

# ORNAMENTS OF VEGETAL INSPIRATION IN ORTHODOX ARCHITECTURE

## ORNAMENTE DE INSPIRAȚIE VEGETALĂ ÎN ARHITECTURA SPAȚIULUI DE CULT ORTODOX

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**Abstract.** *The Church is the only architectural program able to illustrate the cohesion between matter and spirit. Faith acts as a binder of the relationship between religious experiences, aesthetic emotions and rational solutions. The structure materializes the sacred, while the accompanying associated arts assigns aesthetic and spiritual meanings. Worship spaces consist on the basis of rigorous canons which are founded on symbolic meanings. Regarding these religious ideologies, the vision of these spaces is probative for revealing their concept of life, world and divinity. The symbol, a link between visible and imaginary, between concrete and intuitive, expresses clearly the relation between divine and world. It and represents an indicator to what is beyond it, but remains always linked in the present reality. This paper aims recognizing and interpreting the symbolic elements of vegetable inspiration used in the Orthodox worship spaces, metaphorical images of archetypal space.*

**Key words:** *motif, nature, symbol, church, decor*

**Rezumat.** *Biserica reprezintă singurul program arhitectural capabil să ilustreze coeziunea dintre materie și spirit. Credința joacă rolul de liant al legăturii complexe dintre trăiri religioase, estetice și soluții raționale. Structura materializează sacralul, în timp ce artele conexe ce o însoțesc îi atribuie acesteia valențe estetice și spirituale. Spațiile de cult ortodoxe sunt alcătuite pe baza unor canoane riguroase ce au la bază semnificații simbolice. Conceperea acestor spații este edificatoare în ce privește ideologiile religioase respective, dezvăluind concepția lor despre viață, lume și divinitate. Simbolul, punte de legătură între vizibil și imaginar, între concret și intuitiv, exprimă cel mai evident raport dintre divinitate și lume, constituind un indicator spre ceea ce este dincolo de el, dar raportat mereu la realitatea prezentă. Lucrarea de față își propune recunoașterea și interpretarea elementelor simbol de inspirație vegetală folosite în spațiile de cult ortodoxe, imagini metaforice ale spațiului arhetipal.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *motiv, natură, simbol, biserică, decor*

### INTRODUCTION

The Church is the only architectural program capable to illustrate the cohesion between matter and spirit. Faith acts like a bond between the complex religious experiences, aesthetics and rational solutions. The structure materializes the sacred, while the related arts assign aesthetic and spiritual meanings.

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Orthodox worship spaces are composed after rigorous criteria based on symbolic meanings. Designing these spaces is edifying for the respective religious ideologies and revealing their conception about life, world and divine.

After Franz Sales Meyer, ornament in its narrower sense, includes elements of decoration which derive from the natural foliage form. He classifies geometric elements as non-organic ones, as long as they are organic – have stems, flowers, leaves, etc. When it is only drawn on paper, a vegetal motif it is abstractly considered an “ornament”, but when it’s applied in order to embellish an object, it becomes a “decorative element” or a “motif”. (Meyer, 1988)

## **MATERIAL AND METHOD**

Iasi is the capital of Moldova, and a leading cultural centre. It is the keeper of some of the ecclesiastical assemblies, churches and monasteries of great importance for the Romanian history and the Romanian Orthodox Church. This paper examines different churches and monasteries in Iasi, from the perspective of decorative vegetal elements. It aims to identify and interpret symbol elements used in the Orthodox worship spaces, metaphorical images of the archetypal spaces.

As research methods were used: theoretical and photographic documentation, observation and case study.

Architectural monuments analysed are: Galata Monastery Church, Golia Monastery Church, Three Hierarchs Church, Cetatuia Monastery Church, Saint Spiridon Church and Frumoasa Monastery Church.

