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The Žiča Altar Screen Icons

The altar screen mosaic icons were ordered and installed on a new reconstructed altar screen in the Žiča Monastery in 1993. The sketches made by a painter, Mladen SrbinoVIć were approved by a committee consisting of eminent experts. Furthermore, The Serbian Patriarch Paul gave his blessing to the icons. However, soon after they were put up, there was an outcry and controversy ensued, which ended in the removal of the “controversial” icons and with them being replaced with one produced in the Žiča iconography workshop. The aim of this paper is to show the objective or subjective reasons for such a sequence of events: the departure from the canon and the instructions given in artistic manuals or the social environment unprepared to accept the otherwise expressed spirituality.

Keywords: Žiča, Mladen SrbinoVIć, altar screen, altar icons

The Žiča Monastery Church was built by Stefan the First Crowned with the help of his brother Sava, between 1206 and 1217, when it became the coronation church of the Serbian kings and the seat of the Serbian Archbichopric. Soon after that, the Constantinople marble masons and painters, brought in by Sava, painted the frescoes and completed the altar screen. The screen was placed centrally, between the eastern pair of pilasters and the deep proskynetaria on the pilaster front towards the nave. However, that screen was destroyed and in the 14th century a new one which was made in the same place. Only a few stone fragments remain of both screens along with some traces on the dome pilasters’ sides and the opposite walls and some remainders of the frescoes. Based on the preserved remains and analogies with similar structures in Byzantium and Serbia, a reconstruction study of the earliest screen was made, as well as the one dating from the 14th century. The central part of the original altar screen was designed in such a way that on each side of the Royal Doors there was an intercolumniation. The architectural structure included the proskynetaria as well, which the pilaster fronts had mosaic icons representing Christ and the Virgin. Such a structure was never to be repeated either in Žiča or in any other Serbian mediaeval church. The 14th century altar screen proskynetaria, instead of the mosaic icons, had their icons painted in a fresco technique with stucco framing. During the conservation and restoration works, the tall iconostasis from 1938, the work of Macedonian master carvers, with the icons painted by the Russian artists Nikolai Meyendorf and Ivan Melnikov, was moved to the Monastery of Nova Pavlica. The altar screen’s central part was renovated according to a study drawing made by Milka Čanak-Medići. In August of 1993, mosaic icons of Christ and the Virgin were placed on the new altar screen, in the intercolumniation area (fig. 1), the work of the painter Mladen SrbinoVIć.

The altar screen mosaic icons made by SrbinoVIć were soon replaced by ones painted in the Žiča Monastery icon workshop. According to the artist’s wish, the mosaic icons were taken from Žiča, now constituting a part of the SASA Art Collection. More recently, the icon of Christ was part of the “The Icon, a Serbian Spiritual and Historical Image” exhibition.
Placing the altar screen and icons in the intercolumniation was made as part of the structural improvement works and the works on improving the building’s earthquake resistance after the 1987 earthquake. It was considered that the works should be followed by restoration and perhaps the reconstruction of its original shape. A committee reviewed the works and the project submitted and conducted by the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments, Kraljevo. At a committee meeting held in Žiča on 17th July 1991 in order to make a decision on the new church iconostasis, a proposal was made for the new altar screen icons to be made in the mosaic technique. The eminent painter M. Srbinović was to create the mosaic, as he had already made some pieces inspired by old Serbian art.5

The new altar screen was mounted according to a plan made by the architect Milan Pališaški and approved by the authorising committee. The committee’s proposal was that it should be “an original work made according to the 13th century icons, the time of the Žiča Monastery’s construction.”6 In early 1992 the sketches and the drawing of Christ in actual proportions were submitted to be reviewed by His Holiness Patriarch Paul, Most Eminent Metropolitan John, Eminent Bishop Stephen, academician Vojislav Đurić and M. Čanak-Medić. Out of the two proposed choices, the one we have today was selected. The following year a stone iconostasis was built with mosaic icons (figs. 2, 3) which were consecrated on 15th August.7

The icons that came to be as the result of the search for a road towards Orthodox synthesis, erudition and creative inspiration, were soon to be the subject of controversy. It turned out that a critical point was reached where the old orthodox thought and the pious tradition of St Sava of our times collided with the inventive and poetic force of modern artists.8 Not a full year had passed after the icons had been put up, when in May 1994, the Holy Episcopal Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church sent a letter to the academican Srbinović, saying that, with all due respect, their recommendation was, “due to an incompatibility of the artistic expression of the mosaic icons of Christ and the Virgin with the time and style when the Žiča Monastery Holy Ascension Church was built and with the preserved frescoes, and taking into account that the congregation is upset with the icons of modern expression, to replace the icons and the replaced ones to be anticipated for a future new church in Kraljevo or any other church of modern design in the Žiča diocese.”9

