

The life cycle of St. Nicholas conducted in Basilica of "St. Nicholas" in Voskopoje by painter David Selenica



Archeology

Keywords: Basilica, church, saints, salvation, icons, temple, etc.

Ahilino Palushi

Teacher of Painting in the Lyceum Theater "Jordan Misja" & PhD candidate at the Faculty of History, Department of Cultural Heritage, Tirana, Albania.

Abstract

Among the five major basilicas built in Voskopoje over a period of 60 years (1699-1759), the church of St. Nicholas is known as one of the most magnificent buildings of this style. With its construction it is opened the series of three basilicas which were built within four years (St. Nicholas -1721, -1722 St. Michael and St. Thanas-1724). The church was the main church (temple) of St Nicholas neighborhood. According to its ktitoric inscription, the church was built mainly by the Arcond Haji Jorgji Hira's costs within a period of 17 months from June 1721 to September 1722.

Decoration with frescoes of the basilica of St. Nicholas in Voskopoja has always attracted the attention of researchers in the field, not only for the manner of artistic conception and implementation, but also for the spirit and content that brings the program used by the headmaster "...the most knowledgable David"²³¹. Together with two of his aides Constantine and Kriston, the headmaster David Selenica had a large volume of work for the decorations on multiple surfaces in St. Koll, work which lasted about four years (1722-1726)²³². Iconographic program used in such an environment, not only consumed the painter's manual, but also every sketch, or etching template²³³ thus creating the necessity of a "real encyclopedia" scenes. The walls are filled with different cycles, common and rare starting from dogmatic, liturgical, evangelical, also of the old Testament and of the martyrolog, scenes from the history of the Church, and up to the life of the Saints, apocryphal traditions, etc. The scenes are combined on the basis of a "hierarchy" not only in their placement but also in their realization. They are addressed in the exposure depending on the eye of the believer and ecclesial significance of space.

In this context, a considerable space for decoration of the southern site it has occupied the cycle with scenes from the life of St. Nicholas, the saint to whom is dedicated this magnificent temple. Within the ample space that he had at his disposal, the headmaster David from Selenica illustrates five scenes²³⁴ which are concentrated in the visible place for the eye of the believer. They are positioned on the third painting category in naos central part, respectively over the medallions of "the 40 Martyrs of Sevasta"²³⁵. To these five events from the life of the saint it is

²³¹ In the ktitoric inscription which is found written about two meters high is found on the face of the west wall of the basilica, the master David Selenica has expressed himself with great pride;" ...it was painted in appropriately grand fashion around Naos generally with the hand and the brush of the wise and well-known Z.Z.David Selenica..." Th.Popa."Inscriptions of the churches in Albania" Tirana 1998,p.166. fig 331.

²³² V.Puzanova. Notes on Albanian art in the XVIII century. Bulletin of Social Sciences. Nr. 1, 1957. Th. Popa, Albanian medieval painters, Tiranë 1961. S.Adhami. *Voskopoja and its Monuments*. Tirana,1998. "Basilica of St. Nicholas".

²³³ Printed engravings, published, not originals, (Flemish, German, Italian, or those which came through Venice or Austria), or from proskinitaria (προσκυντήρια) published and used by monasteries, as well as religious paintings in western style, copied from European engravings.

²³⁴ Scenes "Miracle of Artemisa" and "St. Nicholas rescues the drowning midshipman" as we will see below are conceived in a single composition..

²³⁵ In the post-Byzantine period we find many times portraits in the torso of the 40 Martyrs, inside the medallions, or without medallions. We find it, for example, in the monastery of Kokomea realized by the painter Mihal from Zerma, year 1672.

also added the appearance of "St. Nicholas temple donation from ktitor" which is separated from the "cycle."

