

Problematic Terminology in a Tentative Research Methodology for the Visual Culture of the Balkans

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to highlight and briefly discuss some of the most problematic terms and concepts that recur in art historiography: for example, the words *Byzantine*, *post-Byzantine*, *Eastern*, *Western* and *Local*. These concepts are used in a misleading way not only by American and Western European authors, but also by Eastern and South-Eastern European ones: in fact, the “Balkan” art historiography based itself on the Western-European one, adopting its periodisation, terminology and interpretative framework, which led to a number of methodological problems that researchers are now trying to identify, discuss and, if possible, solve.

Keywords: art historiography, South-Eastern Europe, silverwork, Byzantium.

Rezumat: Scopul acestei lucrări este de a evidenția și de a discuta pe scurt unii dintre cei mai problematici termeni și concepte care se repetă în istoriografia artei: de exemplu, cuvintele *bizantin*, *post-bizantin*, *oriental*, *occidental* și *local*. Aceste concepte sunt folosite în mod înșelător nu numai de către autorii americani și vest-europeni, ci și de către cei din Europa de Est și de Sud-Est: de fapt, istoriografia artei „balcanice” s-a bazat pe cea vest-europeană, adoptând periodizarea acesteia, terminologia și cadrul interpretativ, care a condus la o serie de probleme metodologice pe care cercetătorii încearcă acum să le identifice, discute și, dacă este posibil, rezolve.

Cuvinte cheie: istoriografia artei, Europa de Sud-Est, argintărie, Bizanț.

This paper is based on my current doctoral research, which aims at a systematic categorization of the reliquaries produced in the Orthodox world on the eve and in the aftermath of the Fall of Byzantium, considering their shapes and their evolution through the centuries, looking for similarities and differences within different areas of the Orthodox world and with the reliquaries produced and used in the Latin Christendom. This research confronts two major problems: firstly, the study of the so-called “minor arts” in the post-Byzantine period has been generally neglected by both Western and South-Eastern scholars; secondly, the “Balkan” art historiography based

itself on the Western-European one, adopting its periodisation, terminology and interpretative framework, which led to a number of methodological problems that researchers are now trying to identify, discuss and, if possible, solve. The aim of this paper is to highlight some of the most frequently encountered and problematic terms and concepts I have identified during my research: i.e. the words *Byzantine*, *post-Byzantine*, *Eastern*, *Western* and *Local*. In the first part of the paper, some of the main routes of circulation of masters and figurative models across the Balkans in the Middle Ages will be discussed, and some case studies showing the coexistence on the same object of figurative elements or patterns belonging to different cultural contexts will be presented: that will aim at demonstrating the existence of mutual influences, e.g. Western, Eastern or local features organised into a more traditional (i.e. Byzantine) layout, but also, eventually, to question this type of analysis.

Of course, the aim of the presentation will not be to discuss in detail centuries of art history and the thousands of art objects made in the Balkan peninsula in the Medieval and Early Modern Ages, but rather to give an overall impression of the context in which those objects were made and, on that ground, to point out the most critical points I have encountered while trying to define a methodology I could use for my own research, because I wanted that methodology to be valid to develop the analysis of the material culture of the Byzantine and post-Byzantine Balkans in general, and not only for my specific research field, which is Orthodox liturgical art.

The Balkans: a composite backdrop

The issue concerning the relationship between Western Medieval and Byzantine art has been the subject of investigation for generations of scholars, and it has led to the publication of some of the cornerstones of art-historical literature, among which *Byzantine Art and the West*, published by Otto Demus in 1970, is probably the best known one.¹ On the contrary, less attention has been devoted by scholars to the study of the links between post-Byzantine and Western art. As noted by Anna Ballian, also in South-Eastern regions post-Byzantine and Ottoman silverwork was an overlooked research field: in Greece, interest in this subject was sparked off only after the late 1980s by the publication of material from the major Greek Orthodox monasteries and by some exhibitions in Greek museums.²

¹ Otto Demus, *Byzantine Art and the West* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970).

² See: Anna Ballian, 'Silverwork Produced in Ottoman Trikala (Thessaly): Problems of Taxonomy and Interpretation', in Ibolya Gerelyes - Maximilian Hartmuth (eds.), *Ottoman Metalwork in the Balkans and in Hungary* (Budapest: Hungarian National Museum, 2015), pp. 11-35.

