

The University of Art and Design Cluj-Napoca

Field: Visual and Decorative Arts

**God's Incarnation and Out of Body Experiences in the Western
Art**

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Since the beginning till nowadays, everywhere and in any period of time, the human being felt the necessity to invoke something he believed was superior and having a power way beyond the mortals' qualities. The universal aspect of the human being's search of the absolute being and its faith in it is reflected in the mankind's art. In an attempt to represent God, the Christianity found itself involved, almost without knowing, in the vastest artistic experiment in the history of the world. The canonic project of the Christian iconography was born of an amalgam of ancient arts and Christian ideas. This project was the grain of sand around which Western art has developed similar to a pearl, gradually gathering successive "layers" over the centuries. The ultimate consequences of this evolution were the modern art and later the contemporary art, and the process is ongoing. The thesis wishes to make an incursion in the field of the Western art aiming to observe the mutations of God's artistic images. Another purpose is to see the way in which the presentation of divinity in the visual arts moves away from the strict canons of the Church. By the thesis we search a way to maintain faith in an open and surprising status by exploring the conflict area between art and religion. Religion and art don't have the habit to confirm what we know, but the tendency to look for the individual answers at all the questions induced by them. In each of its moments, to a lesser or greater degree, art is avant-garde. And so is faith.

As well as religion, art has an important role in the mankind's history, although they are different systems. One of the most surprising aspects of the dialogue between art and religion is that they both ask similar questions, but offer distinct answers. The thesis *God's Incarnation and Out of Body Experiences in the Western Art* does not propose a survey of religious art nor an exhaustive research of the way God was represented over the time, but it is an attempt to establish a trajectory, a direction of its evolution culminating in the 20th century with unconventional representations as Morton Schamberg's *God* (1918), a metallic structure evoking the periscope's curves. God's image had a distinct specific determined by each period's characteristics when it manifested itself on an artistic level. If the icon, as a traditional representation, kept unaltered qualities so far, there is another type of representing sacredness, an intimate and personal type, reflecting each artist's faith. To represent the unseen became of the biggest plastic adventures of humanity, as well as believing the unseen

which marks our existence since the beginnings. Without giving excessive details, the research try to capture and follow the presence or absence of fluidity between the spiritual-aesthetic essences characteristic to each period of the history of art. But, most probably, the most important aspect is the fact that God's "hypothetic" image continues to trouble and inspire the representatives of a secularized world which seems to be more dedicated to the material existence. The context of the 20th century was the most favorable to God's idyllic image: "After Marx, Nietzsche and Freud have canonized the suspicion's hermeneutics and the visionary tone, any cultural step has been contaminated by the nihilism's voluptuousness: the death of art, the death of metaphysics, "God's" death, the human being's death, and the end of the history – this was a funeral procession which the philosophers of the 20th century knew how to recap with exasperation".¹ The image's general crisis, corresponding to these nihilist attitudes, was overlapped by the crisis of God's "updated" image. Although this thematic still exists within an inverse ration, the number of works having God as their object of representation (and here we take into consideration all the 3 elements of the holy Trinity) decreases in inverse proportion to the number of creators and aesthetic objects.

We identify here an iconoclast tendency of the contemporary art caused by the lack of the work of art's message's concrete determination. As Corrado Maltese shows in his work *Message and artistic object*: „Contemporary art pushes its own experimentation to the limits, offering simulacra messages instead of messages, meditations on signs instead of signs, something which is in fact extremely interesting. But such an experimentation of the limits, which sometimes seems to be a parody, sometimes an analysis, sometimes irony and sometimes simple egotism, has meanings and purposes which are easy to determine from a historic point of view and cannot be accepted as a general definition of the artistic communication valid for all periods and moments”.² The personalized conception of God's plastic incarnation has its roots in the romantic period, although we cannot ignore the antecedents, Caravaggio's so called "flesh and blood saints". His pictorial style, *terribilità*, stripped them of their sacred and glorious qualities.

Is it possible that God, the supreme expression of the unseen, to be represented by the help of art? Which are the coordinates of this aesthetic odyssey which made possible the "transfiguration" of the humble shepherd of the catacombs into a glorious emperor and later into an abstract image, totally chromatic such as Rainer Arnulf's *Cross* (1988)? Are we

¹ Mihai Neamțu, „Jean Luc Marion – arhitectonica unei gândiri” în volumul *Crucea Vizibilului*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2000, p.137

² Corrado Maltese, *Mesaj și obiect artistic*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1976, p.27

entitled to create (because, let's not forget, nobody has ever seen the face of the Father) images of divinity or to represent our own conceptions about Christ's crucifixion or are all these approaches, all art works aiming the sacredness dimensions, accusing us of heresy, if not of idolatry? There aren't general answers to clarify these questions, but, by this research, we wish to observe the panorama of such possible answers, solving the moral dilemma remaining to each of us individually.

