by the renown¹⁵ painter, who used naturalism on his canvas, staging around the images that construct spatiality, 'trompe l'oeil', heavy brush strokes of color, all means of expression enriched by the new-substance programmatic restoration of Catholicism with the help of visual didacticism and no hidden rhetoric.



Figure 2. Michel Angelo Unterberger, Nepomuc pleading for the salvation of Timișoara, 1750. Source: Catholic Diocesanum Archivum Timișoara archivum_dioecesanum_tm@yahoo.de

The six-side altars of the Catholic cathedral in Timișoara also received a Baroque input from the creation of Johann Nepomuk Schöpf (1735-1798), Bavarian by origin. The present study discusses his scenes in which allegory was used to describe Madonna's intervention to save the city from the plague, presenting Nepomuc, Rosalia, Valentine and Sebastian as intercessors. In this com-

¹² William Gardner. *Art through the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1980), 651.

¹³ Nicolae Sabău. *Metamorfoze ale barocului transilvan. Pictura II* (Mega: Cluj-Napoca, 2005), 406-407.

¹⁴ Rodica Medeleț Vărtaciu. *Valori de artă barocă din Banat* (Timișoara: Triade 2017), 219.

¹⁵ One should have in mind the artistic descent of Michelangelo Unterberger, born in Cavalese of Tyrol in 1695, disciple of the Venetian painter Gian Battista Piazzetta, trained in the Bozen studiolo under Antonio Balestra, Alessandro Mascherini, and under Paolo Pagani, Stefano Maria Legnani and Luca Giordano of the Capucin monastery in Klausen. For details on his artistic evolution and influences he received from some of his masters, see Mihaela Vlăsceanu. "Prezențe europene în peisajul artistic baroc al capitalei Banatului imperial: Michael Angelo Unterberger, Johann Nepomuk Schöpf și Johann Joseph Ressler" in *Questionnes Romanicae VII* (Szeged: Jatte University Press, 2019), 575-583. https://ciccre.uvt.ro/sites/default/files/acl/questionnes-romanicae_vii-2.pdf

position, one can clearly observe the cult of the plague protector saints imagery, realized with the same emphasis, finding a new '*sensus mysticus*', which is, in fact, envisioned so clearly. Once again, we find key elements that encompass the topography required to decode the scene. Canonical in means of expression, one can observe such an interpretation in Madonna with infant Jesus – rendering the mother of Jesus hypostasis (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Johann Nepomuk Schöpf, The Virgin with Infant Jesus surrounded by Saint Roche, Sebastian, Rosalie, Valentine and Nepomuc), 1774 (Source: Catholic Diocesanum Archivum Timișoara) archivum_dioecesanum_tm@yahoo.de

The new directions set by the Art Academy of Vienna were echoed by these compositions, a *mélange* of late mannerism and Baroque in terms of compositional scheme and language and the effects of light and shade having documental character, as it relates to the event of the 1736 plague epidemics that decimated the population of Timișoara. The artist made a selection from the repertoire of plague saints, displaying academic skills in his interpretation, classicized postures of '*contrapposto*' and theatrical arrangements with dynamic perspectives, a tempered '*chiaroscuro*' and saints floating on clouds reverberating of light and texture. He managed to suggest a mystifying composition where questions of meaning are bound to arise as signs and symbols are not so evident, only the attitudes and ideas penetrate.

The second votive painting decorating the side altar of the catholic cathedral of Timișoara describes another plague related episode as one may notice from the composition arrangement, subject and iconography of saints. The key concept emphasized again is that of salvation through faith, illustrated by J. J. Schöpf with allegorical constructed devices that enhance the qualities of Nepomuc. In this case the saint intercedes sal-

vation to the Heavens where the Trinity was arranged under a central dome surrounded by portico colonnade, enhancing the drama with the help of spiraled clouds, putti bearers of signs sustaining his ascent and reminding of his sacrifice.