According to an assessment presented by the director of the Regional Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments, Kraljevo, Slobodan Đorđević and the architect Veljko Vučenović, the artist succeeded in meeting the committee’s requirements. The work did not differ much from the similar icons we can find in Christian churches of the Early Middle Ages. According to the experts’ assessment, the icons were an accomplishment and a significant tribute to the world of art, monuments and spiritual content. Their appearance did not depart from the canons; we should have just waited for a while for the people to get used to the new altar screen.10

As early as August 1993, when it was put up, the new altar screen with its mosaic icons appeared unusual to the congregation. According to the monastery sisterhood, the parishioners began to complain, while some other experts and artists expressed different opinions, therefore a special commission was formed with the task of putting together a proposal for the Holy Synod about the further fate of the altar screen and its icons. With regards to the conservation, restoration and construction works conducted on the Serbian monasteries, the appearance of the Žiča mosaic icons received the following comments: “Those icons on that marble iconostasis appear horrible; they may be anything else but not the images of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Virgin. You cannot pray to God before them as they seem gloomy, in disarray and lost, as if coming from Hell, as if made by Satanists and not, as they say, some eminent mosaic artist of ours. Those faces are more like the Malisori Shqiptar Gypsies leaving an inn at dawn than Our Lord and the Holy Virgin.”11 There was also a comment from Žiča’s bishop, Stephen: “I honour and respect Srbinović and I honour and respect the artistic creative impulse. But in these icons, I don’t see, as a priest, the required spirituality. So, even if I agreed with the opinion that the icons should remain in the Žiča altar space, it would be impossible due to the monks’ and believers’ irreconcilable opposition to the pieces.”12

In the talks with the academican V.J. Đurić held in 1995, the issue of the new church art or “the new church painting” was raised. The eminent art historian and academician pointed to a theological and artistic crisis in modern
church art and to a need for the Church to accept the great artists. It was he who was in favour of Mladen Srbino\v to make the altar icons in \v. All the competent bodies approved the sketches and drawings, but once the all screen was put up, protests ensued and Srbino\v __i\/_ mosaic icons were removed to be replaced with ones made the \v iconography workshop.\n
The Serbian Church engaged the greatest national artists to adorn the early newly built churches with their works. Today, however, there is a prevailing hesitation and distrust towards the artists. \v is an example of how everything was turned into an after-the-fact passing judgement on knowledge, the history of art and conservation, and into provoking dangerous discrimination in testing orthodoxy and patriotism. Distrust of the proved artists' creative abilities was demonstrated, of artists who were ready, within the prescribed rules, to find out ways of enriching appearances and expressions of the Orthodox objects of prayer.\n
turned out that the problem was much greater than the issue whether the Srbino\v altar icons were good for \v or not. It was, in fact, about the dilemma of whether modern artists, which ones and in what way, should express the greatest secrets and truths of orthodoxy, represented in the images of saints and biblical motifs.\n
Here is one comment by the academican, Dejan Medakovi\v, in M. Srbino\v's exhibition catalogue at the SASA Gallery, 2005: "The question of icons is as old as Christianity itself. The rules that the holy fathers were setting up in the past led to scholarly theological debates where even the highest state authorities interfered. The true instructions on how one was supposed to paint and what did not depart from the religious and the doctrine set up by the holy fathers, those thinkers who required a spiritual experience of reality, expecting that one should be detached from one's body, environment and anything that indicated tangibility. Such spiritual exertion was a unique opposition to the material reality, leading to abstraction that gains new form even when it reaches for the elements of the real world.\n
A short overview of icon-painting history shows what church norms a mediaeval painter was supposed to apply, what the painting manuals said about the representations of Christ and the Holy Virgin and who could be entrusted with painting icons.

The Canon 82 of the Quinisext Council in Trullo in 692 states: "In some of the paintings of the venerable icons, a lamb is inscribed as being shown or pointed at by the Precursor's finger, which was taken to be a type of grace, suggesting beforehand through the law the true lamb to us, Christ our God. Therefore, eagerly embracing the old types and the shadows as symbols of the truth and pre- indications handed down to the Church, we prefer the grace, and accept it as the truth in fulfilment of the Law. Since, therefore, that which is perfect even though he be but painted is imprinted in the faces of all, the Lamb who taketh away the sin of the world Christ our God, with respect to His human character, we decree that henceforth He shall be inscribed even in the icons instead of the ancient lamb: through Him being enabled to comprehend the reason for the humiliation of the God Logos, an in memory of His life in the flesh and of His passion and of His soterial death being led by the hand, as it were and of the redemption of the world which thence accrues."\n
A participant in the Second Council of Nicaea 787, St Germanus I, the Patriarch of Constantinople, campaigning against iconoclasm, says: "In eternal memory of the life in the flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, of His passion, His saving death, and the redemption of the world which results from them, we have received the tradition of representing Him in His human form - i.e., in His visibil Theophany - understanding that we exalt in this way the humiliation of God the Word.\n
In his treatise again iconoclasm, John of Damascus emphasises the change which occurred in the relationship between God and the visible world when He became a Man. By His own will, God became visible by assuming a material existence and giving to the matter a new function and dignity: "In former times, God without body or form could in no way be represented. But today since God has appeared in the flesh and lived among men, I can represent what is visible in God [to horaton tou theou], I do not venerate any matter, but I venerate the creator of a matter, who became the matter for my sake, who assumed life in the flesh, and who through the matter accomplished my salvation." For Theodoret the Studite, an icon of Christ is not an image of "Christ the man", but an image of the Logos in nate, who assumed all the characteristics of man, including the possibility to be presented in a painted image. He compares a Christian artist with God Himself who created man in His own image: "The fact that God create
man in His own image shows that iconography is a divine act.” An icon-painter is in the role of a forerunner, he is the means of the Divine Grace. 21 By making an icon of Christ, the iconographer also makes an “image of God,” for what the deified humanity of Jesus truly is. 22 The Byzantine Christian art was inseparable from theology. In their style, symbolic composition, the system of church and iconostasis decoration, icons became an expression and a source of the Divine knowledge. In the early 20th century, the Russian philosopher, Evgeny Trubetskoy, called this artistic expression “a contemplation or theology in colour.” 23