But before taking the winding path of God's "incarnations" in order to reach his tragic and exacerbated "out of body experience" in the contemporary art, we will allow ourselves to quote Alain Beçanson's words which reflect more than eloquently the actual aesthetic-sacred state: „Yet, despite what Hegel says, there is no fatality in the image's death. It lives again, without us even knowing, in unknown places and shapes we don't even think about. *Mensura, numerus, pondus* may reunite to regulate the sacred and profane, one through another, to propose divine images which give life to the things and profane images which give divine a body. We all know that they cannot be prosperous while apart; they have to be together, feeding one another as demonstrated by Western Europe for centuries now.

Our century experienced great revolutions because of which the law, the property and other institutions considered sacred for a period of time hardly find their fundament now. Under the circumstances, is it still surprising that the image, touched by another contemporary revolution, is so hard to be restored?"³

By God's incarnation in the plastic image, art reaches the state of epiphany and becomes an undeniable proof of the human being's necessity to find / create a material basis on which to built its faith. The entire sacred art can somehow be summarized in the biblical episode of Thomas' disbelief, so graphically transposed in a painting by Caravaggio. We could presume that both the icon and the divergent directions God's image follows starting with the dawns of the Renaissance wish to be the Saviour's palpable "wounds", glorious or doubtful presentiments of the salvation. From this perspective the history of God's image assumes, in a certain measure, the characteristic of an initiatory path. At its end each of us finds himself alone, facing the spiritual dilemma which has tormented mankind since the beginnings of Christianity – the faith in the unseen.

The research is structured in 3 big chapters chronologically aiming the history of the Christian divinity's representation. Within this approach we orientate ourselves according to the two key terms as they appear in the PhD thesis' title, incarnation and out of body

³ Alain Beçanson, *Imaginea interzisă*, Editura Humanitas, București, 1996, p.403

experience, in order to emphasize the distinct concepts which are the fundamentals for the recent representation of the sacred. The first two chapters, Primele două capitole, *THE CIRCUMSCRIPTION OF THE CONCEPT OF GOD'S IMAGE* and *GOD'S INCARNATION IN ART: THE MIDDLE AGES – THE 18TH CENTRURY*, extend from antiquity until the severe jolts of the ancient Christian faith by the new ideologies launched by the exponents of Enlightenment. The specific of God's image promoted during these centuries is its universal character, the presence of an internal unity of the plastic conception developed within the diverse ages of this interval of time.

The 1st chapter's purpose is the "circumscription" of what it is the concept of God and it searches to crystallize the process of its formation. God is *threeunique* from the point of view of the traditional Christian religions: God as Father is one of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, along with the Son and the Holy Spirit. Father God is unborn and not made. The Son is one of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Son is born from the Father and transformed into a man, by a Jewish maiden, Mary, by the descent of the Holy Spirit upon her. God as the Holy Spirit is one of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, along with the Father and the Son. According to the Orthodox Christianity, God as the Holy Spirit proceeds from God the Father or, according to the Roman-Catholic Christianity and to the Protestants, from God the Father and from God the Son. The arguments in sustaining God's existence are: the first cause argument, the cosmologic argument, the argument of the perfection degrees, the ontological argument, the theological argument, the 5 ways (Toma d'Aquino's methods of demonstration), and Pascal's bet. The arguments against God's existence are: hell, the atonement and the matter of evil.⁴ From its beginnings art tried to bring God's "image" or face closer to the material world.

The catacombs are among the oldest Christian proofs of the human being's necessity to create a visible face through which to "incarnate" the divine creature in whose invisible existence he put all his faith in. Jesus is the living image, God's material incarnation, therefore, during Christianity's first centuries it was normal to see the majority of the sacred images representing Him as a Man or his attributes by referring to a large number of symbolic props having sacred meanings. The Paleo-Christian iconography is neither new nor original, but consisting of a reconsideration of the meanings of the images, already present during the pagan Antiquity. But, this type of representation, most often assimilated to the figure of the Good Shepherd, will not persist too long because together with the Christianity's official