According to documentary sources, Johann Nepomuk Schöpf realized the votive paintings in 1772, at the time when the construction and the interior decoration of the Catholic cathedral were completed. This figural painting with narrative effects was very popular in Central Europe, the altars were complex wooden and wall structures decorated with paintings using oil on canvas.

The fact that the Central-European Baroque was bound to Mediterranean and Roman culture is visible in the way the artistic evolution lingered in these areas and produced affiliations that make up a much-quoted expertise for the artists. Italian painters were responsible for disseminating their expertise especially in Austria and Bohemia. In Robert Evans' opinion, the Baroque Catholicism in Austria was not so much an elaboration of state power as a substitute for it, and the same situation can be cited for the Banat, which became the classic terrain where provincialized Baroque developed and was sustained by local ecclesiastical and noble interests. All the study cases presented were commissions by the dynasty itself (Charles VI and Maria Theresa) or by religious orders, and were artistic imports to the province, as they were fashioned in Viennese workshops following ready-made prototypes (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. J. N. Schöpf, Johann of Nepomuc interceding salvation, 1772 Source: Catholic Diocesanum Archivum Timișoara archivum_dioecesanum_tm@yahoo.de

As symbols were essential to the vocabulary of Christianity, especially when literacy was anything but universal (although we know from documents of the period that the catholic orders of the Jesuits, Franciscans and Piarists settled in the Banat where they opened schools for the instruction of Catholics), art was still instructive and had the ability to convey complex meanings. Codifying salvation and the victory of Christianity, these artworks apprehend greatness especially as they were part of the complex church interior scenography, theatrically arranged to introduce the worshipper by means of visualized narrations into the divinely arranged realm. The metaphor of the world 'seen as a stage' was prevalent throughout the Baroque period and lasted from the end of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century¹⁶. The work of art is an artifact and a historical event as it documents the character of many patrons, clerical and lay, as well as most of the artists themselves. In the religious realm of Baroque devotion, with processions and pilgrimages, wayside crosses and calvarias, Nepomuc was present in shaping the church's aesthetics, especially in the rustic context of the Banat, where the statues were displayed at the entrance as allegorical renderings of victory over death. It was in fact an expansion of the entire world, as the conquests of the Eastern areas reintroduced the European monarchy into the coordinates of the medieval Banat¹⁷, a region situated at the crossroads where the West meets the East, the North meets the South, a middle ground performing thus a mediating function. With the acquisition of the entire Hungary and Transylvania, as separate principalities in the 1700s, and the Banat as an imperial province, art reflected geopolitics, symbols of the monarchy replacing the authority. A crown positioned on the obelisk is one such presence, setting the Habsburg policy under the sign of centralism¹⁸.

In Plague columns for example, we find new meanings of persuasion by the use of *ronde-bosse* renderings of patron and apotropaic saint iconography¹⁹. Each hypothesis is a clear indication of the mosaic of cultures that shaped the melting pot of influences found in the illusion of the other reality, transcendental, where the unseen turns seen, capitalizing, through gestures, on the function of such a monument, which is to be visualized and understood. These *ex-voti* monuments were part of

the city scenography, made after prototypes²⁰ available all over Europe. Of these, we shall focus on those rendering plague-related iconography. These statues have ontological²¹ value as they instruct, indicate and remind of the monument's public function, by means of the unseen performing on the stage – the city square – asserting the universal power of the illusion that takes the shape of Plague hagiography monuments²². I may add some features as these monuments have tropic, apotropaic, soteriological, aesthetic and commemorative outcomes alike, mirroring the society in a certain period, exerting interdisciplinary critical thinking of these perspectives that finally lead to the idea of identity construction. Religious processions evolved around this scenery, making the promise of eternal life besides the optical approach. The iconography of these saints investigated in past and recent studies²³ stands as introductory guidelines for art history. Carrying the identity of colonists from Bohemia, Nepomuc became the patron saint of the province; the Franciscan order founded the homonymous congregation in 1724 and later, in a letter addressed to Emperor Charles VI, asked for his recognition as patron saint of the Banat. Represented in various iconographical postures, all are reclining the qualities that made Nepomuc protector of the secret revealed under confession, martyred for his true faith and glorified by cardinal Cienfuegos in the process of canonization. The attitude towards death changed²⁴, during the period analyzed, that is why the martyrdom the saint suffered was not visual, but dissimulated and explained through allusions to the events that consecrated him (Fig. 5).