Undoubtedly, the Fall of Byzantium had a deep influence upon the system of contacts and the network of exchanges between East and West, but it did not disrupt them.³ In this scenery, the Balkans have represented the dividing line and – at the same time – the meeting point between Latin and Greek Christendom. The trading routes that connected Europe to the East penetrated deep into the Balkan inland and then, across Macedonia, they reached Thessaloniki and eventually Constantinople, creating a tight, stable network of contacts between East and West.⁴ Together with merchants, also artists and artisans travelled along these Balkan routes, therefore promoting contacts and mutual influences in virtually every artistic field: this dynamic substrate allowed the coexistence of different stylistic models that developed autonomously in different areas of the peninsula. Liturgical and lay vessels produced between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries in the Balkans can be considered witnesses of the multiple cultural influences crossing the peninsula, because the applied arts allowed a wider freedom to the artists than the so-called major ones, and can appropriately be regarded as mirrors reflecting the style of an age in a more direct and effective way, as new iconographic schemes and stylistic features could be more easily introduced and received, even if – for the reasons that will be mentioned in the following pages – a strong “loyalty” to the traditional structural elements on the ecclesiastic vessels can be observed. The subject is indeed very wide and it would be impossible to mention now all the ways of diffusion and all the possible visual results of these multiple influences, so I will focus on some silver vessels produced in the North-Eastern part of the Balkans during the Ottoman domination and after the Fall of Byzantium. The Ottoman domination in the Balkans had included, since its beginning, the control of the silver mines, which had become the main source for the Empire.⁵ Nevertheless, that did not stop the local silversmith workshops, which continued to develop well into the eighteenth century, recording a remarkable increase in the quantity and quality of their production.⁶

³ Nicolae Iorga, *Byzance après Byzance* (București: 1935).

⁴ A number of studies have been devoted to the relevance of the Adriatic coast and the Balkans as an area connecting different cultures; an important contribution was given by the Romanian art historian Răzvan Theodorescu, who, in a volume dedicated to this topic, analysed the main “cultural channels” that connected Venice to Constantinople through the Balkans. Răzvan Theodorescu, *Bizant, Balcani, Occident la începuturile culturii medievale românești (secole X-XIV)* [Byzantium, the Balkans, the West at the origin of Romanian medieval culture (10th-14th centuries)] (București: Editura Academiei RSR, 1974).

⁵ See, for example: Speros Vryonis, ‘The Question of the Byzantine Mines’, *Speculum*, 37/1 (1962): 1-17; Boško Bojović, ‘Entre Venise et l’Empire ottoman, les métaux précieux des Balkans (XV^e-XVI^e siècle)’, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 60/6 (2005): 1277-1297.

⁶ For example, the city-state of Ragusa (present-day Dubrovnik) had a flourishing goldsmiths’ quarter and relied on the Balkan mines for supplies of precious metals. James Allan – Julian

Orthodox ecclesiastic silver vessels continued to be produced and the *élites* continued to order and purchase those precious objects as gifts for monastic foundations all over the Balkans. Furthermore, some rulers saw in the reinforcement of Orthodox identity a way to counteract the Turkish rule, and supported therefore the foundation of monasteries in their homeland, in the other Orthodox Balkan kingdoms and above all on Mount Athos (that had been the main artistic centre of the Orthodox world since the fourteenth century), endowing them with rich treasures. For example, on Mount Athos, the Wallachian princes economically supported the re-establishment of the Koutloumousíou monastery,⁷ two Byzantine officers from eastern Macedonia founded the Pantokrátoros monastery and the Serbian despot John Uglješa founded the monastery of Simonos Petra;⁸ the voivode Bogdan in the fifteenth century donated a precious woven gold mantle to the monastery of Rila (Bulgaria);⁹ the Moldo-Wallachian prince Matei Basarab, in the seventeenth century, and the Tsarina of Russia Catherine II, in the following century, made rich donations to the Greek communities exiled in Italy, which in turn supported the Greek communities under Ottoman rule, as part of her anti-Ottoman political project.¹⁰

Ecclesiastic silver vessels were therefore a political instrument able to reinforce Christian Orthodox identity in opposition to the Turkish threat, especially after the Fall of Byzantium. This explains the conservative attitude towards Byzantine visual culture: the form, the layout and the iconography chosen for the silver vessels remained adherent to the traditional Byzantine standard. Nevertheless, Ottoman characters such as arabesques, stylized flowers and abstract motifs started to penetrate in the *décor*. The local representatives of the Ottoman administration and also the artists from the

Raby, 'Metalwork', in Yanni Petsopoulos (ed.), *Tulips, Arabesques & Turbans. Decorative Arts from the Ottoman Empire* (London: Alexandria Press, 1982), p. 25.