⁴ Simon Blackburn, *Dicționar de Filosofie Oxford*, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București, 1999, pg. 115

status, God and implicitly the Son as His image will be associated with the imperial glory and brightness. The Byzantine period's God will be a glorious One, in slave, situated far away from the humble image of the first Christian centuries. The Christianity's emperors will assert their power in front of the world by building grandiose religious edifices demonstrating profane and political motivations. „After the year 313, the Church' recognition allows the construction of basilicas decorated with mosaics showing true iconographical mutations, with triumphant representations of Jesus, such as in Santa Pudenziana church from Rome. Jesus often appears here represented with beard, as a mature man, far from the serene fragility of the Good Shepherd, usually surrounded by the alpha and omega symbolizing the eternity of his reign; He rules haloed, sitting sometimes between Peter and Paul, whom he gives the law, while the other gets the keys. In other images he is among martyrs. The image of the celestial sovereign was built on the one of the emperor”.⁵

Within the Byzantine context we cannot ignore the iconoclast period of incertitude and crossroads regarding the icon's nature and meaning and the sacred representations. In the same context the references to the Islamic and Jewish religions are analyzed. Within these, iconoclasm corresponds to the biblical interdiction and will be contested during the times.

The 2nd chapter aims the period between the Middle Ages and the European romanticism. The Middle Ages are among the few periods when art is almost totally dedicated to the Christian devotion. Within this context we evoked the Palatine School and the famous Gospel books of the period which will culminate during Carolingian period. We are tempted to see the Middle Ages as a “dark” period, but they were more a period of striking contrasts, of the fight between darkness and light than a period with an omnipresent oppressive atmosphere. The most shocking aspect in the field of art, which has sacredness as its unique object of representation, is the appearance of some “incarnations” of the evil, of the devil, surprised in his sordid environment – hell. Perhaps it is here where the genesis of the association between the medieval era and darkness is coming from. It is this imaginary bestiary which will transform the believers, oppressed by the every day life's sins, in a mass of people fearful in front of Judgment. Next to the Judging God we also find the God of the Light, „emanation of light”, as it is the case of the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. In these ideas we identify an early prediction of the spectacular Gothical stained glasses.

The Romanic and Gothic Styles distinguish themselves from the previous aesthetic conceptions because of their their wide spread on the European continent. While the Romanic

⁵ Hollingsworth, Mary, *Arta în istoria umanității*, Editura Rao, București, 2004, p.76

style develops mainly within the monasteries along the pilgrimage's roads, disturbing the monks' meditation because of their fantastic sculptural shapes, as rightfully complains Saint Bernard de Clairvaux, the Gothic style develops as a performance of the "elevation" and of the colourful lights of the stained glasses. Within this context light becomes God's primordial attribute and the symbol of faith. The history of the humanity is circumscribed between the expulsion from the paradise and a future Judgment.

The early Italian Renaissance proposes a new aesthetic program in the sacredness' plastic representation. An important role within these changes is given to the ancient values' reevaluation and to the development of a humanist culture. The first signs of this reshuffling of God's images can be identified in Giotto's works; they culminate in Michelangelo's, Correggio's or Veronese' creation. The Rhenish Renaissance represents a special case where Christ's scenes of crucifixion will be invested with a specific dramatism, being transformed into universal symbols of the pain, as it is in Grünewald's *Shrine from Isenheim*. While Christ's contorted body as appears in the *Crucifixion* imagined by Grünewald questions the very possibility of salvation, mannerism will introduce us in the mystic sphere of the Spanish devotional painting, full of enthusiasm and dedication because of El Greco's unique personality. Gathering the spirit of the Byzantine icon and the Italian Renaissance's achievements, El Greco will create powerful mystic images where the characters will burn like flames, while the soul will be turned on by the fire of the faith.

The 16th century is the century of the Reform and the Catholic Church will initiate a vast movement of Counter reform after the the Synod from Trento, involving arts also in an attempt of regaining the "lost" believers' faith. Beyond the great, spectacular composition having *trompe l'oeil* effects and decorating the churches' ceilings, imitating the Skies opening, the Italian Baroque offers another dimension of the sacredness in art. Caravaggio, maybe one of the most important representatives of the Italian Baroque, will confront the viewer with a realistic version, where the sacred characters are humanized. The apostles are presented as described in the Bible, a group of fishermen wearing ragged clothes and with their faces "burnt" by the sun and the wind. Impressive by their humanity, these saints are united by the faith in the invisible and not by certitudes. God's images from the Baroque period are extended from the theatrical sphere to realism, but they aren't always dramatic. The Baroque's efforts will gain mannerist accents once the passage towards the decorative excess, specific to the Rococo, is done. Neoclassicism will not prove to be more inventive in

this matter, the Christian iconography consisting of the rebirth of the pagan antiquity's formulas.