²⁰ Mihaela Vlăsceanu. "The Iconography of saints as represented in the Baroque monumental sculpture of Banat", in *Transylvanian Review*, XXI, Supplement no. 1 (Cluj-Napoca: Romanian Academy, Center for Transylvanian Studies, 2012), 227-232.

²¹ Quoting Paolo Cammarosano. "Imagine visive e propaganda nel Medioevo", in *I linguaggi della Rivoluzione Inglese, Italia liberale, Fascismo, Resistenza* (Milan: Mandatori, 1991), 8-29. Apud Aguilar Salinas, Marina. "Muerte y sexuación en la Edad Moderna: construcción de la diferencia sexual y ausencia de lo macabre en lápidas sepulcrales femeninas en Alcalá de Henares y el Museo do Carmo de Lisboa". En *Tristeza eterna: representaciones de la muerte en la cultura visual desde la Antigüedad a la actualidad*, editado por Luis Vives-Ferrándiz Sánchez. Monográfico temático, *Eikón Imago* 10 (2021): 5-23. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/eiko.74133>

²² Cesare Ripa. "Iconologia azaz különféle képek leírása, amelyeket az antikvitásból feltalált vagy tulajdon leleményével megalkotott és magyarázatokkal ellátott a perugiai" [*Iconologia or the description of various pictures recovered from antiquity or made up and explained by Cesare Ripa of Perugia*] (Budapest: Balassi, 1997); Franz Matsche. *Die Kunst im Dienst der Staatsidee Kaiser Karls VI, Ikonographie, Ikonologie und Programmatik des Kaiser stils I* (Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1981); George Fergusson. *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (Oxford: University Press, 1961).

²³ Mihaela Vlăsceanu. "Regional characteristics of Baroque Art in the Banat", in (Victor Neumann ed.), *The Banat of Timișoara, A European Melting Pot* (London: Scala Arts & Heritage Publishers 2019), 161-180; Mihaela Vlăsceanu. "Considerations on the iconography of Mary in the Baroque sculpture of Timișoara", in *Banatica XXVIII* (2018), 849-855; Mihaela Vlăsceanu "Plague Columns of Timișoara – An Episode of Eighteenth century Faith, Devotion and Imagery", in *Brukenthal. Acta Musei Supplement of Brukenthalia* 5, no. 10, Imago Mortis. Natural Disasters, Epidemics, Masacres, Genocide, the Holocaust, the Gulag, Sibiu: Muzeul Național Brukenthal (2020), 81-96. <http://www.brukenthalmuseum.ro/pdf/BAM/BAM%20XXV-1.pdf>;

²⁴ John Rupert Martin. *Baroque*. (New York: Routledge, 1977), 119.

¹⁶ In 1645, Calderon della Barca wrote the allegorical play *El Grand Teatro del Mundo*, inspiring generations of philosophers but primarily artists who found various meanings in this comparison.

¹⁷ Mathew Anderson. "L' Europe au XVIII-e siècle", in *Histoire de l'Europe III* (Paris: D. Hay Sirey, 1968); Victor Neumann. "Between Orthodox Byzantium and Catholic Europe", in (ed. Victor Neumann) *The Banat of Timișoara. A European Melting Pot* (London: Scala Arts & Heritage Publishers, 2019), 1-14; Martin Rady. *The Habsburgs: Rise and Fall of a World Power*, (London: Allen Lane/Basic Books, 2020).

