

**STYLISTIC FEATURES OF THE ZOGRAFI  
BROTHER'S PAINTINGS IN THE  
CHURCHES OF VITHKUQ**



**Archaeology**

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**Abstract**

The village of Vithkuq is distributed in an uneven, highland territory in south-east Albania, near the city of Korça. The villagers, who were part of the greek-orthodox religion, during a well economically developed time in the 17th and 18th century, they enriched Vithkuqi with circa 14 churches and a monastery. Today, in this monastery, are found only 2 churches in damaged conditions. The small mortal church of Saint Cosmas and Damian and the main church, which holds the same name as the monastery, Saint Peter and Paul. Both of these churches are decorated with miraculous murals from the famous Albanian painters, the brothers Kostandin and Athanas Zografi. Kostandin and Athanas Zografi are the painters with the widest activity during the 18th century and are known for their works in and outside the country. Their mural paintings can be really observed from 1744 until 1783, so for 24 years. The amount of work, and the fact that they were required to paint in the Mount Athos, were only the most talented painters of Epirius could work, shows the quality and their professional evaluation. The style of their work can be studied in the churches of Vithkuq. The features and elements of this style will be the theme of this work.

Based on an inscription on the door of the church of Saint Cosmas and Damian in Vithkuq, it is built in 1736 and painted in 1750 “by the hands of Kostandin and Athanas from Korça”<sup>1</sup>.

Konstandin and Athanas Zografi are the painters with the widest activity during the 18th century and are known for their works in and outside the country<sup>2</sup>. There aren't a lot of information about their life and their activities. They are mainly based from the datings and inscriptions found in the churches and the later studies done by the researcher Popa<sup>3</sup>.

These painters are “brothers from Korça”, but their origins are from the village of Potkozhan of Mokra. They got their surname “Zografë” later because of their artworks. A surname, which is inherited by their nephews even today. Both brothers were married and each of them had a son, Terpo and Efthimi, who inherited the profession of their fathers, painting the churches murals and icons (on wood)<sup>4</sup>.

Their mural paintings can be really observed from 1744 until 1783<sup>5</sup>, so for 24 years. The mural paintings of the Zografi brothers, which works, “as painters will be the biggest than any work of any other medieval Albanian painter”<sup>6</sup>, is followed by the inscriptions from 20th February in the monastery of Ardenica.

<sup>1</sup> Thomo, 1998, f.177.

<sup>2</sup> Popa, 1959, f.23-48; V. Puzanova, *Prapë mbi artin shqiptar në shekullin e XVIII*, in: Buletini i Universitetit Shtetëror të Tiranës (BUSHT) 2, Tiranë 1958, p. 152-158; T. Vinjau Caca, Some Data about the Activity of Kostandin and Athanas Zografi from Korça and the Characteristics of their Art in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, E.Drakopoulou (botuesi) Topics in Post-Byzantine Painting in Memory of Manolis Chatzidakis. Conference Proceeding 28-29 May 1999, Athene 2002, pp. 203-216.

<sup>3</sup> Popa, 1959, p.24.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Popa, 1959, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Popa, 1959, p.24.

It continues in the same year, in the church of St. Athanas in Voskopoje, and in the same church's narthex in 1752. Later on, in the Mount Athos, in the skeet of Saint Anne in 1755. In 1764, the painters paint the Church of the Monastery of Saint Peter and Paul in Vithkuq and in 1765 the Monastery of Filotheu in the Moun Athos. After painting churches in middle Albania, they start working again in Mount Athos in the Ksiropotam Monastery, in 1783<sup>7</sup>.

The amount of work, and the fact that they were required to paint in the Mount Athos, were only the most talented painters of Epirus could work, shows the quality and their professional evaluation.

### **The Stylistic Features of the Frescos in the Church of Saint Cosmas and Damian**

In the mortal church of Saint Cosmas and Damian, the area of the apse and the naos on the upper floor are painted. The lower floor and the area of the narthex don't contain mural paintings.

The sides of the naos and apse's walls contain some strips with paintings on them and are placed over each other. These strips which separate the mural areas are red with a white thin strap up and down.