⁷ Virgil Căndea, 'L' Athos et les Roumains', in Anthony Bryer - Mary Cunningham (eds.), *Mount Athos and Byzantine Monasticism*, papers from the Twenty-eighth Spring symposium of Byzantine studies, Birmingham, March 1994 (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), pp. 249-256.

⁸ Krítón Chrysochoïdis, 'I monasteri del Monte Athos e il mondo ortodosso dopo la caduta di Costantinopoli', in Grigore Arbore Popescu (ed.), *Cristiani d'Oriente. Spiritualità, arte e potere nell'Europa post-bizantina*, exhibition catalogue, Trieste, 22 luglio 1999- 9 gennaio 2000 (Milano: Electa, 1999), p. 72.

⁹ Teofana Matakieva Lilkova, 'L' arte cristiana della Bulgaria', in Grigore Arbore Popescu (ed.), *Cristiani d'Oriente. Spiritualità, arte e potere nell'Europa post-bizantina*, exhibition catalogue, Trieste, 22 luglio 1999- 9 gennaio 2000 (Milano: Electa, 1999), p. 103.

¹⁰ For an overview on this topic, see: Dimítrios Konstándios, 'La Grecia dopo la presa di Costantinopoli: focolaio d' arte e di cultura', in Grigore Arbore Popescu (ed.), *Cristiani d'Oriente. Spiritualità, arte e potere nell'Europa post-bizantina*, exhibition catalogue, Trieste, 22 luglio 1999- 9 gennaio 2000 (Milano: Electa, 1999), p. 85, Erin McBurney, 'Picturing the Greek Project: Catherine II's Iconography of Conquest and Culture', *Russian Literature*, 75/1-4 (2014): 415-443.

Balkans working in the court ateliers were some of the possible mediators of design for the interaction.

A meaningful example of the way this external Ottoman influence was received is the artistic production of the silversmith workshops active in the surroundings of the Bachkovo monastery (close to nowadays Plovdiv, in the south of Bulgaria). The most characteristic feature of the production of the Bachkovo workshop was the use of filigree enamel. Some outstanding examples belong to Bulgarian museums: their entire surface is enamelled and covered with stylised vegetal ornamentation; mainly lotus palmettes, little leaves and flowers (hollyhocks and carnations) in full face. In spite of the noticeable Oriental aesthetics that the floral filigree enamel confers, this technique is not actually a common decoration for “authentic” Ottoman artefacts: the seventeenth-century traveller and writer from Constantinople Evliya Çelebi reported that, in the Ottoman Empire, the most skilled craftsmen in the enamelling technique were non-Turks.¹¹

The use of this technique in ecclesiastical silver is attested from about mid-seventeenth – until mid-eighteenth century. Besides the workshop in Bachkovo-Plovdiv, such enamels have also been credited to Christian workshops in Istanbul and in Trikala in Thessaly (today in Greece).¹² It should also be noted that the works in Byzantine-Ottoman decoration were produced in the cultural centres that were wealthy mining settlements, as well as trade and craft centers, and, in most of the cases, the population was of mixed confessional affiliations.

