

Pictorially Depicted Landscapes and Vegetal Environment in the Mural Works of the Churches of Romanian Monasteries

Iulian Dincă, Adela Tuduce, Camelia Teodorescu, Adina Popovici

Abstract — The study intends to tackle in an interdisciplinary, respectively geographic – environmental, botanical, economic, and cultural-artistic manner, the subject of the information “offer”, other than the religious one, of five churches with exterior frescoes belonging to some Romanian monasteries. This mural work was selected according to the mural vegetal criteria (trees, shrubs, plants from the spontaneous or cultivated flora) and criteria concerning the type of landscape generated only by vegetation and also by the other natural or anthropic components of that particular place. Also, we had in view whether the environment in which the monastery complexes provide enough information regarding the influence of the medieval painters and the depiction of the influence in the scenes painted. The artistic considerations together with the scientific ones related to the frescoes could be filtered and synthesised so that the result is a possible detection of an ecumenical touristic sub-programme centred on the subject of art-environment local-vegetation-landscapes marked by vegetation.

Key words — vegetal element, frescoes, monasteries, landscape marked by flora

I. SIMILAR ASPECTS IN LITERATURE

A visit to any monastery is an interesting experience. A visit to a Romanian monastery with mural paintings is more than an experience, it is a spiritual feeling and a high held cultural cognition [41]. Some studies directly refer to the phenomenon of mural paintings in the Romanian cultural-religious space [34], [44]. The association of culture, religious objectives and environment creates interest for the form and the internal and external content of a church, the monasteries and the associated churches, having an organic connection all over the world, are the measure of the combination of the architecture, theology, and historical context parts [38].

It could be considered that the experiences lived by the tourists during their travels are mainly related to perceptible, concrete objectives through the material expression and less through a conscious spiritualization coming from an elevated education. The studies show that the tourist is influenced to such an extent so that his conscience marked by the geographical cognition is influenced by the experiences of the same tourists [24]. One of the *experiences* is the *religious experience*, the religious tourism taking shape based on some places having the force of religious expression and based on some conditions deriving from the artistic and historical richness [30]. This is because the tourist's inside nature is scientifically explored in contact with a religious objective creating the religious experience [20]. Another direction to approach the aspects deriving from the location of the monasteries, of other religious or non-religious

objectives, in the centre of researches is that concerning the *frescoes*. Of interest is the approach coupling art and history, as in the case of frescoes and art of religious origin from the time of the Reform [46]. Information on frescoes are brought to the attention of the specialists due to the study of their techniques but mainly due to some processes of fresco deterioration due to some microorganisms [32], [29], [16], [7], [33] and fresco restoration [5]. On the other side, the studies insist also on emphasising the secrets of the pictorial techniques and of the mineral materials used in the past for mural paintings [48], [19]. Results in which the subject of frescoes or mural paintings is present in other objectives than monasteries: the establishments of some Christian missions like that in the Fidji Islands [26], in Italian palaces and aristocratic residences [1], [27], Birmanese Buddhist temples [25], American public buildings [36] or antique frescoes in Grecian style which tombs in the Italian province of Lucania [6] were delineated. Of a real interest is the subject of the secular frescoes in a museum, the frescoes possibly becoming vectors of any art and through art lover's experience [31].

The frescoes rose scientific interest also through the representations of some *floral motives* in their structure. In this way, it is not a surprise the researches in which there is a great variety of floral motives in the frescoes of some religious objectives in the Holy Land [39] or the Christian Egypt of Coptic Rite [14] or the presence of some species such as the rose, salvia, iris, lily, and also other plants identified in certain frescoes restored in Crete [42]. In other studies, there are descriptions, from the taxonomic and phytogeographic point of view, of 24 species found in the frescoes of a Roman villa presenting the flora in the Mediterranean space [3] or there are vegetal elements depicted in imaginary paradisiacal representations in the Islamic art [21].

In the field of academic investigation, there are also known subjects dealing with *frescoes representing something else than vegetation*: rituals, women and the invocation of divinity as in the case of those of Akrotiri [8], scenes containing religious – biblical subjects or themes [23], including scenes having a funerary subject [22], as well as social and religious practices in the Aegean islands focusing on the fabrics worn by the inhabitants [11].