The compositions of the iconographic figures in the chapel of Saints Cosmas and Damian, made by Kostandin and Athanas Zografi, are mainly based on the figures formulations instructed by Dionysius of Fourni. They are based on the "typified" display since the middle period and late byzantine and saved in the post-byzantine period.

However, they are found in their programs, iconographic scenes with western origin, like *The Coronation of Maria*.

Time by time, modifications or partly adaptations from the western iconographic are spotted. For example in *The Birth of Jesus*, where the child is positioned in the bed near Maria, who is sitting on her knees. Not like in this scene in other churches, with typical byzantine iconographic, where the mother and the child are both lying on a sheet.

The positioning of the Zografi brothers stays like this in the rankings of the many post-byzantine painters, who tried to adapt the borrowings to the traditional, not declaring as fully supporters of the western art<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Popa, 1959, f.24,25; T. Vinjau-Caca, *Some Data about the Activity of Konstantin and Athanas Zografi from Korça and th Charcteristics of their Art in the 18th Century*, in: E. Drakopoulou, *Topics in Post-Byzantine Painting in Memory of Manolis Chatzidakis*. Conference Proceeding 28-29 May 1999, Athene 2002, pp. 203-216.

<sup>8</sup> Triantaphyllopoulos, 1995, p. 399.

## The Composition

In the display of the scenes, is the distribution of the compositional elements found, which are adapted to the iconographic contain. The displays are balanced with the maximal concentration to gain a clear iconographic figure. The scenes contain the minimum amount of elements which are required to transmit the message. There is no aim for a spatial depth or the request for a picturesque element. So the backstage is conceived based on the essential need of the iconography, while the action moment is positioned right before the backstage, in the front row. An emphatic schematization is seen in the paining of the natural and architectural elements in the backstage. From time to time, the need of depth in the perspective is required, but also in those cases, the composition remains poor and simplified. E.x in *The Mourning of Christ*.

The nature in the backstage is minimal. Few, lonely trees are distributed, and this enriches in a minimal way the backstage. The architecture in the backstage is poor and mostly two-dimensional. The architectural space is completed with a piece in a form of a curtain (stylistic remnant from the paeologus period), just how it is observed in the scene of *The Last Supper*. The curtains used for completing the architectural backstage, also the rocks in the shape of wedge are distinctive, stylistic remnants inherited since the Paeologus period.

## The Figures

The modeling of naked figures, for example, in the scene *Epiphany of Christ*, presents tendencies of plasticity by showing similarities with kretian formation, but still remain two-dimensional. In the narrative presentations, the actions of the figures are obviously noted. The characters are dynamic in movements and gestures. From time to time, the protagonist figure is presented bigger than the sidekicks, just like in *The Epiphany of Christ* or *Anastasis*. The bodies of the figures in the narrative scenes are tall, thin and without a convincing statue.

Different from the presented figures in the narrative scenes, the figures of the last row with the standing saints are constructed and fit. The saints are wider and more static displayed, by showing a type of monumentality with their size.

But even between these fully figures, are differences in display mend distinguished. The saints figured in the altar zone are wider, with shorter necks and with more modeled features than the figures in the naos zone. Their wide and stiff torsos distinguish from tight and more detailed bodies of the saints standing in the naps zone. If we refer to the two datings found in this chapel, one under the iconography of *Acra Tapeinosis* in the altar zone (1746) and one in the inscription over the door (1750), it can be suggested that it has to do with two different time periods this church has been painted, the distance in between is 4 years. This time difference could have brought a progress of the Zograf brothers's artistic practice, by sophisticating and by modeling more significantly the presented figures in the naos zone.

The fact, that there are two painters (even if very close to each other), it brings up a question over each artist's style and the connection to the differences distinguished in this church. But these difficult questions can't be answered in this study. As long as the Zografi Brothers have been active in their work (and this activity lasted for overall 40 years) they have been working together. It would take a very intense study to all of their works, in order to distinguish the stylistic differences between Konstantin and Athanas Zografi.