¹⁸ Jesse M. Locker. (ed.) *Art and Reform in the Late Renaissance after Trent* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

¹⁹ Mihaela Vlăsceanu. "Considerații teoretice privind barocul în artă – scop sau mijloc al persuasiunii?", *BANATICA* 29 (2019), 477-485. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/search-result?f=%7B%22SearchText%22%3A%22Banatica%2029%202%20%20%20persuasion%22%2C%22SearchInOption%22%3A0%7D>



Figure 5. E. Wasserburger & F. Blim, Plague column, 1756 (detail of saint Nepomuc bearing *ex-voti tabula* surrounded by putti) (Image source: Mihaela Vlăsceanu).

The discussion is whether these representations were simple and clear enough for the worshiper of those times. That is why we shall engage in formal, iconographical and iconological analysis, keeping in mind the historical context and how the scenery of urban squares provided the place where the moral truth was issued in a very intuitive form. This intuition of comprehension was not something new, it had already been tested in far more hostile territories than a land situated at the crossroads of civilizations, as so often historians refer to the Banat (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. Franz Wagner, Johann Georg Wittmann, Anton Bossingen, Hope (*Spes*), 1774 Source: Catholic Diocesanum Archivum Timișoara archivum_dioecesanum_tm@yahoo.de

The Catholic Church ardently embraced the religious power of art through the metaphysical view of the world and conveyed certain messages and emotions, inviting the viewer to explore and to envision dogma. One of the first arguments of the Catholic Church in favor of the visual arts was that they played a key role in guiding the faithful. In order to be effective in its pastoral role, religious art had to be clear, persuasive and powerful. Not only did it have to instruct, it also had to inspire. In the church interior, the scenography presenting the reality of Christ's sacrifice, the suffering of the martyrs, the visions of the saints was adapted to shrine sculpture. Allegory intervenes in this case and the art of persuasion challenges new representations in the shape of the theological virtues, *Spes* and *Fides*, always associated with the salvation by divine revelation as revealed by Thomas Aquinas (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Franz Wagner, Johann Georg Wittmann, Anton Bossingen, Faith (*Fides*), 1774 Source: Catholic Diocesanum Archivum Timișoara archivum_dioecesanum_tm@yahoo.de

The perception of space in the eighteenth-century Banat materializes in the way architectural space decorated public spaces like the central squares, openings that concentrated the entire activity around religious processions, too often exaggerated by the Jesuits with a single devotional monument positioned in the middle. This conception derived from Pope Sixtus V, who reenacted some of the ancient concepts in terms of urban planning when he consecrated Rome as the eternal city, for his actions being often compared to Augustus and his period of reforms.

The monument itself is spatial in the shapes that suggest movement, merging terrestrial and celestial connotations. The principle of coextensive space is often

evoked in close connection with the general evolution of geography, cartography and the new territorial discoveries that shaped the seventeenth-century Europe, the Baroque transcending the time limits and setting the stage for yet another phase of evolution, that of a dissolution into classical order.

Baroque art is also time defined, as each stage of the style emerges from a different period and transforms gradually into a well-defined set of shapes and contents that reflect the ideology of the commissioners and of the artists. From the public place of the city square to the interior of cathedrals and churches, everything was designed to serve the Catholic revival propaganda, offering a visual counterpart for dogma. The achievements of the Baroque age serve the cause of international harmony in the cultural life of Central Europe. In this internationalism, the style that proliferated in the Banat stands as a form of manifestation with a set of values displaced from the political center in the general evolution of form in time and space, as defining concepts (Fig. 8).