Another direction approached in the studies in the field is portrayed by the *demand for art* and the movement towards the *supply of culture* through culture due to some touristic objectives, as art is a centre in the touristic initiatives or it might become a peripheral subject [17]. Tourism becomes art when in front of the tourist image and text are conjugated, between coordinates from symbolic to imaginative

[43] or a moment of touristic production and cultural transfer, without speaking of acculturation [9]. The importance of spirituality through culture, as a consecrated formula of soul welfare [12] brings in front of the connoisseur or the least versed the cultural heritage of any objective. Either is part of the UNESCO patrimony or is a less important one, it becomes a reason for preservation and expression of the identity of a territory and of any person [37]. The cultural activities related to an objective influence the impressions of the visitors according to criteria as loyalty, brand image, quality of perception, brand values [2]. The full consecration of the dialogue of art between the religious faith of the individual and the eternal cultural message is accomplished especially when the media resources, too, are part of the work [10].

Any religious objective belongs to an environment and, when this *environment* becomes objectivised through the action of their observance by a person it becomes a *landscape*, a subject tackled in some articles, due to the durability of the relation between art and religion, the landscape being a secondary theme or being associated in its main quality and a reason of the artistic representation in painting [4]. It continues with frescoes which harmoniously integrate in the exedras of the built, urban, old or new landscape [28], as the vegetation, as an element of the landscape, is depicted in the analysis of some species of plants related to the Christian formation of the Romanians [40].

The environmental quality which can satisfy or not the requirements of a cultural-religious treasure hunter as it might be considered a monastery, can be seen through approaches regarding the evaluation of the biodiversity in a sector of mountain forest in Iran starting from the influence of physical factors which create a certain ecological ambiance [15]. On the same line there are mentioned the effects of the pollution in Moldova on the morphoanatomy of some trees or on some forest formations [47], as well as the categories of natural resources and cultural resources in Moldova which hosts, among others, monasteries, too [18].

The crowning of the efforts of touristic practice, even at an objective such a monastery, is found in the analytics of some studies on the *economic reverberations* of making tourism based on religion or religious objectives [45], the perceptions of the tourists regarding the quality of the touristic site and the relation of the tourists with the objective as a part of the cultural place heritage being extremely important [35].

II. THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

This analytical approach intends to bring to harmony three situations: **a.** to contribute to the superior touristic capitalization of the relation between the religion and the sacred art of the Romanian monasteries; **b.** to inform the potential consumers of religious touristic product on the external frescoes of the Romanian monasteries analysed, respectively about the place and the role of the vegetal element which creates a certain archetype of the landscape; **c.** to reveal to the same tourists and practitioners the inseparable

connection of the local nature, local environments, local landscapes and their depiction in the configuration of certain vegetal formations in the frescoes.

III. THE LOCATION OF THE MONASTERIES

The monasteries whose mural paintings and environmental conditions made the object of this analysis are from Romania, being differently located (Fig.1). Three of them, Cozia, Hurezi and Bistrița, are located in the central-south eastern part of the country, in the subcarpathians realms of Province Oltenia and the other two, Sucevița and Voroneț, belong to the Province Bucovina, being located in the north-western part of the country, at a small distance from the foot of the Western Carpathians, not far from the northern border parting Romania from Ukraine.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Having in mind the good development of the research several methods have been used on several work stages: **a.** the separation of the external frescoes with a potential of reference for the speciality description of the vegetal element and of the landscapes suggesting a certain ambiance; **b.** the field exam necessary to thoroughly know the natural components and those related to the built side of the geographical environment in the interior and neighbourhood of the monastery space; **c.** the creation of a model of touristic capitalization of the potential that the subject of vegetation and adapted landscape from the set of mural paintings present.

V. RESULTS

V.I. THE SITUATION AND THE STATE OF LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS – A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION FOR MURAL PAINTINGS

The Romanian monasteries, as a symbolically erected ensemble, means a church plus other buildings with an obvious religious purpose (chapels, wooden crosses, monumental crosses, stacks for candle burning) or with a usage subordinated to religious life (rooms for the ecclesiastic personnel, kitchens, stores, administrative buildings, religious artefacts shops, even stables for animals). Other close spaces are considered from a territorial point of view interior yards frequently arranged from the landscape point of view in an unpretentious style, yet neat, to which a small domain can be added to be used for ploughing or as grassland for the nourishing needs of the monks/nuns and their animals. In this sacred and profane mix a marvellous Romanian mural work stands out, especially when speaking of the external frescoes.

Analysing especially from the perspective of physical geography, many religious touristic objectives with mural paintings, icons and drawings depicting different scenes from printed religious works, we conclude that there is an important frequency of reflecting the conditions in the local environment in these works.