## **Colors**

Also the colors of the palettes differs if you compare the figures and presentations in the naos area and the one's in the altar area. In the naos area, the tones of the colors are more drowned colors with less contrast. Different from the altar area. Clear colors contrast a lot with each other, for example, white with blue and red.

The colors that the Zografi brothers mainly used in this chapel are polychrome, inside one still and light contrasted pastel game (only in the altar area are the heavy contrasts between the colors). The main colors are white and okra. Also green, light blue and amber in different tones are used. The careful usage of the calm colors transmit finesse and overall harmony.

## **The Mimics Of The Figures**

In the display of the painted characters's mimics, a homogeneous distribution of incarnate is seen, especially in the figures presentations in the altar area. The incarnate is a light brown in the middle of the face which gets darker while getting nearer to the hair zone. Also the shadowed areas around the face's features are darker, around the eyes and the nose.

Overall, seen from the stylistic way, the painting of Kostantin and Athanas Zografi is part of the 18th century artistic style. The features of this painting are the linear treatment of the figures together with preference of ornamental decorations, elements that are clearly observed in the painting of the Zografi brothers. The clothes of the figures are tight to the bodies of the figures, with fine wrinkles and clear contours. The long lines of these clothes create volumes, which get completed by thinner and smaller lines. These volumes highlight the motion of the figures. The brighter spots contrast with darker pieces in the shadows, which creates contrast in order to get the light illusion. The sickles and form givings of the clothes, were used the same for all the figures, by creating stereotype and formal looks. To break this monotony, the painter decorate the clothes with different floral decorations, precious stones or contrasting edges. This ornamental interference affects in the invigoration and specification of the clothes painted.

So in this small chapel, painted by the Zografi brothers in 1750 in Vithkuq, are found the main features of the post-byzantine mural painting of the 18th century, partly impacted by the

western iconography, clear preferences of figuring the image of regional saints and also a distinguished step of the stylistic development of these famous painters's art.

### **The Stylistic Features of the Frescos in the Church Saint Peter and Paul**

Also the church Saint Peter and Paul is painted in 1764 by the brothers Athanas and Kostandin Zografi (based on the inscription over the northern door inside the church)<sup>9</sup>.

The inside the church offers a fluent and tied view for a figurative mural decoration. It is painted on the whole inner surface to show a wide decorative program. Even though a big amount of the inner decorations of this church is badly damaged, it still creates an overall impression over its base decoration system but also an idea of the wonderful view it must have had right after the decoration.

The painted surfaces decorate the whole area of the cover and the central dome, the cylindric cover of the central nave and the domes of the side naves. The paintings in the apses and naos area decorate as well, which are separated by white stripes.

The church Saint Peter and Pavel is painted by the Zografi brothers in 1764. This church is painted after circa 20 years experience of working in many churches in middle Albania and south Albania (north Epir), in the Prespa<sup>10</sup> area and Athos. The decoration of this church is done after circa 15 years after painting the nearby church in the monastery of Saints Cosmas and Damian.

The evolution of the Zografi brothers work style is very distinguishable while comparing the Saint Peter and Paul church with the picturesque style of the chapel nearby. They worked in the Mount Athos, in churches conceived from Cretan artists. There was their chance to get to know features of the Cretan paintings and to be presented with the western effects which reflected this painting. This brought up the evolution of their style.

In the church Saint Peter and Paul, the Zografi brothers work with brighter colors, better painted figures, perspective tendencies and a more completed and compositional organization, compared to the chapel nearby. Although, their paintings keeps clear the conservative features, by identifying the hand of these masters with an extraordinary working rhythm.

### **The Iconography**

The church of Saint Peter and Paul is relatively brighter than other post-byzantine churches. The mural surface of this church, with the system of the archway cover in the central nave, offer a spacious building amount to decorate with mural paintings. This is considered from masters, by

<sup>9</sup> Papakozma, 1983, pp. 77-85; Thomo, 1998, pp. 50-54; Popa, 1959, pp. 23-48; Rousseva, 2005/06, pp.141-161.

<sup>10</sup> Kirchhainer 2003/04, p.192.

composing wide scenes, balanced with the participation of more figures, compared to the chapel nearby. Different than the iconography scenes conceived with the building nearby, the main scenes are associated in the painting Saint Peter and Paul also with second scenes (for example in the scene *The Birth of Christ*, or *Crucifixion of Christ*).