On the contrary, the goldsmiths of Chiprovac reached a completely different synthesis of the multiple visual sources. The Chiprovian craftsmen (active since the end of the sixteenth c.) mastered several different techniques, from engraving to casting, from gilt to enamel, from openwork to encrustation of coloured stones. Their sophisticated production was highly appreciated by the upper clergy of Bulgarian, Serbian and Wallach-Moldovan monasteries. The high technical knowledge of the Chiprovtsi goldsmiths is attested by a *kivotion* which dates back to 1626/1627¹³ and was

¹¹ James Allan – Julian Raby, ‘Metalwork’, in Yanni Petsopoulos (ed.), *Tulips, Arabesques & Turbans. Decorative Arts from the Ottoman Empire* (London: Alexandria Press, 1982), p. 22. As noted by Allan and Raby, at least on this topic, Evliya Çelebi’s opinion can be trusted, having been a goldsmith himself and the son of the guild’s head. *Ibid.*, p. 20. For a sketch of Evliya Çelebi’s biography see: Evliya Efendi, *Narrative of Travels in Europe, Asia and Africa*, translated by Joseph von Hammer (London: 1834), p. v.

¹² Ballian, ‘Silverwork Produced in Ottoman Trikala (Thessaly)’.

¹³ In the inscription, it is said that the *kivotion* was gifted to the monastery in the year 7134 since the Creation of the Universe, after the so-called Byzantine calendar, used by the Eastern Orthodox Church until the 18th century. The year started on the 1st of September, therefore the year 7134 started on the 1st of September 1626 and ended on the 31st of August 1627. *Tesori dell’Arte*

presented as a gift to the Dečani monastery in Metohia (Kosovo).¹⁴ Its architectural shape recalls that of the church to which it belonged:¹⁵ this formal connection between the *kivotion* and the church was common at that time.¹⁶ While the Bachkovo workshops preferred the filigree enamel, the Chiprovian goldsmith used to chisel the decoration on the plates. An example is a liturgical cup, dated to the first half of the sixteenth century, used by the monks to drink Holy Water during the celebration of the Feast of Jordan (6th January): along the rim it presents an arabesque ornament similar to the ones widespread in the entire peninsula, on the spherical body of the cup there are three rosettes of Ottoman inspiration, with elongated petals turning into palmettes, while the birds are a traditional element in Byzantine silver vessels.¹⁷ At the end of the seventeenth century, the Chiprovian craftsmen were forced to leave the region, and found protection abroad:¹⁸ right beyond the Bulgarian border, they were accepted at the Wallachian court (in nowadays Southern Romania) where they introduced the floral motif of Ottoman inspiration in the empty space around the images. This is evident, for example, in the *kivotion* made in 1671 by the Bulgarian goldsmiths Marco and Iacov as a gift by the abbot Petronie to the Tismana monastery: on the side of the *kivotion* corresponding to the façade, where the scene of the Death of the Virgin is represented, the two goldsmiths filled the empty spaces with floral motifs with rosettes and sunflowers.¹⁹

In that period, in Wallachia, as well as in other areas on the border between East and West (e.g. Serbia), the Occidental influence was already

Cristiana in Bulgaria, exhibition catalogue, Rome, 22 May - 15 July 2000 (Sofia: Borina, 2000), catalogue entry nr. 91, p. 237 (record by Ivan Sotirov).

¹⁴ Today this *kivotion* belongs to the Sofia National Museum (nr. 29280). Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ I have dedicated to this topic my Master thesis in Art History at the University of Pisa (Anita Paolicchi, *Architettura in effigie: un excursus nell'argenteria sacra post-bizantina*, MA thesis, Manuscript, Department of Civilisation and Forms of Knowledge, University of Pisa. Pisa, 2015), some observations have been published in: Anita Paolicchi, 'Les *chivote* à l'époque de Constantin Brâncoveanu', in *Microarchitecture et figures du bâti: l'échelle à l'épreuve de la matière*, conference proceedings, Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art, Parigi, 8-10 Dicembre 2014 (Paris: Picard, 2018), pp. 87-96.

¹⁷ Grigore Arbore Popescu (ed.), *Cristiani d'Oriente. Spiritualità, arte e potere nell'Europa post-bizantina*, exhibition catalogue, Trieste, 22 luglio 1999-9 gennaio 2000 (Milano: Electa, 1999), catalogue entry nr. 81, p. 341 (record by Teofana Matakieva Lilkova); *Tesori dell'Arte Cristiana in Bulgaria*, catalogue entry nr. 93, p. 242 (record by Nikolaj Markov).

¹⁸ Péter Király, 'Die Čiprovečer in Ungarn' [Chiprovian in Hungary], *Studia Slavica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 47/1-2 (2002): 1-23.