Thoroughly researching the frescoes containing vegetal elements, looking for the possible reverberations of the conditions of the place nature on the manner and orientation of the style of the painters of these monasteries' frescoes, there are some conclusions: a) the striking influence in the case of **Horezu Monastery**, where the wavy relief around the location, the hosted shady valleys, the fruit trees and the grasslands (Fig. 2) are to be found as a reference in the environment placed by the painters in the rural painting; b) in the case of **Bistrița Monastery**, the vegetal element and the geographical landscape engaged by the vegetation are perfectly aligned to the tendency of being under the influence by the local environment; an environment sketched by a wavy hilly relief, with prolonged inter-rivers and also with short versants falling almost firmly on the left and on the right to the large valley whose upper part hosts a cape on which the monastery complex is located; all are morphological support for the mature beech forest on the right, for the orchards and disparate forest formations (Fig. 4); c) The partial influence on the mural painting at **Cozia Monastery** from the Subcarpathian and contact landscapes with the mountain (Figure 6); we have

to deal with a more "à la rebound" influence, from the cover of beech forests and shrub formations, the medieval painters inspiring only from the deciduous species, the type of canopy and the chromatic of the foliar mass of the trees; d) for the highest part, the lack of the influence of the environment in the case of the fresco studied (excepting the grass formation), the fresco belonging to the church of **Sucevița Monastery**, that is it can be depicted a biblical landscape with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, a landscape configured in an absolute horizontality of the field, different from the neighbouring local environment, where the hills are covered by coniferous woods and watch protectively on the place where the edifice of the monastery is let "to breathe" and be lightened in the centre of a large and slightly inclined valley corridor, with hay and arable (Fig. 8); e) the lack of the influence of the features of the local environment in the case of the frescoes at **Voroneț Monastery**, where the aspects of the landscapes of the slow hill yet well configured, with thick and mixed, mature, deciduous and whitewood forests, with large valley and hay corridor (Fig. 10).