Since Renaissance, Romanticism is the first current generating major changes in the art and having repercussions over the sacredness' aesthetic conception as well. We will analyze here a Romantic painter such as Caspar David Friedrich, but we cannot ignore either the mystic references within the English romantic painting represented by William Blake. But while the English art falls victim to a vision denoting an excessive attraction to the occult, the German painting becomes the living expression of the personal devotion. The biblical characters are banished from the Rhenish landscape due to the iconoclast interdiction of the Reform, but nature, creation, as a material sign of God's existence, will become the main subject of the mystic sublime's plastic presentation. Romanticism will open the path of the personalized interpretations of the sacredness and of God's image, a path having multiple ramifications, culminating with the contemporary artistic context.

We've put the the thesis' first two chapters under the sign of "incarnation" due to the fact that although the plastic changes induced by the time are not negligible, we cannot talk about a proper reshuffle of the sacred image and of the feeling generating it before the dawns of modernism and once the romantic ideology is spread. The *Ism-s* which will follow this period will also be subordinated to the personalized conception of what God's image might look like, generating a multitude of morphologies and attitudes. Although art no longer has the purpose of serving ecclesiastical purposes, the spiritual dimension remained constant in the modern and contemporary art. More than the others, the 20th century, because of the two wars, became a proof of the spiritual uncertainty, developing an intense need to find a superior sense of the human existence. Expressionism, surrealism, the abstract art, all of them tried to penetrate beyond the appearances in order to understand the human being's true essence and also the mystery beyond the material incarnation. Therefore, art started an opposite process, the one of "dematerialisation", through which God's image marked its presence by the absence of each reference to the immediate visible, because God is the invisible by excellency. The contemporary representation of god's face is made by symbol and abstraction, because we still do not know the secret of the beginnings.

The contemporary vision over sacredness surpasses the limits of "the art for the sake of art" and penetrates the ecclesiastic field, especially in countries affiliated to the Protestant faith. Since the beginning of the century a revolution within the architectural concepts regarding the construction of the churches was stated; therefore, apparent metallic structures

appeared, Gaudi's neo-Gothic interpretations of the vegetal, and later buildings exploring the plastic qualities of the concrete also appeared. A specific aspect of the unconventional churches is an iconoclast preference for a diminished decoration, but not a total lack of it. An example in this matter is the *Corpus Christi* church from Aachen, designed by Rudolf Schwartz. This evoked the Middle Ages mysticism, mainly Master Eckhart's ideas, according to whom the emptiness within creation is filled by God. God's presence seems to emanate from the immaculate calm of the walls, establishing the presence of the sacredness by the absence of the sacred image.⁶

Gradually a new type of ecclesiastic "decoration" appears, closer to the profane art than to the traditional religious art. Such an example is the *Floating Angel* by Ernst Barlach from the Güstrow Cathedral. The sculpture distinguishes itself by simplicity and monumentality, the hands joined together on his chest and the weight of the figure giving a paradoxical character to the floating, while the face with the eyes wide closed seems to evoke the image of the expressionist artist Kathe Köllwitz. The association between the religious motifs and the after war traumas becomes implicit. There are also more innovative solutions such as the concrete ceiling from Christ Church Bochum (1957-1959), made by Dieter Oesterlen, extending over the shrine similar to a tent.

The presence of the painters such as decorators within the ecclesiastic space is documented since the first part of the 20th century, the preferred media being painting and stained glass. Matisse will make the decoration of the Chapel of Rosary (1948-1951), situated in a Dominican monastery's interior, referring to a stylized art bearing the reminiscence of the early paintings of the catacombs. Marc Chagall will design the Metz Cathedral's stained glasses, meant to replace the Gothic stained glasses destroyed during World War II. He will combine elements from the Old and New Testament. Therefore, the sleeping patriarch Jacob can be seen in Jacob's window, in the third, blue-violet part of the lower area, while the stairs spread through the red space crossed by the angels of God, having their arms stretched towards the heavens where we can see Jesus crucified.

