

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE GARDEN OF EDEN IN CHRISTIAN SACRED ARCHITECTURE

REPREZENTĂRI ALE GRĂDINII RAIULUI ÎN ARHITECTURA SPAȚIULUI SACRU CREȘTIN

CEHAN Agata Mihaela¹, GHEORGHIȚĂ Constanța Carmina¹
e-mail: agata.cehan@yahoo.com

Abstract. According to the Bible, the path of humanity began in a garden, an enclosed precinct, a hideaway, a shelter, simultaneously a place of genesis and death. In the architecture of the Christian churches, Heaven, or Paradise, is often represented as a garden with lush and spontaneous vegetation within which dominates the Tree of Knowledge. The Garden of Eden is thus a place of the reconstruction of the man, the centre of the soul. This study aims to analyse the visual representations of the Garden of Eden in the decorative arts of the Christian worship space.

Key words: symbol, Eden, garden, Paradise, cross-tree, sacred-space, sacred architecture

Rezumat. Potrivit Bibliei, drumul omenirii a început într-o grădină, spațiu împrejmuit, refugiu, adăpost, loc al genezei și al morții în același timp. În arhitectura spațiilor sacre creștine, Raiul sau Paradisul este reprezentat de cele mai multe ori ca o grădină cu vegetație luxuriantă și spontană în mijlocul căreia tronează Pomul Cunoașterii. Grădina Raiului este locul de restaurare a ființei, centrul sufletului. Acest studiu își propune analiza reprezentărilor vizuale ale Grădinii Raiului în plastica decorativă a spațiului de cult creștin.

Cuvinte cheie: simbol, Eden, paradis, copacul-cruce, spațiu sacru, arhitectură sacră creștină

INTRODUCTION

According to the Bible, the path of humankind began in a garden, an enclosed precinct, a hideaway, a shelter, a place of genesis and death. In the architecture of the Christian churches, Heaven, or Paradise, is often represented as a garden with lush and spontaneous vegetation within which dominates the Tree of Knowledge. "Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters." (Gen. 2: 8-10)

In the book of *Genesis* Eden is described as being a beautiful garden, enclosed with circular walls, with well-doer waters and fruit-bearing trees. From the center located the Paradise's well spring the four rivers of the Earth: Pison, Gihon,

¹„Gh. Asachi” Technical University of Iași, Romania

Hiddekel and Euphrates. In this garden, the Lord planted the tree of knowledge of good and evil. After committing the original sin, this sacred space will be banned for man and will be protected by a cherubim with a flaming sword.

The Christian sacred space has an architectural component at the same time with a symbolic one. The symbol implies representation, being most often a sign or an image associated with a few words or abbreviations of the item that it represents. Symbols have always helped in finding or identifying certain values, beliefs, ideas or creed. (Cehan and Gheorghiu, 2014)

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Eden or Garden of Eden are frequently represented in the iconography of Christian worship spaces. In general, we call icon "any visual representation of an object crafted using various forms of art (drawing, painting, sculpture, etc.) [...] Thus within the broad concept of the Icon, understood as a visual representation of something, are included also statues, sculptures, engravings, reliefs, etc." (Braniște, 1993)

This paper identifies and interprets different visual representations of the Garden of Eden, in the decorative art of Christian worship space. As research methods were used: theoretical and photographic documentation, observation and case study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Holy Fathers identified in their teaching about divine reasons the whole world as a symbol "a translucent circumstance of divine transcendence" (Streza, 2010). Each symbol is a microcosm, an entire world, his perception being subjective, everyone sees and understands what can and wants to see and understand. "...the whole intelligible world presents itself mysteriously imagined in the symbolic faces of the sensible world, for those who have eyes to see; and the entire sensible world, if studied with a mind fond of knowledge, in its very reasons being included the intelligible world." (Maxim Mărturisitorul) The open space, without limitation, generates insecurity, fear, chaos. "...a well-defined space [...] is made up of three parts: *THE WORLD AXIS, THE ORDERED SPACE and THE BORDER. Beyond BORDER there is CHAOS*" (Biciușcă, 2008). Once its limits are perceived, it begins to be perceived and understood. This is why the Paradise is imagined as an enclosed garden in which the primary essential elements are ordered around the *Tree of Knowledge*.