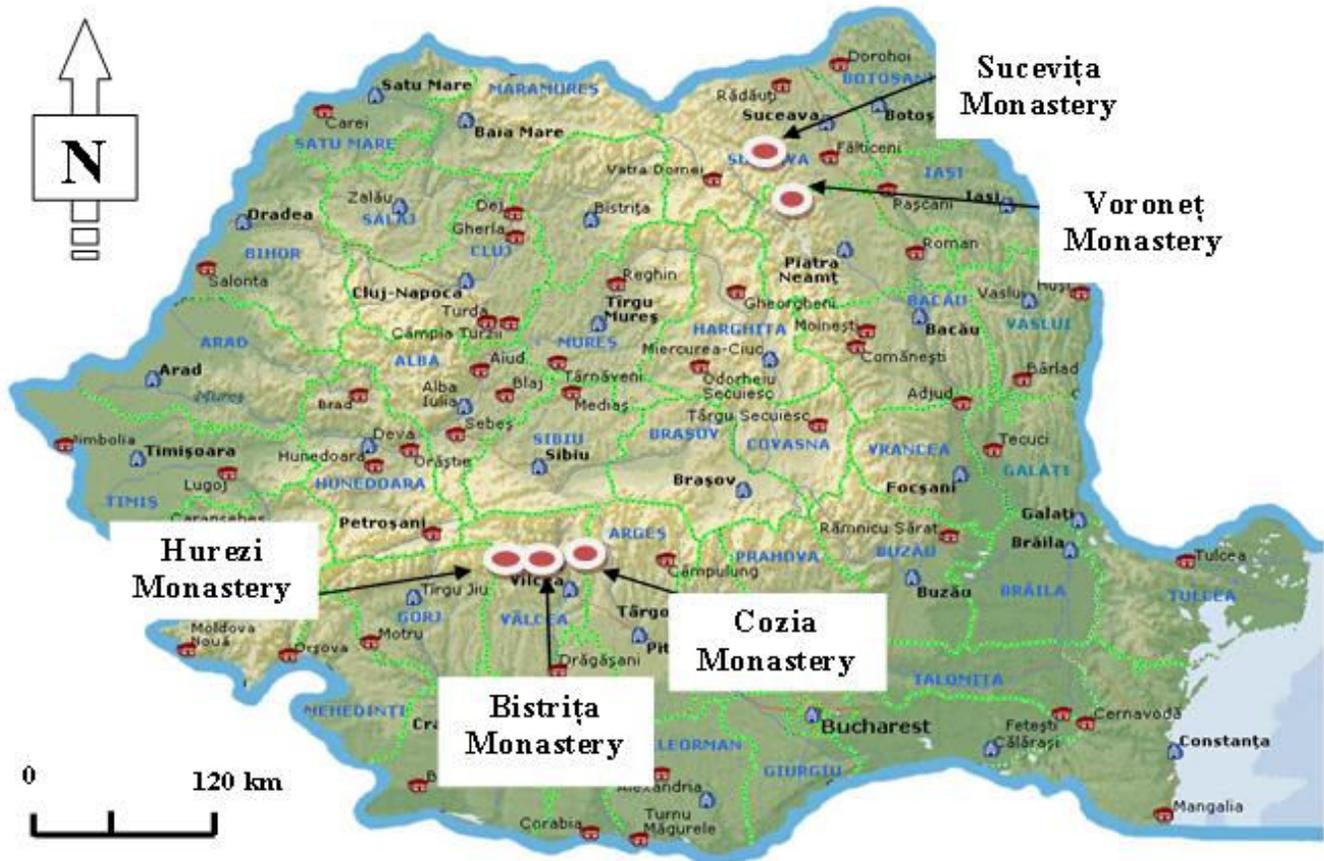


Fig. 1 Location within the Romanian territory of the five monasteries with frescoes studied

V.II. THE CONVERGENCE BETWEEN THE FLORISTIC ELEMENT IN THE MURAL CREATION AND THE SPIRIT OF DISCOVERY

The mural paintings in the Romanian monasteries, no matter their geographical position, are the creations of some popular artists, more or less known, the majority not having a previous training. Simple people, laymen, but with a very developed spirit of observation, these popular artists expressed

in their works the reality of the surrounding environment, a reality which they combined with their own vision on divinity and biblical scenes.

The characteristics of the Romanian geographical space, the alternation of mountains and valleys is an

omnipresent representation in the Romanian frescoes, yet existing variations form a geographical area to another. The following images, made at the Monasteries of Hurezi, Bistrița and Cozia, show these characteristics of the Romanian space, including the alternation of vegetal formations.



Fig. 2 The environmental ensemble of the monastery complex and the entrance of Hurezi Monastery



Fig. 3 The landscape and vegetal element in the mural painting belonging to the porch of the church of Hurezi Monastery

If in the case of the representations from *Hurezi Monastery* and from *Bolnița Church of Bistrița Monastery* it can be noticed an alternation of the conifer forests, represented by trees with columnar structure, with deciduous forests – present in the remote plan in the case of the image from Hurezi (Fig. 3), respectively much more frequent in the case of the image from Bistrița (Fig. 5), at Cozia Monastery are represented only deciduous species, yet obviously differing from those represented in the frescoes from the other two monasteries (Fig. 7).

At the church of *Cozia Monastery*, and partially in the case of *Bolnița Church of Bistrița Monastery*, the trees have a round crown and they are represented in the interior of a fortress' walls. This makes us think that the species growing in the neighbouring places, which are protected by the walls of the

fortress, so that this species could very well be the representation of the edible chestnut (*Castanea sativa*). This reason is based on the fact that it has been taken into consideration that currently, not far away, there is the reservation of edible chestnut at Tismana. This is considered a cultural remnant from the time of Roman Empire, yet it must be taken into consideration, too, the existence of a slightly gentler, sheltering topoclimate. It is interesting also the representation probably of the fruit of the tree in the centre of the image, as well as the presence of Trinity in three plans: at the base (Jesus and the three Patriarchs of the Old Testament), in the centre of the image being represented by the three branched tree and in the remote plan is represented the Holy Virgin surrounded by the angels.