¹⁹ Corina Nicolescu, *Argintaria laică și religioasă în Țările Române (sec. XIV-XIX)* [Lay and religious silver in the Romanian Reigns (14th-19th c.)] (București: 1968), pp. 172-174, catalogue entry nr. 198, illustration nr. 122-124.

evident in the Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque decorative elements pervading almost every artistic domain, from architecture to topiary.

An early example of the Occidental influence on Wallachian silverware is a censer, which dates to the late fourteenth – early fifteenth century.²⁰ It shows a cross-in-a-square architectonic plan that had been really common in Byzantine ecclesiastic architecture since the tenth century and was similar to some contemporary churches in Serbia and Mount Athos, for example Gračanica in Serbia and Hilandar monastery on Mount Athos. Nevertheless, the architectural details of the censer clearly belong to the Western European visual culture, as they are in Gothic style, and so are the figures represented in the niches in the lower half. Nowadays, it is considered the oldest material proof of the process of permeation of the Transylvanian and Wallachian visual cultures. Nevertheless, in the past, its multifaceted appearance puzzled the researchers, who tried to explain the concurrent presence of Western Gothic decorative elements and Byzantine structure with an alleged provenance from a Dalmatian workshop, because Ragusa (nowadays Dubrovnik) had actually been one of the main ways of introducing Western visual culture in the Balkans, thanks to the strong connection with Venice.²¹

The introduction of these features belonging to the Central and Western European visual culture into Wallachia was mainly due to the Saxon-Transylvanian goldsmiths, who were extremely active not only at the workshops to which they belonged, but also directly at the Wallachian princely court. In fact, most of the silver and gold artefacts commissioned in Wallachia at that time were realized by Saxon-Transylvanian craftsmen, as demonstrated by the marks easily detectable on the surfaces of these objects.²²

Obviously, those craftsmen had to please the Orthodox customers and therefore they closely followed the instructions as for the shape, the function and the general features of the object. Nevertheless, they succeeded in

²⁰ It is the oldest (architectural) censer in the collections of the National Museum of Art of Romania (Bucharest); Nicolescu, *Argintaria laică și religioasă*, p. 216, catalogue entry nr. 229, illustration nr. 160.

²¹ Spiridon Cegăneanu, 'Din odoarele bisericesti ale Muzeului Național' [About the ecclesiastic vessels of the National Museum], *Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice*, 3 (1910): 1-3.

²² Several studies have been dedicated to the Transylvanian guilds of the goldsmiths. Among the most recent ones, see: Daniela Dâmboiu, *Breasla aurarilor din Sibiu între secolele XV-XVII* [The guild of the goldsmiths from Sibiu in the 14th-17th c.] (Alba Iulia: Altip, 2008), Ágnes Flóra, *Prestige at Work. Goldsmiths of Cluj / Kolozsvár in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Saarbrücken: vdm Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009). I have recently dedicated an article to a case study on the relation between a Wallachian customer and two Transylvanian goldsmiths in the early 16th century: Anita Paolicchi, *Celestin e Johannis: alcune tracce documentarie su due orafi transilvani al servizio di Neagoie Basarab nel primo Cinquecento*, *Museikon*, 2 (2018): 79-88.

introducing Western visual elements in Wallachian silver vessels: Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque features were successfully imported and – this is interesting to be noticed – did not substitute one with the other, but rather overlapped them, creating a new mix which combined with the more traditional Byzantine elements. This phenomenon reached its highest qualitative point and predominance during the reign of the Wallachian prince Constantin Brâncoveanu at the end of the seventeenth century, and for this reason it is known as Brancovan style.

An example of the multiplicity of visual elements of different provenance that could coexist on the same object is a censer realized by a Wallachian workshop in the late seventeenth century to be given as a gift to the Hurezi monastery, an important princely foundation. Its function is related to the Orthodox liturgy, but its decoration shows Western elements as well as Oriental ones: the tower-shaped lid recalls Venetian architecture, while the flattened bulb-shaped dome has an oriental taste, and the base, which is older and is probably an original Ottoman dish, is decorated with enamelled floral motifs which contrast with the Baroque openwork floral *décor* on the body of the censer.²³