The first scene "*The Saint helps three sisters*" is mentioned in many articles and presented at almost all illustrated stages of the life of Saint Koll.²³⁶ The story is about a poor father who wanted to marry his three daughters in order to take out the family from destitution, but St. Nicholas helps economically secretly throwing for three consecutive nights before. The scene shows the moment²³⁷ when the father and three girls sleep and Saint Nicholas puts the bag with the money from their father to his head. The father of these girls is lying asleep on a sofa covered with a calico and decorated with ornaments and the three girls are asleep also painted on the transom away. This part of the composition (the transom) is treated in a simple architectural background that consists of three buildings. Second event speaks of "the miracle of Artemis". This event that lies in the wake of a series of miracles performed by the Saint during long trips at sea, is quite rare in iconographic representations.²³⁸

According to holy scriptures, the pagan god, Artemis of whom St. Nicholas had burned her house in Mira, decides to take revenge. She turns to the image of a believing woman and manages to convince one of the pilgrims to take a pot full of oil that can be used to light the candles of the temple dedicated to the Saint. This oil actually was a very powerful fuel that would be enough to burn the house and the whole city across. While traveling along St. Nicholas appears to the pilgrim and gives orders to pour this oil into the sea. This mural represents the moment when Artemis is standing on the shore watching the boat that is in the sea and at the same time advised by the Saint pilgrim pours the Jar from which emerges the red flame.

In continuation appears the *St. Nicholas saving the drowning midshipman*. Here in the midst of powerful waves and strong winds the headmaster has painted a very large ship with vessels where sideways stand canons and at the bottom of this ship. Within the ship appears the Saint praying over a stranded sailor, who is lying motionless on his back. Around them other sailors stand amazed.²³⁹ One of them is keeping the head of a drowned man in his lap. Regardless of the "*miracle of Artemis*" and "*St. Nicholas who saves the drowning midshipman*" are two different episodes which background for both events is the same, unified by a common horizon line which provides an aesthetically pleasing image for the viewer. The history of the saint who "rescues the three convicts with death" is treated almost the same in all types of iconography. Three convicts are given the expense of the executioner with their hands and eyes tied waiting for the deadly crackdown.

²³⁶ Αννας Τσιτουριδου." Ο ζωγραφικός διακοσμος του Αγιου Νικολαου Ορφανου στη Θεσσαλονικη"Κεντρο βυζαντινων Ερευνων Θεσσαλονικη,1986.

²³⁷ Usually this event is illustrated with three moments of Byzantine painters., when the saint puts the money and the father of three girls sleeps, when the father stays awake to find out who is his charitable, and finally when he thanks the saint. Αννας Τσιτουριδου." ...Αγιου Νικολαου Ορφανου.."op.c

²³⁸ This miracle occurred after the death of the Saint, see: Αννας Τσιτουριδου." ...Αγιου Νικολαου Ορφανου..." το θαυμα της'Αρταμιδος p.170.op.c.

²³⁹Dionisio da Furna "*Ermeneutica della pittura*". Fiorentino Editore – Napoli; 1971"il Santo che risuscita il marinaio nel vascello". P.240.

St. Nicholas is given to us at the moment that he has blocked the hand that's about to hit, holding tight with one hand the wrist and with the other the shoulder of the executioner. The fifth scene represents "the Saint's sleep".²⁴⁰

At first plan St. Nicholas is given to us lying on his deathbed. He is given with his head turned left, wearing his bishop's attire, epitrachil and the white omofor with large crosses and Bible placed on red cloak which folded his skin. In the second plan are given monks and psalmodies, among which are distinguished by the aura above the head and by the wardrobe of the two saint fathers. The first on the left reads a prayer turning out of bed and the second is set more in the middle (who has a very damaged face) performs the same ritual by reading from a book that is keeping open a new deacon. An elderly monk is leaning over his saint and with his hand over the Bible seems to whisper a last prayer. Even this scene is accompanied with a simple architectural background which is consisted of two buildings. As mentioned above, the appearance of "the donation of the Temple to St. Nicholas" is specific from other scenes. This image occupies a considerable area in the left wall of the southern entrance and reaches to the southwestern corner of the temple. This topic seems to have had a great impact on the painter's creative spirit. Therefore it is realized from this solemn moment in the eyes of believers obtained in a composition where the real is intertwined with mysticism. Figures of the two protagonists Haji George the donor and St. Nicholas are close to the real sizes and of the natural movement outside the iconographic framework. Dear Voskopjar old man stands on the left side of the composition. He wears clothes of the time; black cocoons on his head, with a robe from cloak and white socks on his feet. The pleasure he feels after the act he does, is seen on the happy facial expression which has stuck to Saint Nicholas who stands before him. With outstretched hand he delivers to him the church saying the words: "*God I loved the majesty of Thy House asking forgiveness for my sins.*"²⁴¹ On the other hand, on the right side St. Nicholas appears sitting on a stool on a pillow in dark colors. He holds archcleric attire, with dark surplice on down to the end of his legs and with the red cloak thrown on his shoulders. He keeps wearing the archcleric attire, with a dark color down to his legs and with the red coat thrown at his shoulders. With the omofor along his neck with the white color decorated with large crosses in red and with the epitrachil that stands below him. In his left hand he holds a red Gospel adorned with precious stones and with his right hand he blesses toward the donor. Epigonati stands on his knees with precious stones set in an unusual position. Temple in the center glares on a contrast between the white and red colors whereas the gold color on the roof indicates that the temple has just been consecrated by the Saint. The only iconographic elements in this scene are so vital, statues of Christ and St. Mary in medallions respectively to the left and to the right, which offer the saint the gospel and omofor, symbols of the highest rank of the priesthood, which had been taken and are in return for the reinstatement of his position in the First Ecumenical Synod of Nicaea.²⁴² Iconographic cycle of Saint Nicholas²⁴³ is one of the richest that