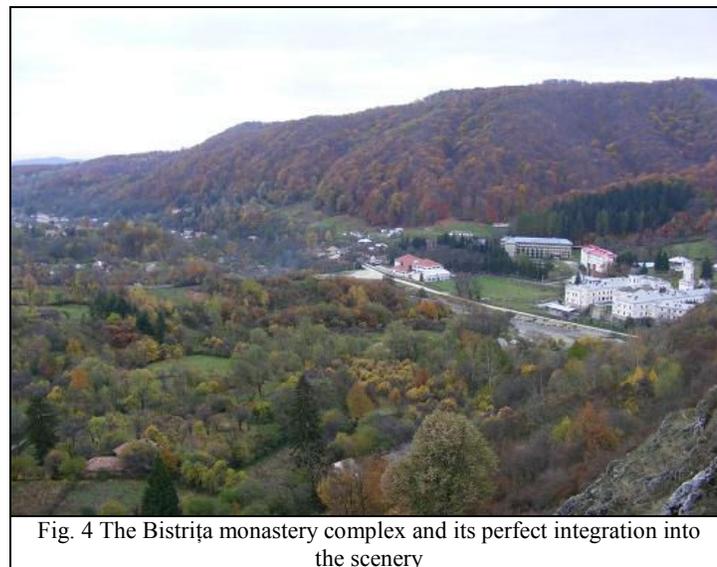


Fig. 4 The Bistrița monastery complex and its perfect integration into the scenery

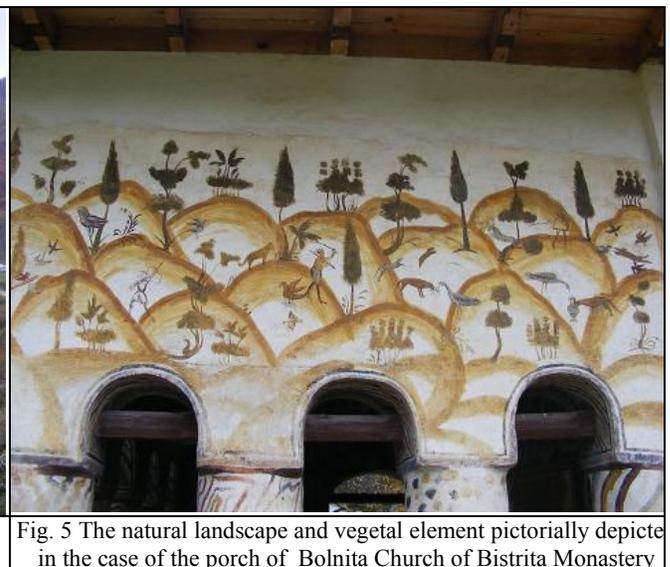


Fig. 5 The natural landscape and vegetal element pictorially depicted in the case of the porch of Bolnița Church of Bistrița Monastery

The fresco from **Bolnița Church** belonging to **Bistrița Monastery** is extraordinarily diverse (Fig. 5). Apart the typical alternation of mountains and valleys, there can be seen also the water sources represented by springs on the right side, respectively wet biotops represented by slopes a little on the left, from where the animals of the forest drink. The conifer or deciduous forests, where apart trees there are also shrubs, are populated by animals: stags, wolves, foxes, rabbits or

birds. Moreover, there are represented also the traditional activities of the inhabitants of that place – raking, hunting, shepherding.

In the case of **Hurez Monastery**, too – a typical element for the Brancovenean art [44], apart the floral element in the frescoes (Fig. 3) is also represented the fauna element, just like at Bistrița Monastery, yet in this last fresco the representations of human activities are missing.



Fig. 6 The position of the church of Cozia Monastery in a place marked by the condition of the mountain-Subcarpathian hill environmental interference



Fig. 7 Religious scene under the shape of a fresco on the exterior of the Western wall of the narthex of the church of Cozia Monastery in which appears vegetal facies

From the floristic point of view, the trees with a conic shape crown appear, a habitus mainly characteristic to the conifers (fir, spruce), with whom appear representations of some exotic trees, resembling a palm tree, but which are rather a stylised representation of the bear's breech (*Acanthus sp.*) – an exotic

species which is not present in the Romanian flora, yet very frequent in the iconographic representations. In the remote plan there is another species of deciduous, probably represented by the yoke elm (*Carpinus betulus*) or a species of shrubs.



Fig. 8 The environmental landscape of Sucevița Monastery – a partial source of inspiration for the mural painting of the church