Towards the end of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, a new Byzantine influence infiltrates to Moldova. This influence is felt both in form and in the construction processes. The monument which sets the tone of these new influences is Galata Monastery Church, founded by Petru Schiopul in 1584 (Ionescu, 2007).

The Three Hierarchs Church (1637 -1639) and Golia Monastery (1650-1660), built by Vasile Lupu, are essential and representative monuments of the Moldavian feudal architecture from the first half of the XVII<sup>th</sup> century. In this period there is a new orientation of the ecclesiastical architecture, determined by the Wallachian architecture, and by new decorative formulas with Oriental (Georgian or Armenian) or Occidental origins from Poland and Russia (Ionescu, 1981).

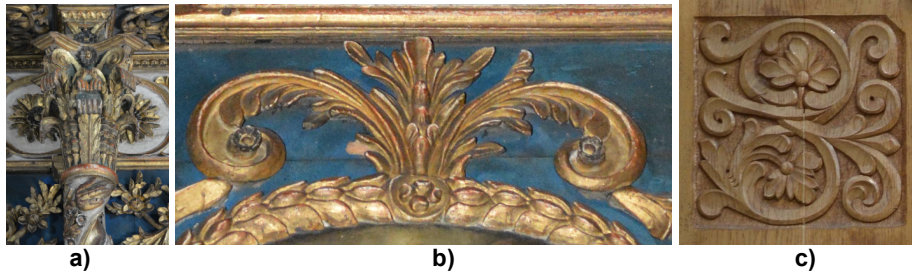
Some of the most important monuments through size, but not as significant as originality, mark the ecclesiastic architecture of the second half of the 18 century. They generally reproduce, more or less exactly, representative monuments built by mid-century: Three Hierarchs Monastery and Golia. Thereby, in 1672 Ion Duca Voda builds a monastery, after Three Hierarchs model, called after the name of the hill on which is situated: Cetatuia Monastery (Ionescu, 2007).

Towards the 18th century second half, a new trend emerges to Moldova through Russia – the Italian Neoclassical (Balş, 1933). This period won’t last for long and among its remarkable representatives we can consider Saint Spiridon Church from Iasi, rebuilt in 1804 and the Church of Cetatuia Monastery (1836) (Ionescu, 2007).

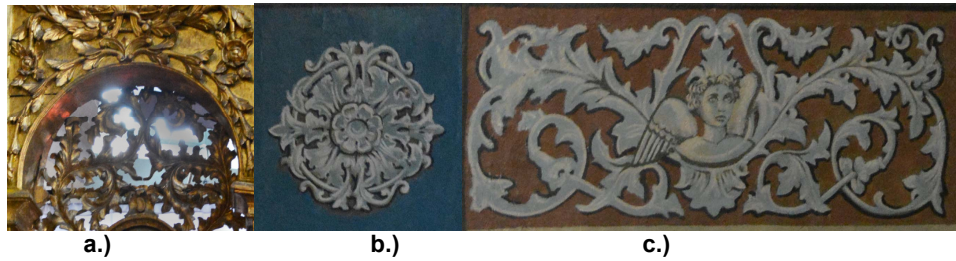
## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The ornaments analysis focused on the elements that generate the orthodox architectural space; facades, interior wall decorations, iconostasis, doors and windows were studied. Also it was studied the decorative elements of the religious furniture – generating the atmosphere in the Orthodox worship space

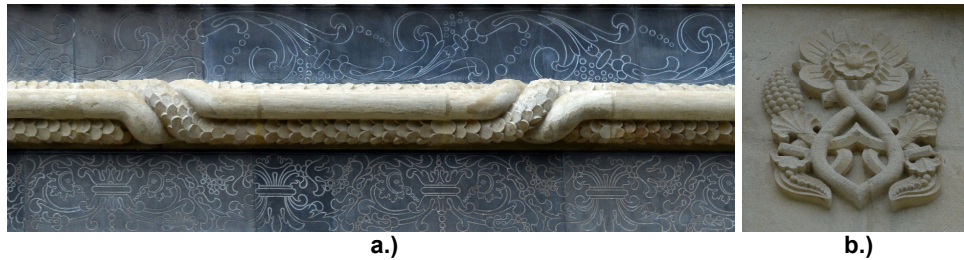
(stalls, bishop chairs, etc.). Stylized or represented by imitation, singulars or in groups, the vegetal inspiration assemblies are composed of elements which recall the acanthus leaf, tulip, rose, pine cone, vines (leaf and fruit), ragged palm leaf, lotus flower, etc.