The association between *World Tree* and *the Tree of Life*, as a divine manifestation, is found in the Christian tradition, Tree of Life having as sap the heavenly dew, while its fruit transmit a touch of immortality. In the Christian iconography appears the symbol of the cross with leaves, or the Tree-Cross, which stands on top of a mountain in the center of the world, resuming the image of the Cosmic Tree or of the world.

The cross is the most common sacred symbol, representing one of the fundamental reference points of cultural and religious history of the world, believed to be a geometric variant of the *World Tree. World axis, ladder or tree*, all these meanings conveys a symbolism of ascension in the *center of the world*, a bond

between the layers of universal existence. The cross symbolizes the *Center* and the directions or lines of power departing from this center. *Sign of signs*, the cross is a model of cosmos totality, but also of man or anthropomorphic deity. Its most elevated meanings are related with the universal history of Christianity, the cross being assimilated with the *Cosmic Tree*, in its quality as *Center of the World* symbol. (Evseev, 2001)

Transitional space between the faithful world and the church, the precincts of the ecclesiastical spaces seem to be a reinterpretation of what the Holy Scripture describes as "garden eastward in Eden" (Genesis 2:8). The Church, centrally located, seems to subordinate the whole precinct's composition, just as "the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil." (Genesis 2:9). Extrapolating, we can say that the metaphor of the "tree of knowledge" is represented on several levels. The central vertical axis of a church, defined by the nave and the dome on the central tower, support of Jesus Pantocrator, represents the image of an *Axis Mundi*, the link between the realm of death (horizontal plane, the floor of the church), the terrestrial world (space defined by the church walls) and the realm of promises (everything that is above). In the same way we may consider the church itself as an object, as a representation at the scale of the whole ensemble of this 'tree of knowledge', and further, even at a larger scale, the whole ecclesiastic ensemble as an *Axis Mundi* for the landscape. (Gheorghiță and Grigorovschi, 2013)



Fig. 1 -The Garden of Eden, German author unknown

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hortus_conclusus#/media/File:Meister_des_Frankfurter_Paradiesg%C3%A4rtleins_001.jpg)

In medieval iconography, in the Eden Garden, enclosed within walls, *Hortus Conclusus* (Fig. 1), Virgin Mary is represented with the child and the angels. Hence derive the closed gardens from the enclosure of the monasteries. The tree in the upper left corner of the painting is a cherry tree which refers to the blood of Jesus shed on cross; the may-lilies from the close-up and the lilies from the middle right and

the white flowers symbolize the innocence of the Virgin Mary, the iris in the background, a flower of the Virgin, appears in scenes of the Annunciation; roses (top right) symbolizes Mary "the rose without thorns", not touched by original sin; strawberries (table below) represent the food of happiness; peony (below, middle) is the symbol of spiritual wealth and honor.

According with the painting orthodox Erminia, the representations of Eden are present in the icons illustrating the *Creation of Man*, *The Creation of Adam*, *Creation of Eve*, *Adam and Eve Trampling Commandment*, *Expulsion from Paradise* and *Lamentations of Adam and Eve* (Dionisie din Furna, 2000). (Fig. 2, 3, 4) A different representation of the Garden of Eden is found on the east wall of the narthex, in the lower register left of the icon of *The Last Judgment*. (Fig. 4) Heaven is depicted as a garden surrounded by walls of "crystal, gold and gems all around", where it can be found „*Distinguish trees, beautifully decorated and flying birds of many kinds*”, in the center of which the Mother of God is sitting in a „gold stall” surrounded by two angels dressed like deacons. (Dionisie din Furna, 2000)

In the Garden of Eden, the first humans, Adam and Eve, are allowed to taste all fruits and plants, but the fruit of the *Tree of Life* and the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil*. According to some interpretations, the forbidden fruit is represented as an apple. From a symbolic perspective, the apple has as a starting point its own inside with the five alveoli arranged in the form of five-pointed star, which is why the initiated ones have considered it the fruit of knowledge and freedom (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1994). According to its nearly spherical shape, it would generally signify the mundane desires or the giving in to these desires. The Prohibition made by God would put the man on guard against the predominance of those desires that drag him toward material life opposite to the spiritual life, which is in fact the meaning of evolution. The apple would be the symbol of this knowledge and laying it in front of a need: to choose (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1994)