It must be pointed out that, while the Ottoman influence onto the silver artefacts realised in the Balkans is evident but limited to *décor*, the occidental features introduced and adopted by the local craftsmen are sometimes also stated in the iconography of the figurative images. An example of the role played by the Transylvanian goldsmiths as intermediaries between the traditional Byzantine visual culture and the Western innovations is given by a small group of Gospels bookbindings made at the end of the seventeenth century.²⁴ The layout of the two plates is the traditional Byzantine one: a central biblical scene surrounded by several medallions depicting biblical characters, such as the four evangelists, the apostles and prophets. In this case, though, the subject of 26 out of 36 medallions is the *Apocalypse of John*. That is quite an unusual subject in the Orthodox world, and – as far as I know – it is actually the first time it appears on bookbinding, at least in the Northern Balkans.

Furthermore, the iconography employed on the bookbinding does not conform to the coeval Byzantine standard. This fact can be perceived

²³ Nicolescu, *Argintaria laică și religioasă*, p. 235, catalogue entry nr. 251, illustration nr. 181.

²⁴ An article on this topic is in preparation. I have dealt with this material for my Master thesis at the “Babeș-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca (Anita Paolicchi, *Apocalyptic imagery and confessional identity: a case study on Transylvanian Saxon goldsmiths*, MA thesis, Manuscript, Faculty of History and Philosophy, “Babeș-Bolyai” University. Cluj-Napoca, 2016). During summer 2018, I have conducted further research on the topic during a research period at the National Museum of Art of Romania (Bucharest).

immediately in the first scene of the front cover: Saint John is kneeling in front of Christ, who is holding seven stars in his hands, while a double-edged sword comes out from his mouth, and is surrounded by several candelabra. This iconography is the exact visual translation of the verses 12-17 of the First Chapter of the *Apocalypse*:

I, John, ... heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: 'Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: ...'. I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead.

On the contrary, the usual Byzantine standard presents Saint John in a cave, in the act of turning his face towards the voice that is calling him. Sometimes he is in the company of his disciple, Saint Prochorus, a young scribe who helps him write his Gospels. This iconographic standard is based on different verses of the same chapter, notably the verses 9-11:

I, John, ... was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: 'Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea'.

Quite unexpectedly, the majority of the apocalyptic scenes depicted in the medallions on the book covers (i.e. 21 out of 26 scenes) are conceived as "copies" of the Lucas Cranach the Elder xylographies for the *Apocalypse* of the Luther Bible.²⁵ This is perfectly evident, although the different artistic *medium* inevitably forced the goldsmith to operate some simplification of the arrangement of the figures and, especially in the most articulated scenes, to reduce the number of elements of the composition, either human figures or scenic details.

Some observations

The analysis of these objects has led to a number of considerations concerning both stylistic and technical aspects. In the analysed period, after the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, Orthodoxy seemed about to collapse. The Balkans were threatened by the pressure of Islam, and at the same time by the

²⁵ It is not necessary to discuss in this paper which edition is the one that the goldsmith used as a model. It is enough to point out that the Lutheran religious confession of the Saxon goldsmiths eased their access to this visual prototype.

propaganda of the other half of the Christian World, that is to say the Roman Church, but also by the presence of other Christian confessions that were spreading from Central Europe toward the peripheries. The Balkan rulers reacted creating a sort of "Byzantine Commonwealth". One of the means through which they could strengthen Orthodoxy was protecting and endowing the centres fallen under Ottoman control, donating a huge amount of precious silver vessels.

It is worth pointing out that although local individualities were destined to emerge and to lead to the birth of the modern Balkan states, it is exactly the Balkan Commonwealth that allowed the survival of the Byzantine world after the Fall of Byzantium, which is reflected by the persistence of the conservative Byzantine formal influence.

On the other hand, thanks to the dynamic substrate granted by the coexistence of different ethnical and religious communities, visual influences came from East and West and fruitfully settled in the traditional cultural byzantine framework: the different visual modules did not substitute each other, but, rather, coexisted.

These dynamic, opposed forces are witnessed by the silver vessels: conservative toward the Byzantine tradition but at the same time open to "exotic" stylistic novelties. Therefore, Balkan silver vessels are definitely "unstable materials" because they reflect different decorative tendencies which were the result of the multiplicity of mutating factors and of the dynamic network of relations between East and West.