**Fig. 1 - Stylized Acanthus - Galata Monastery – details a), b) —iconostasis; c) – door**



**Fig. 2 - Stylized Acanthus –Sf. Spiridon Church – details a) iconostasis; , b), c) – interior fresco**



**Fig. 3 - Grapevine – 3 Hierarchs Church a), b) – exterior details**



**Fig. 4 - Frumoasa Church – a) ornament on the iconostasis b) interior ornament**

Acanthus (Fig. 1 a.,b.,c., Fig. 2 a.,b.,c.), present as bundles of leaves is the most present vegetal motif used in architecture and it had never received a

symbolic meaning; its frequent and variant applications are due to the ornamental possibilities and the foliage beauty (Meyer, 1988). The spiral stalk with tendrils is an invention of the artists because the natural plant is way much simple. Often, the spindle is completed by other plants such as: laurel, oak, ivy etc., or along its course it is decorated with various flowers and calyx with acanthus leaf end seen from aside.

Grape vine (Fig. 3 a., b.), a very popular element, it is adopted by the religious art as a decorative motif along wheat ears as a symbol of Jesus Christ (Meyer, 1988). Considering how important agriculture was in all ages, it was nearly impossible for the decorative art to disregard the cereal plants, although their poor ornamental possibilities prevented a broad application. Cereal ears along other motifs were used in various styles.

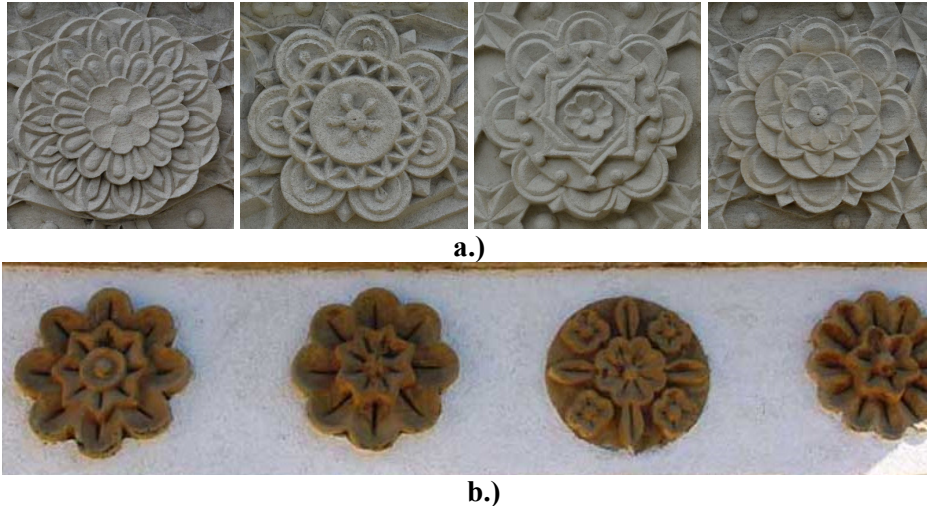
Laurel and olive (Fig. 4 a.) were introduced into ornaments due to their symbolic significance. Laurel was consecrated to Apollo and olive to Athens. Symbol of redemption and reconciliation, laurel leaves were used to crown victorious heroes. In Ancient Rome the victorious hero was crowned with laurels and welcomed by slaves who wore olive branches in their hands, when returning home (Meyer, 1988.). In a similar sense, nowadays, laurel is considered a symbol of glory and the olive branch a symbol of peace, fertility, purification, victory, glory and reward. Olive is considered a symbol of eternal life, not only because of its ever green leaves, but also because it was a source of oil with many uses. In the Hebrew and Christian tradition, olive is a sacred tree and in the same time a symbol of peace: the dove brought an olive branch to Noah at the end of the flood, Jesus's cross was made from olive and cedar wood – in this way the olive tree it is associated with the tree of life (Evseev, 1994).