The apple, tree and fruit, occupies one of the most important places in the plant code of symbols of different nations. It's a symbol of life, of youth and love, but also of sin, of carnal temptations, the ambivalence of the symbol being due to the fact that, before becoming a feminine symbol, the apple was one of the essentials emblems of the Great God of Earth. Because the main zoomorphic aspect of the God of Earth is the snake, the biblical myth associates the apple with the snake that will tempt Eve. This is how the apple became one of the symbols of the sin. The biblical text does not mention exactly which was the fruit of "knowledge and sin", some older painters drawing in the middle of Heaven a fig tree, or a peach, or a quince, as a fruit of temptation. Another theory holds that the constant association of apple with the forbidden fruit has been made because of the fact that in Latin, *malus* has a double meaning: *apple*, but also *bad*. The third negative symbolic interpretation of the apple as tree and fruit is based on the fact that early Christians were suspicious and granting negative connotations to the pagan objects and symbols, including apple which holds one of the most privileged places, because of its red color, mixed with the green and the yellow, being a symbol of life and youth (Evseev, 2001).



Fig. 2 - Icons on the north wall of the monastery Sucevița representing the Garden of Eden

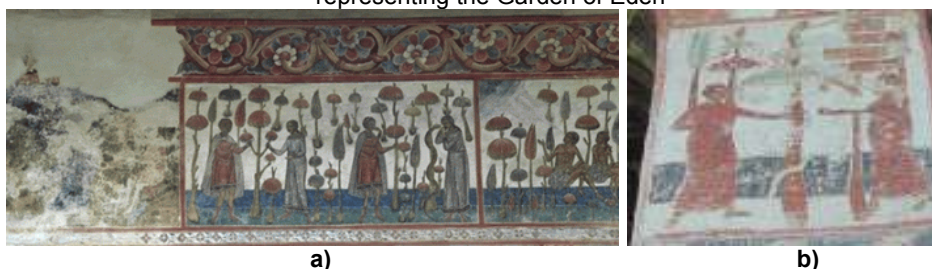


Fig. 3 - Representations of the Garden of Eden
a) Voroneț Monastery

(https://fotopoeziemuzica.files.wordpress.com/2008/04/imag2010_jpgvoronet-fatada-nordica-adam-si-eva-in-rai-scene-din-viata-maicii-domnului.gif?w=468)

b) Moldovița Monastery

(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Moldovita_murals#/media/File:Moldovita_murals_2010_09.jpg)



Fig. 4 - Last Judgement, Voroneț, overview and representation of the Garden of Eden
(<https://rasvancristian.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/voronet-1-imagine-mare.jpg>)

The fig tree is present in the Garden of Eden. According to the Old Testament, after the Fall, the fig leaf becomes the first piece of clothing of Adam, symbol of the acknowledged male sexuality: *"Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves."* (Gen.3: 7) The fig tree is a symbol of marriage, fertility, sexual attraction, feminine principle, spiritual enlightenment and truth (Evseev, 2001).

The peach tree, also known as "Persian apple" is a symbol of spring and of gentleness. In China and Japan, it represents an ancient symbol of the immortality, being associated with the Tree of Life (Evseev, 2001).

CONCLUSIONS

The world created and represented in the Christian iconography painting is entirely oriented toward eternity, toward the beyond. By simplicity, schematic and linear shaping of the portraits, the characters give an impression of remoteness from the real world. Unlike the western religious art, more realistic, oriented in the precise reproduction of the man and nature, in the Orthodox iconography both the nature, the man and the animal world are represented not in their „natural” as in the "spiritual" one. So the icon is not an exact copy of reality, it is neither portrait nor photo. The icon is the image, the prototype and the symbol of the divine creation, the real world being represented as a transfigured cosmos.

In its various representations of Christian iconography, Garden of Eden appears as a space whose purpose is recreation and spiritual ascent. It represents a sacred space, a protected place, enclosed by symbolic walls or fences, and it is guarded at times by higher beings, as the angel at the gates of the Earthly paradise. Garden of Eden symbolizes the condition of beatitude in which the human ancestors lived before the Fall. It is a state of perfection, to which the man is desperately trying to return, as it shown by the numerous journeys in the search of the Lost Paradise.

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