The iconoclast vision reaches also the field of the stained glass often becoming abstract. The most important example in this matter is the Southern stained glass of the Cathedral in Cologne, designed by Gerhard Richter to replace the original also destroyed during World War II. This is made of 11.500 individually coloured glass squares, having the dimensions of 94 x 94 mm each and being inspired by the painting called *4096 Colours*, made

⁶Toman, Rolf ed., *Ars Sacra, Christian Art and Architecture of the Western World*, H.F. Ullmann, 2010, p.765

by the artist in 1974. The 72 colours, chosen from 800, correspond to the medieval stained glass' chromatic and were aleatory combined. Richter's work integrates its chromatic chaos in an attractive structure from an aesthetic point of view, a fact that can evoke a transcendental order.⁷

In order to clarify the meaning of our artistic approach in the sacredness' direction, we will make a short incursion in arts, art history's, concepts about God and sacredness' nowadays situation. „God's Death” along with „art's death” are two clichés most frequently associated with the ambiguous situation of the contemporary visual arts. This ambiguity is most probably a direct and inevitable consequence of the break between the public and the artist, but also of the traditional artistic systems and meanings' decline. On the 15th of February 1979, within the Pompidou Center, Petit Salle, Hervé Fischer was having a *performance* symbolically announcing the end of the art history, an act he will later describe in details in his volume *L'histoire de l'art est terminée*. In his vision „The ideal of the new must be abandoned if one desires the survival of the artistic activity. Art is not dead. What died is history as progress towards novelty”.⁸

The personal artistic project connected with the thesis develops within the field of painting and has as its central motive the biblical fragment known as *Jacob's Fight with the Angel*. After analyzing the text we reach the conclusion that this fragment has a special semiotic significance. This is why we found it pertinent to build the works accompanying this theoretical research around this motive. The episode is transposed according to the libertine principles of the contemporary aesthetics and reduced to its physical essence – two men fighting each other, having the intention to win in this confrontation. The subjects are taken from the world of sports, *wrestling* or boxing. The technical interpretation folds on the dynamic model of the fight, giving rhythm to the surface. The fight becomes an existential metaphor, having both a sacred and profane character, a fight between “the two angels”, between the human being's two contrasting natures. The profound content and meaning of the Savior's sacrifice can be found in this fight; the human being conquers the flesh in order to become a person closer to Jesus' model – *imitatio christi*. But Jacob's fight has a higher significance also, the revelation of God's Face: „«Israel» doesn't mean only «the one fighting God», but, according to a different etymology, also «the one who saw God» (Is-ra-el). The text specifies in the 30th verse that the place of the fight was named Peniel «God's Face», an

⁷ *Ibidem.*, pp.794

⁸ Hervé Fischer *apud* Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, pp.4-5

indication of the fact that there Jacob has seen the Supreme Face”.⁹ As a consequence, the episode receives a prophetic value also if we look at it and compare it with Moses’ meeting with God: „God cannot be seen from the front, meaning the only perspective is of the one walking behind Him, following Him as a guide. Still, Jacob sees the face of God. It is the prophecy of a moment in which such a possibility can be offered to all people: the moment of Incarnation. Jacob’s fight with the angel is a prefiguration, an anticipatory achievement of Jesus’ arrival into the world. Before leaving, God comes *in flesh* to his first confrontation with his creature”.¹⁰

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the out of body experiences is the freedom to chose. In nowadays art the topic od sacredness is combined with the profane aesthetics, often the only certitude of the God’s image’s presence being its interoretation. Within this context, questioning the attempt to give a material face to the Christian God, distinctive of that belonging to the Byzantine iconography, is more than just. The representations invested with mystic meanings frequently glide between sacred and heresy, even blasphemy. A linguistic cliché says that *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder*; art seems to tell us that this phrase is a true reflection of the object of beauty’s process of being. We will end by giving an example regarding the truthfulness of the above phrase refering to Andres Serrano’s work - *Piss Christ*. The first impression the viewer has when looking at the crucifix is that of the transcendent’s infallibility. But the confrontation with the title corresponds to a shock, if not repulsion. What we see receives another meaning, a revolting meaning. Or not? “The viewer’s eye” confronts itself with divergent feelings; how can somebody feel the aesthetic pleasure when it is generated by such a scandalous act, such as submerging a crucifix in urine? Only an excessively personal or intelectual interpretation can solve the conflict, but what has troubled the viewer becomes a manifesto against a decadent society – Jesus’ contemporaries have taunted Him and the “nowadays human being”’s attitude towards the Christian teachings isn’t too good either. Such as beauty, God’s presence in the contemporary art stays “in the eyes of the viewer”, being a fragmented image, dematerialized one, but still recurrent.

⁹Andrei Pleșu, *Despre îngeri*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2007, p.248

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p.249