Lotus and papyrus leaves (Fig. 4 b, c.) are symbols of fertility and immortality. The palm tree (Fig. 4 b.), plays an important role in the ornamental art. Leafs or branches were used for kings entering in temples in Jerusalem, at Osiris feasts in Egypt, for the Olympic Games in Greece, and for the triumphal processions in Ancient Rome. In the Christian church rituals, the palm tree is a symbol of victory and eternal peace (Meyer, 1988).

Flowers, the most beautiful product of the vegetal world, enjoyed, in all ages the popularity of ornamental art. Whether as plain ornament or relief, they were used in multiple forms such as bouquets, festoons, garlands etc. or as parts of floral string courses. Tulips, carnations, roses, lotus flowers are all carrying an entire universe of decorative styles which are specific to the Romanian Orthodox worship space, reminiscent of the beauty of the Garden of Eden.

The lotus flower is present in the most of the solar-floral discs which belong to the second string course of the Three Hierarchs (Fig. 4 a) and reveals not only the artistic value but in the same time the numerous one – the motif is present in almost each of the 63 pieces that organize the facades composition. Having 8 petals, the lotus flower blooms are placed in the first corolla register - rarely in the second, of the disc. As semantic-symbolic significance, the motif approaches the Padma lotus (pink lotus) significance – solar emblem (Chevalier

and Gheerbrant, 1994). Usually, in the first register, it is represented the front view of the flower. Circular unfolded, the petals propels the energy in a radial way – it has always been a solar symbol. The creator of the Three Hierarchs discs successively transformed the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> registers into an artistic and decorative way, referring to old Ottoman and contemporary art and to their own interpretations (Fig. 4 a) (Macarie, 2008). Solar discs, similar but much simpler, are located on the exterior of the towers of Golia Monastery (Fig. 4 b).



**Fig. 4 - Solar discs a) – 3 Hierarchs Church – details of second string course, b) Golia Monastery Church**

In the decorative art the rose is one of the motifs with countless values and symbolic connotations. Symbol of Our Lady or Messiah's sacrifice, of the cup of life, soul and love, of power and mystical rebirth, in Christian iconography, the rose is assigned to the Cup in which Jesus blood wept (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1994).



**Fig. 5 - Decoration of vegetal inspiration on the facade of 3 Hierarchs Church (vegetal motifs: tulip, lily, lotus flower, pinecone, Tree of Life, etc.)**

In the Three Hierarchs Church lunettes arches, stylized tulips and lilies with long rods grouped in clusters, are carved in flat relief, while the entire range of niches are decorated with floral motifs, joined symmetrically and planted in pots and amphorae (Ionescu, 1981), recalling the Tree of Life (Fig. 5). There is a discreet and thoughtful fusion between the pagan motif of tree of life and the Christian cross, perpetuating an only aesthetic syncretism (Macarie, Gh., 2008, p. 205). The lily means purity, innocence, virginity while in Christianity is the symbol of the Holy Virgin (Evseev, 1999; Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1994).

## CONCLUSIONS

Along time, the vegetal world has been a constant source of inspiration for the building's ornamental registers. Flowers or parts of them, trees or just branches, leaves and/or fruits, alone or in various combinations have been adopted as decorations through imitation or stylization. Generally, plants chosen for decorations were peculiar through their beautiful form (leaf outline, branch delicacy etc.) and by the fact that they have a symbolic meaning- sacred or profane.

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