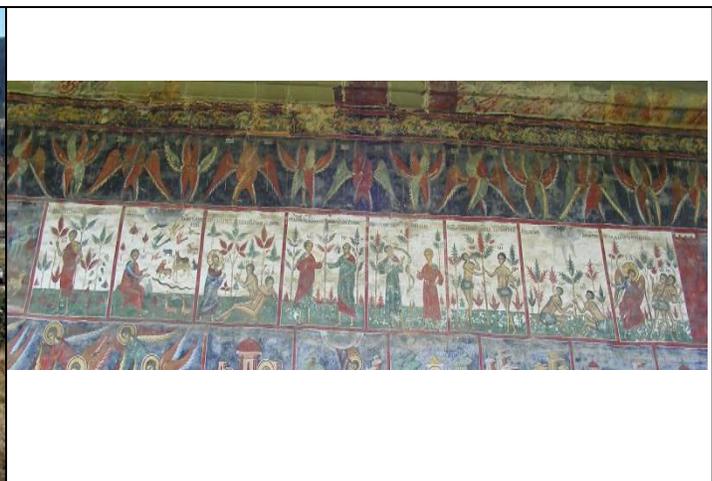


Fig. 9 The Scene of Genesis pictorially represented on the outside wall of the church of Sucevița Monastery, in which the landscape incorporates floristic elements

In the case of **Sucevița Monastery** the fresco depicts in the upper part biblical scenes, so that the representations of plants are exotic, yet it can be recognised in this case, too, the

presence of several copies of bear's breech, on two phytohorizons, the inferior being intercalated in low grass formations, a reference to the neat grass situated in the proximity of the monastery (Fig. 9).



Fig. 10 The setting of the church of Voroneț Monastery in a live, fluid, and expressive environmental space



Fig. 11 Religious scene under the shape of a fresco on the western facade of the church of Voroneț Monastery, in which vegetal elements appear

At the church of *Voroneț Monastery* the mural painting (Fig. 11) surprises also with the representation of some religious scenes in which together with the characters and biblical events there are motifs of folk inspiration. The “felega” (a Romanian scarf) is pictorially depicted, an allusion to the species of flax or hemp it used to be made of. From the point of view of the analysis of the plant species, in the fresco mentioned above, the bear’s breech dominates, followed by the symbol of the grapevine (*Vitis vinifera*). From place to place there is the representation of the conifers – in the case of the trees with green crown, respectively of the deciduous – the beech (*Fagus silvatica*), for the species with red crown. The beech forests are well represented in Bucovina, even the name of this region means “beech forest” and it derives from the word “buk” meaning beech in Slavic [13].

V.III. THE VEGETAL LANDSCAPE AND THE ARTISTIC ACT OF THE MURAL PAINTINGS

The five churches bring in front of the scientist and to any pilgrim a dowry of mural paintings which have a varied register of presentation and a complete artistic message, a fact which makes that three of these religious and medieval art monuments (Hurezi, Sucevița and Voroneț) be included in the list of the UNESCO’s world cultural heritage.

The technique of the *fresco* type painting at the Romanian monasteries requires essentially the same process of painting some surfaces having a base of especially prepared gypsum layers or layers of plaster impregnate with lime where the colours of mineral provenience form a thin surface. Yet, it is retained the ingeniousness of the folk artists who, in spite a certain handicap of coming from small countries (it is worth retaining that these five monasteries used to belong in the Middle Ages to the Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia), permanently under the risk of being invaded by foreign powers which could destroy the art works, with relatively limited technical expression and financial opportunities, found suitable formulae to produce paints from local mineral and vegetal substances (the blue of Voroneț is considered by the chemists even now a wonder). In spite of all these, the vegetal

element and the landscapes generated by the vegetal faces from the frescoes were reunited in original scenes in original scenes even in the 14th century (the case of the narthex of Cozia), contributing to their exquisite external ornamentation.

Their exterior paintings are highly artistic, being rightly considered the best benchmarks of the ensemble of the European feudal art of Byzantine influence of belonging to a local trend (the Brâncovenesc style at Hurezi). The biblical faces in these exterior frescoes are lively, natural, being placed in a balanced, harmonious composition, the floristic element contributing to the harmony of the scene. The mural paintings distinguish themselves by their lively colours, close to that of the surrounding nature and in which green and blue are predominant, yet existing ochre and dark red affinities and shades which clearly refer to the mineral substratum of the neighbouring lax soils and rocks.

The geographical landscape from the frescoes becomes ornamental, yet “accessible”, easy to be accepted by the sight, especially due to the introduction together with the vegetation of the biblical characters, folk elements (for example the shepherds and their tools to guard the animals – the case of Bolnița Church of Bistrița Monastery), the animals, the result being a happy alternation of the nature, its elements, the characters and the holy spirit. The exterior of the churches studied, by their paintings, create the spiritual connection between the locals (or the visitors) and divinity, the loose composition of different scenes being surprising due to the freshness of detail, sometimes having even naive accents.