In this sense, concepts such as "Eastern, Western" and "Local" cannot be considered as antonyms, but rather as operative concepts: they are undoubtedly useful to map the appearance, diffusion or persistence of a variety of visual elements, but at the same time they disallow, or at least they make harder, the highlighting of the dynamism that characterises their reception in the Balkans. These words belong to a lexicon which may be suitable for structuring an art-historical formal analysis of a single object, but which become inappropriate when it comes to talking about art history as history of culture, and about an art piece as result of a cultural phenomenon or context.

On the same ground, concepts such as "Byzantine" and "post-Byzantine" are sometime ambiguous because they have both a chronological and a cultural meaning: the expression "post-Byzantine art" literally means "made after the Fall of Byzantium", but basically it suggests the persistence of Byzantine cultural and visual elements in a political context which struggles to keep "Byzantium" alive after its political disappearance. From this point of view, any visual element which does not belong to the Byzantine tradition is perceived as "exogenous", foreign, even if – in that specific context – such an

element is in fact consistent with the panorama. A concept that is often encountered in the art historical bibliography is that Transylvanian goldsmiths introduced Western elements into Wallachian art. This statement is based on the current terminology: but conversely, one could also say that Transylvanian goldsmiths added to their repertoire elements coming from the Byzantine tradition, which was surviving in Wallachia, and mixed it with their own figurative culture when needed. Both statements are valid. What differentiates the two statements is essentially the perspective: in the former, the Western hegemonic, paradigmatic, point of view is applied, while in the latter the idea of a dynamic cultural exchange is suggested. The dominance of the first kind of statement is undoubtedly derived from a bias in art historiography. This topic – the Western European-centred point of view on Byzantine and post-Byzantine art – is a topic which would deserve major attention: art historiography has transmitted from generation to generation a conceptual and operative contraposition between Western and Byzantine art, as if they were unrelated phenomena.²⁶

A complementary observation is that any analysis based on mere national/geographical criteria is worthless: to speak about Romanian, or Serbian, or Macedonian medieval art is absolutely pointless, because the liveliness of the contacts along the numerous routes that crossed the Balkans made the cultural boundaries indefinable, even if – politically speaking – boundaries were clear. This is the heritage of the “Balkan” bibliography of the late Communist age, which was often affected by the nationalistic propaganda which aimed at demonstrating the idealized existence of specific national styles, while more definite national styles had appeared only in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the term “Balkan” is also extremely problematic: even if ‘a common Balkan mentality can perhaps be traced in the pre-nationalistic age, when Orthodox Christianity was the tie binding the Balkan peoples ... in the bosom of the Ottoman Empire’,²⁷ this term is not historically attested as a self-referential concept in any of the Balkan peoples’ self-narratives and is used only rarely in the artistic historiography and only to identify folk art or, in silverwork, early-modern lay objects bearing an Ottoman aesthetics.²⁸

In my opinion, the analysis of the visual culture of the various religious or ethnic groups who inhabited or travelled the Balkans is definitely not only fruitful, but it is possibly the key to understand why a certain stylistic influence, or a certain iconographic prototype, appeared in a specific place at

²⁶ For a notable contribution to this critical analysis of the subjectivity of the dominant art historiography in Europe and America, see: Robert S. Nelson, ‘Living on the Byzantine Borders of Western Art’, *Gesta*, 35/1 (1996): 3-11.

²⁷ Ballian, ‘Silverwork Produced in Ottoman Trikala (Thessaly)’, pp. 13-14.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

a specific time. Religious or ethnic communities shared the same cultural background, and this implied a common visual culture, while, on the other hand, not necessarily a common identity was contoured on a geographical basis, since many different ethnic and religious groups used to inhabit the same area.

While the structural elements of a certain object were determined by the function it had to perform, and, along with the general theme of the decoration and its structure, they were usually clearly dictated by the customer to the goldsmith, the cultural identity of the goldsmith himself emerges more easily in the portions of the decoration or in the structural and iconographic details which were not subject to the requests of the client and which he was called to realise autonomously. While in areas characterised by a culturally “homogeneous” population – such as Catholic Italy or Byzantine Greece – the purchasers and the goldsmiths usually shared the same visual culture, in the polyglot multicultural Balkans these often differed, and the liturgical vessels offer the chance to investigate the ways these different cultures coexisted.