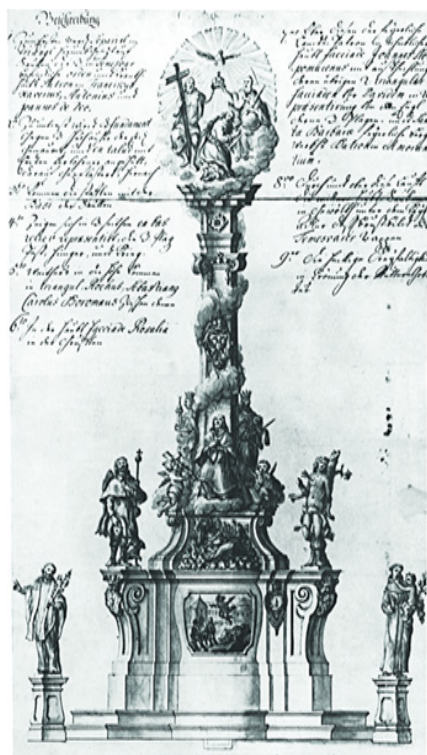


Figure 8. Anonymous, sketch of the Plague column, 1741, apud Hans Diplich. *Die Domkirche in Temeswar*. (München: Südostdt Kulturwerk, 1970). (Source: Catholic Diocesenum Archivum Timișoara) archivum_dioecesanum_tm@yahoo.de

By means of allegory, the message was reinforced, as it does not cover what the eye could see, but what the soul could emulate. Madonna floating on the clouds, crowned as *Regina coeli* by the Trinity, stands as another vivid portrayal of the victorious Marian cult, a prominent theme used to bolster the claims of the Catholic Church against Protestantism.

But, since Protestantism was not an issue for the Banat, we must search for other arguments. Reenacted with diligence, this representation introduced during a time

when many people were still illiterate, and religious dogma was conveyed by hidden meanings, Madonna is interceding forgiveness for humanity as supplicant before the heavenly court. The Jesuits promoted the cults of Mary and Nepomuc in the Banat and even established two congregations, one of the Immaculate Conception and the congregation of the Sorrowful Sufferings of Christ²⁵. What should be noted is the singularity of this depiction in monumental *rondo-bosso* sculptures of the Banat, the monument being a particular commission of Jean de Hansen of Lorraine, whose wife died of the plague during the epidemics of 1736-1738, and for whom he commissioned memorial *ex-voti* images, with protector saints advocating salvation through faith. It was a common feature of urban and rural spaces of Europe to commission and erect such monuments to thank plague-protecting saints for their intervention in quelling pestilence and other scourges. Memorials to the victims and demonstrative commitments to the virtuous life and the Christian faith by the survivors, these monuments clearly indicated the time and place by historical events documented on base-relief scenes: instances of war, famine and plague. The worshipper, confronted with the new iconography, grasped a wider range of meanings, from calling for repentance and culminating with the divine retribution (on the top of the Trinity column, where Madonna intercedes for humanity)²⁶. The Mary we see is undoubtedly Queen of Heaven, although she is not enthroned on the top of the column, but presented floating on the cluster of clouds almost like in the Madonna of Humility composition (instead of sitting on the ground she is seated on clouds), with no signs specific for the scene (Fig. 9).

The initial sketch of this monument presented a more complex scenography, with crowned Barbara and Prophet David at the base of the obelisk and Anton of Padua, Johannes de Deo and Francisc Xaverius. Around Nepomuc, two *putti* bearing signs of devotion translate some of the saint's most reiterated qualities, one reminiscent of the silence oath protection sign (*tacui*) and the other bearing the Crucifixion. The Trinity plague column realized in a Viennese workshop does not retain this complex iconography, nor that of the prototype in Vienna (on Graben), commissioned by King Leopold I, so common in Central Europe. Some influences of this proposed scenery are identifiable in the other column of the Immaculate Conception, where ascending *putti* surround the central obelisk bearing *ex-voti* table and crosses (other symbols in connection with Nepomuc's qualities). The allegory intervenes in this case in a direct manner as the base of the column explains in a vivid manner the hagiography of the saint. Stylistic contrivances contribute to the visual rhetoric, therefore displace and engage the observer in a dialogue with the divine. The image of Nepomuc resembles the prototype

²⁵ Peter Anton Petri. *Bruderschaften, Kongregationen, Konfraternitäten im kaiserlichen Banat (1720-1778)* 10, No.2, (Stuttgart: Gerhards bote, 1965), 204.