V.IV. THE ECONOMIC REASONS OF THEMATIC USAGE OF THE ROMANIAN MURAL ART

A religious objective with a high potential of attraction cannot limit the interest only to the believers. The religious phenomenon cannot limit the interest for these objectives not even to tourists. The fact that there is a background of art works in the centre of these objectives as the Romanian or foreign monasteries have, raises the degree of interest, this time of the scientist or for the artist. The contact between the fresco type painting and the connoisseur

brings painting in the sphere of economic interest, especially for tourism.

In the church frescoes analyzed characters are in a natural environment with real or imaginary plants and animals. The potential "customers" of such mural paintings on the inside or outside walls of the Romanian monasteries churches will access a visual model to bring forward the artistic act of the paintings centered on vegetation. For UNESCO-ranking Romanian monasteries or other places, tourists or any visitor

interested in a particular segment of religious art (in this case vegetation) is granted a legitimate right to thematic information and they participate in the flow of ideas in the fluid field of spirituality, enhancing the fertile and palpable field of personal or public knowledge. In addition, it ensures the "right" of the touristic objective to display the power of expression of the painted image in the context of trans-religious artistic wealth.

Table 1

Religious objective	Monastery					Touristic site/program themes
	Horezu	Bistrița	Cozia	Sucevița	Voroneț	
	Tourists who know the artistic phenomenon, religious secondary					Targeted group
	Up to 20 persons					Group size
	Focused and in-depth or only informational knowledge of local or imaginary vegetation specificity in frescoes/mural paintings					purpose
	Picture and artistic representation of vegetation in religious context					Topic of the floral subject frescoes
	Disparate presence – flowers, herbs, shrubs, trees; associated species – advanced complexity vegetal environment (in vegetal plans or horizons)					Vegetation and landscape scenes
	Spiritual contact; echo of painted religious image where biblical characters interpose					Religious message
	Art and touristic knowledge; tangibility of religious objective and artistic scene; decorative and figurative; increase of moralizing role of vegetation theme expressed artistically and religiously; subscription of particular artistic element to the universality of culture					Cultural message (on vegetation and landscapes)
	coherent discourse; sober and balanced style with clear rhythm of vegetal participation; unity in processing; decorative structure in generally free style to regular; diverse repertoire					Stylistic direction
	specialized monastic staff /guides specializing in art and religion; frontal exposure					Transmission of information
	focus on vegetation and vegetal environment in the mural works					Specialization of the speech
	moderate to moderate-high					Level of difficulty of transmitted information
	15-25 min/presented scene					Duration of presentation
	Dynamism; living consciousness; positive and active attitude' reflexive knowledge; personal and group representation; capacity of understanding the phenomenology focuses on vegetation and environment					Effect of information acquisition
	understanding religion in illustrated manner; understanding and frontal confrontation with a local nature or with a glimpse of our heavenly aspiration; detailed knowledge; emphasis of memory of places and of the "specialty " of pictorial art with an emphasis on the vegetal element and landscapes					Benefits for tourists

The tourist participates to an act of cultural heritage where: sacred and artistry intermingle; assists the richness of material culture whose identity is given by the fresco technique; historical tradition of places; insertion of vivid or sober and varied colours (warm or cold colours); integration of consecrated biblical characters (Adam and Eve in Sucevița fresco, Jesus in Voroneț), found in a local inspiration environment (influence of the surrounding forests and meadows) or appealing to the the imaginary dictated by the aspiration to edenian paradise. Information specialization can count for carrying out a type of cultural tourism at the expense of Romanian monasteries or elsewhere. The information that synthetically satisfies all three monasteries, may be found in

the clear splitting in the form of a 14-step proposed thematic program, working ways and orientations (Table 1)

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The five religious entities have a real potential not only from a religious point of view but from that coming from the artistic value of the pictorial background (especially of exterior fresco). This value is admirably expressed when only the vegetation facet versus the touristic experience is surprised in the fresco. At the monasteries located in the central-southern part of Romania (Hurezi, Bistrița and Cozia) their frescoes abound in the interposition of vegetal elements, but