The painted iconographies in the church of Saint Peter and Paul in Vithkuq by the Zografi brothers, contain more of the iconography instructions of the 18th century, designed by Dionysios of Fourná<sup>11</sup>. It needs to be highlighted the diversity of how the Zografi brothers transmit the same theme, for example: the ones in *The Dormition of St. Mary* in the western wall. The scenes of this theme are differently presented in different churches they were painted. For example, in the Church of St. Athanasios in Voskopoje (1744), where *Koimesis*<sup>12</sup> contains seven different fragments about this theme on the western wall, in the chapel of Saint Damian and Cosmas in Vithkuq (1750) with *The Dormition of St. Mary* in the western wall and *The Coronation of St. Mary* as the last view of the dodekaorton. This shows their flexibility to adjust from church to church, but also documents in a wider framework, the circulation of the many painting manuals in the Northern area of Epirus and Western Macedonia, where they have worked<sup>13</sup>.

Also other developments are obvious in their iconographies during the years. For example, in *The Crucifixion of Christ*, the Zografi brothers leave the Saint Peter and Paul church from the drama suggested by even by Dionysios of Fourná<sup>14</sup>. Here we can see a straight appearance, standing of St. Mary, based on the western examples. The influence of the Cretan school is obvious in this scene.

The Cretan influence is also obvious in the scene of *The Birth of Christ* too, where St. Mary and Joseph stand on their knees near Christ who is in his cradle, based on the iconography of Crete of the 15th and 16th century<sup>15</sup>.

The western influence is distinguished in the work made by the Zografi brothers in the church of Saint Peter and Paul also the positioning of the angels and their movements. They are influenced by the pathos of the catholic art of the Italian baroque. What else is obvious in these displays, is a bigger breakdown of the figures and a figural “western” dexterity. Those new picturesque elements unify with the traditional elements of the Zografi brothers by bringing an innovational picturesque *byzantinisation*.

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<sup>11</sup> Schäfer, 1983.

<sup>12</sup> Kreidl-Papadopoulos, 1990, f.136-182; Kirchner, 2008, f. 59-88.

<sup>13</sup> Kirchner 2005, f.192.

<sup>14</sup> Schäfer, 1983, p. 98.

<sup>15</sup> Gouma-Peterson, 1971, p. 40.

## The Composition

The compositions of the scenes usually attempt for an extension in width, by fitting the mansard of the church's position. But even though the surface is available enough for the bible scene, their compositions still remain narrow and flat. It goes directly to the first front, where the characters that act are positioned, in the still poor backstage. The nature is still poor and plants in form of trees break the monotony of the last front.

The architecture, in cases where it is used as a compositional background, remains even in this church as a second-hand element, schematic and without diversity. Also the many rocky elements keep the flatness and the previous schematization, despite the expansion they get in the bigger surface.

Overall, *The Flatness* is a distinguished feature for the Zografi brothers' painting, which is obvious in the conception and painting of all compositional elements. This flatness is connected with the perspectival conception that these painters use. This is a factor that doesn't allow the spatial deepening of their scenes.

## Figures

The figures in the church of the monastery are presented with a lot of energy (compared with the figures in the chapel nearby) and with voluminous clothes, although still linear. In the figures of the freezer below, the figures of the military saints, with convincing physiognomy, with detailed clothes and arms are added.

Regarding to the presentation of the naked bodies, like in *The Crucifixion of Jesus*, the painters show diligence for the formation of Jesus' muscularity. His stature hangs with heaviness and realism in the cross. Obvious are the chest and the arm's muscularity, also the lower half of the body with the piece filled with wrinkles which covers the back, or the tilted positioned feet with a filled and a careful shape. But this obvious commitment in the display of Christ's body does not remain in the other two crossed figures. The formation of the other two convicts bodies falls in the schematization, thus they don't keep an unique level of work. This difference between the figures in the same bible display is an indicator, for the painting according to the characters' values inside a scheme. A medieval and conservator phenomenon, which rules and doesn't let freedom to the art of painting.