²⁴⁰ Regardless of this presentation which usually closes the scenes from the life of the Saint, "Sleeping" (η Κοιμηση) is not displayed much in the monumental painting. "Αννας Τσπουριδου".op.c

²⁴¹ Θ.Γεωργιαδης,Μοσχολις,Αθηναι 1975,ςς 27 «Ο Ναος του Αγιου Νικολαου». Shkrimi "*Ηγαθησα Κυριε του Οικυ σου και μη συναπολεσης μετα των αμαρτιων την ψυχην μου*".

²⁴² This type of saint sitting on a throne, with busts of Christ and St. Mary in medallions holding these two symbols, frequently is encountered in the post-Byzantine painting. See M.Skavara. "*Iconographic cycle of life of St. Nicholas in the Saraqinishtë of Lunxhëria*" 2000 years Art and Church Culture in Albania.Tirana. 2003.

has survived and can be found in the post-Byzantine period in the Balkans²⁴⁴. This interesting cycle filled with many popular events that are mentioned in the biography of the saint is well known in our country, even with a large number of illustrated scenes²⁴⁵. Specifically his cult worship in Voskopoja of that period is probably directly related to the qualities of the saint as patron of travelers and traders who constituted the main active layer of city residents who enjoyed great wealth thanks to trade with Europe. The economic development seems that has created an appropriate atmosphere thus urged the exquisite taste of Voskopojars that through the vision of a completed master like David Selenica perpetuate the real image of a benevolent protector and guide.



Scene 1,2 and 3



Scene 4 and 5



Donating the temple

(Photos by Gentian Ago)

²⁴³ “The first Vita of St. Nicholas was written in the ninth century by Michael Archimandrite, whereas Theodor Studit and Josiph Hinnographer composed the oldest anthem of the Saint before the year 826. In the 10th century, Simeon Metafrastes (translator) wrote the latest classical version on the life of St. Nicholas, which later served as the basis for numerous biographies of saints. The great spread of the cult of St. Nicholas has left a trail in the creation of many iconographic types of the Saint. His older images come from 7-8 century, whereas his iconographic appearance stabilized by the end of 11th century”. See Kliti Kallamata “THE ICON” meaning and symbolism’ K&P. Sbilias S.A.Athens 1998. For the iconography cycles of the Saint from the XIth century until XVth century see Nansy Paterson-sevcenko, *The life of Saint Nicholas in Byzantine Art*, Torino 1983.

²⁴⁴ The largest with 18 scenes, has survived in nartheksi of Bojana Church in Bulgaria.” See Αννας Τσιτουριδου.” A.Grabar, *La peinture religieuse en bulgarie*, Paris 1928, p.127, p.XVII-XIX. M.Skavara.” *Iconographic cycle of life of St. Nicholas in the Saraqinishta of Lunxheria*” 2000 years Art and Church Culture in Albania.Tirana, 2003.

²⁴⁵ In the Saraqinishta’s Church of Lunxheria we find an iconographic cycle with 16 scenes of the life of St. Nicholas. This cycle is painted by masters from Linotopi around the year 1630. Masters of Linotopi have also painted a smaller cyle in frescos with two episodes from the life of St. Nicholas in the church with the same name Ano Vitza in Zagor. M.Skavara. *Iconographic cycle of life of St. Nicholas in the Saraqinishta of Lunxheria*” 2000 years Art and Church Culture in Albania.Tirana, 2003.