not necessarily at the level of species. Here, it can be added the most serious influence that the environmental conditions exercise on the painters when choosing the vegetal detail and sketching the landscape species. There are to be found pictorial tenures for the deciduous and conifers, here appearing exotic species independent from the local flora, a sign of the aspiration of the artists to the paradisiacal world. The landscape bears the endorsement of the morphology of the wavy surfaces, even halo like, and of the harmonious positioning of the vegetal element in the ensemble of the scene. For the frescoes of the monasteries located in the northern Romania (Sucevița and Voroneț) the influence of the local vegetal environment is limited. What is particularised is the dominance of the biblical scenes as a pictorial subject. In this case, the drawn vegetal element, though vigorous and with a remarkable freshness of detail, shares the formation of the exotic and the paradisiacal fantasy. Although, an easily recognisable presence, the natural components of the local landscapes are only but sporadically a source of inspiration for the medieval painters. This situation of having another formula of knowing the artistic in the frescoes from the Romanian churches can serve further to the creation of a personnel and programme specialised on the central subject *art on the vegetal element*.

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First A. Iulian Dincă is a senior lecturer, Ph. D., in the Department of Geography, Tourism and Teritorial Planning, University of Oradea (Romania), Address: C.P. nr. 114, Oficiul Postal 1, str. Universitatii nr. 1, Oradea, Romania, EMAIL: iulian_dinca@yahoo.co.uk. His doctorate was obtained in the Romanian Academy forum, through the Institute of Geography of Bucharest, approaching landscape analysis in relation to hydro resource of

a mountainous volcanic unit. His scientific interest focuses on landscape's science, ecotourism and biogeography features. Moreover, he pragmatically pursues tangible expressions of teaching activities (courses or laboratories). This vision establishes the necessary frame for interdisciplinary studies and research, as well involving students and master degree students. He is a member of Landscape Research Group, Society for Landscape Study, International Association for Landscape Ecology and International Biogeography Society. The teams' work is performed in the benefit of various customers in the western part of Romania, which are interested in landscaping, rural tourism and ecotourism, thematic landscape, ornamentation or simply setting of rural, suburban and urban living framework.

Second B. Adela Tuduce is councillor in the Department of Implementation of Environmental Policies – Protected Areas. She is interesting and she provides activities that relate to analysis of cases on the impact of projects on Natura 2000 sites and protected areas, monitoring the protected areas, GIS database managing on Natura 2000 sites. Other activities and responsibilities: teaching botany, ecology, phytocenologic.

Address: Bihor Environmental Protection Agency 25/A Dacia Blvd., 410464 Oradea, Bihor County, ROMANIA; EMAIL: adetuduce@yahoo.com

Third C., Camelia Teodorescu is a senior lecturer, Ph. D., in the Department of Human and Economic Geography, University of Bucharest (Romania). Address: 1 Nicolae Balcescu Blvd, postal code 010041, District 1, Faculty of Geography, Human Geography Department, University of Bucharest, EMAIL: camiteo@yahoo.com. Her research areas are focused on issues related to social and cultural geography, general economics, and cultural tourism. Her lectures follow the same area of reference, extended with matters regarding agricultural geography and quality of management in tourism. Throughout her work, she aims to find expertise subjects' applications within directed research towards final users like city halls, prefectures and county councils. All these are interested in upgrading the scientific and economic information about rural and agricultural exploitation of tourism's and agricultural potential, particularly in the southern part of Romania.

Fourth D., Adina Popovici is Associate Professor, PhD, at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, West University of Timisoara. She has a PhD in Economics from West University of Timisoara, Romania, part of her PhD research being undertaken within the PhD School of the Institute for Business Administration, from the "Sophia Antipolis" University of Nice, France. She is currently a postdoctoral researcher within the project number POSDRU/1.5/S/59184: "Performance and Excellence in Postdoctoral Research in Romanian Economics Science Field", coordinated by the Academy of Economic Sciences of Bucharest. Her research areas are: Macroeconomics, Labour Economics, Education Economics, and European Economics. Her teaching subjects are: Microeconomics, Macroeconomics, International Economics, World Economics, European Economics, and European Policies. She has published many papers in the volumes of national and international conferences. She is a member of the National Association of Romanian Evaluators, Association of the Accounting Experts and Certified Accountants from Romania and Romanian Association of Regional Studies. She was the rapporteur of workshop 2: „Trade and Development”, chaired by Jürgen Wiemann, vice-president of the German Development Institute, at EDC2010 “Europe and the South: a New Era. European Development Cooperation: towards Policy Renewal and a New Commitment” Conference, September 27-28 2004, the Netherlands Congress Center, The Hague. Address: West University of Timisoara , 16 J. H. Pestalozzi St., 300115 Timisoara, ROMANIA. EMAIL: adinap_12@yahoo.com