The bible and saint figures' are worked with a bright, soft incarnate and with attention. The work of faces shows a finesse and careful work art. Intermediate tones, which imitates the shadowed areas, are worked in a homogeneous way. Also the features are distributed with carefulness and delicacy, eyes in the form of an almond, highlighted brows which are linked with the lines of the nose and the small mouth, but well formed below.

Overall, the faces' mimics don't conduct a lot of expression, but are soft and charming, by transmitting features of Paleologus physiognomy. Especially the faces of the angels are painted with affability and sweetness, even in the cases where they have military and protective positions.

In the mimics of the figures of saints on their feet, is a highlighted schematization noticeable. A stiff presentation, with noted eyes and a lot of shadows in the face's areas, raise the stereotyping of their presentations. They are figured with their conventional attributes, according to the templates (the manuals of painting).

### **The Clothes**

In the formation of the figures, the Zografı brothers orientate on the examples of the post-byzantine era. The figures' body are covered with carefully worked hooked clothes. The volume of the clothes are created by many fine wrinkles, positioned after each other, which allows the difference of the body forms below them, and even their movements. The reaping hooks, from time to time are highlighted with contrasting shadows and lights by making the positioning clearer. The formation of the reaping hooks is sometimes complex just like in the Paleologus era or in the later Cretan one<sup>16</sup>.

It must be said that, they didn't give the same attention to every piece of clothing. The volumes created in the area of the central dome, in the clothes of the prophets and angels, not all painted figures are found. In this area, the painters have paid all of their attention to the movements, the figures' positioning, the modeling by using shadows and light or to the architectural forms.

### **Decoration**

An important item that the Zografı bothers payed a lot attention to, is the decoration of the figures's clothes. This decoration is mostly floral but also geometrical. The bishops' clothes are decorated with a lot of ornaments, especially in the altar area.

The enrichment of decorations in the scenic displays doesn't miss, where the textiles (clothing or table and bed covers) are filled with ornaments, by breaking the monochrome of the scene. Golden borders and clothes that flow with heaviness, conduct the tendency of the qualitative and expensive fabric.

It is a characteristic of the Zografı brothers' painting, their preference of decorated structures. Most obvious is the floral ornament, which is an important element in their mural painting. The freezer of the medallions, the row of the standing saints, as the textile objects, are circled from floral combinations, which are painted with carefulness and love for details. Vegetal

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<sup>16</sup> Gouma-Peterson, 1971, p.40.



elements, such as vine, leaves and flowers are part of the artistic report of the painters. Elements which are sometimes used for the decoration of the saints' clothes. Some of these ornaments come from the western repertory. Post-byzantine orthodox painters often use decorative western forms, which they learn from the graphic templates<sup>17</sup>. The elements the Zografi brothers use in the Saint Peter and Paul church, are similar to the ones used in years, by testifying for their stable, ornamental repertory.

### **Contemporary Elements**

Another distinguishable feature in the Zografi brothers' painted scenes, is the usage of contemporary elements and ethnographic, like in the scene of *The Wedding of Kana*. There we see contemporary elements from that time period, people dressed with folk costumes, which take part in this bible celebration figured in the altar area. The joy of the painters in the approaching of church's iconography with the folkloric tradition and the everyday life, is very obvious in this scene.

### **Colors**

The colors that the painters use in this church are mainly blue, green, red and ocher. They are combined with different amounts of white, by achieving many nuances of the same palette. The result is the transmission by their frescos to an overall fine and pastel impression.

The artistic and stylistic indicators of the mural painting in church Saint Peter and Paul in Vithkuq, worked by the Zografi brothers, show that the artistic tendencies of this work are inside the inherited system of byzantine values and post-byzantine artistic tradition. In some moments it is distinguished the enrichment of this tradition with folkloric elements and also new iconographic elements with western tendencies, but overall they remain small details and stylistic and iconographic enrichments. This because the new elements are transmitted in a softer and modified forms, by not showing tendencies for sensitive deviations from their previous works.

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<sup>17</sup> Triantaphyllopoulos, 1985, f.19.

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