²⁶ On the stereotypy of these monuments see, Mária Aggházy. "A barokk szobrászat Magyarországon" ["Baroque sculpture in Hungary"] I-III (Budapest: Akadémia Kiadó 1959).

of Mathias Rauchmiller realized in 1681, a *contrapposto* figure bearing the Cross.



Figure 9. Anonymous/ Viennese workshop, Plague column– Queen of Heaven ‘Regina Coeli’, 1741. Image source: Catholic Diocesanum Archivum Timișoara archivum_dioecesanum_tm@yahoo.de

Issues regarding the Immaculate Conception, an abstract notion used in the Baroque iconography of Virgin Mary for the use of metamorphosis over a concept, will also be of reference. Generally acknowledged by researchers as a theme heralding the victory over the Protestants, its semantics changed and translated the paradigm of defeating the Ottomans. The formal prototype of these monuments confines itself to the specific stylistic period of the late Baroque (Fig. 10).



Figure 10. E. Wasserburger & F. Blim, Plague column, Immaculate Conception, 1756. Source: Catholic Diocesanum Archivum Timișoara archivum_dioecesanum_tm@yahoo.de

5. Conclusions

Art becomes in this case a primary source in the study of Baroque imagery with the use of its religious and political content. The victory of Roman Catholicism against Protestants brought the replacement of the artistic decorative vacuum promoted by the religious Reformation, ending the prohibition of any worship of relics and of the martyr’s cult with an accentuation of religious sentiment and an abundance of suggestive images. Baroque sensibility promoted themes that suggested the frail character of human existence (*Fortuna labilis*). Death was constantly represented, a close reminder of the ancient concepts of *Memento mori* and *Vanitas*.

The illusion of power and allegory translates the features of Central European Baroque art in a period when the Habsburg monarchy was in full military success after defeating the Ottomans. This historical evidence and the fact that the Catholic Church found a new language to counteract Protestant aniconism contributed to the new vocabulary of the artistic manifestations. Rooted in ancient Roman culture, the art produced by this era, reenacted by official policy, succeeded in bonding the multiethnic structure of the Habsburg Empire and defining frontiers as imperial settings. The region of the Banat²⁷ found a new identity at the beginning of modernity, a process that continued even after the Great Union of 1918, when the territory became part of Great Romania, but Central European traits still continued to identify this region.

In a period when human intelligence prevailed over the disorderliness of nature, these monuments reflected and refracted the social reality. One characteristic of this manifestation can be called mimetic as one may notice from the evolution of the genre in connection with Central-European Baroque conventional stories (plague related saints), recognizable and adopted by the new social order. In every historical period, art defines the value of each society, the examples used as case studies confirming this hypothesis.

After the expulsion of the Ottomans from the Banat, this area developed in synchronicity with the West, a late fragment of art history, where the Baroque found new connotations.

Artists wandered from country to country in search of artistic demands, working for royalty, noblemen (which was not the case for the Banat area), religious orders and high officials. Reviewing the activity of the authors mentioned in this analysis, we must underline the fact that most of their artistic development is not yet fully recognized, while the main traits, though the works suffered restoration stages that somehow altered their authenticity, still preserve what defines the style as Baroque. Animated compositions with allegory emphasized as an autonomous genre have an epideictic character, inspired from Aristotelian rhetoric for the way it presents a positive way of thinking about life and death.

²⁷ Place name derived from the medieval function of “ban”, head of a small territory of Banat; for further reading see Martin Rady. “Controverse istorico-istoriografice privind toponimul Banat” in (ed. Victor Neumann) *Identitate și Cultură. Studii privind istoria Banatului* (Bucharest: Romanian Academy, 2009), 18-24.

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