Germanus’ description of the facial and body features of Our Lord, according to the testimonies of the first witnesses, was given in the painting manuals: “The God-Man’s body is three cubits tall, somewhat bent, giving an impression of grace; has nice converged eyebrows, nice eyes, shapely nose; his tan is the colour of ripe wheat, hair in curls with golden streaks, beard black; the fingers on his pure and clean hand are proportional; in short, he resembles his mother from whom he created his spiritualised and perfect human being.” 24 The painting manuals also provide instructions about the appearance of the Holy Virgin: “The Holy Virgin was of medium height (that is) of moderate height, some said, three cubits, her face was the colour of a wheat grain, with yellow hair, eyes yellow, beautiful, with long eyebrows, moderate nose, long hands and fingers, exalted and calm she was and everything full of grace, modest, sincere, cherishing a particular benevolence, dressed in modest garments and being of natural appearance, like her omophorion was, which in the temple still lies.” 25

Painting the venerable images in the Middle Ages was considered a pious mediation between God and people, so only those who were dedicated to fasting and prayer could do it. Due to the significance of the work itself, scholarly theologians and bishops were involved in interpreting certain themes, and thanks to them, the venerable images became a mirror of the theological thought of the milieu in which where they were created. Stringency in the approach to the venerable painting was also imposed by the church councils. In 1551 the Russian Tsar, Ivan the Terrible, summoned the synod of the Russian Church, and there a collection of decrees was issued in 100 chapters. It said: “It is becoming that an icon-painter is humble, meek, in awe, and not at all frivolous, who does not mock, cheat, is not sarcastic, does not drink, or steal, or kill, but on the contrary, cherishes spiritual and corporeal purity in general reverence… And to paint the image of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Virgin with particular and great care.” 26

All the written and painted models show that from the early times the icon has been considered as an object that cannot be the subject of an arbitrary change. Within those norms, the lay historian and positivist theologians see the Church conservatism, preservation of the forms and ways the old age is used to because the ecclesiastical art has dried out, and consider them to be an obstacle to a new ecclesiastical artistic vigour. The canonical form actually releases the creative form of an artist to reach new achievements, to soar to new creative plains and liberates him to repeat the already known in a creative manner. The Church as “the pillar and ground of the Truth” searches only for the truth, regardless of whether it is manifested in old or new forms. If something has been proved as the truth, the Church gives it a blessing and stores it in its treasury of truths, but if no evidence has been provided, it rejects it. 27 The fact that the mosaic icons for the Žiča altar screen, made by M. Srbinovic, once again state the already recognised truth was confirmed by the Serbian Patriarch Paul who, while the mosaic icons were in their preparatory stages (figs. 4, 5), visited the artist in his studio several times and having seen the detailed sketches, gave his blessing to the making of the icons. 28

Under numerous influences venerated images have been changing not only in their subjects but in style, as well. By studying two icons of the same subject, coming from one and the same icon-painting school, showed that the similarity, visible at first sight, only emphasised the complete originality of the individual creation in each of them. 29 In the early 15th century, at the time of Despot Stefan Lazarević, wood-carved icons from Hungary used to come to Serbia, causing disapproval in the Orthodox Christian clerical circles. Through graphic decorations on printed books, the Venetian influences were being brought to Montenegro, bearing elements of Gothic and Renaissance styles. A series of circumstances caused a deterioration in the quality of the images of saints in both iconographic and artistic terms. 30
M. Erbinović, Virgin in red with Christ, Christ in white and pote for the Gate of Heaven, preparatory design, 1991.
The Žiča mosaic icons feature deep sensitivity and the artist’s awareness of the messages the tradition conveys. The grace of the image of the Holy Virgin with her hands forming a halo above Christ’s head stands in opposition to the image of Christ, looking serious, foreseeing his future suffering. The believers, unable to pray before these icons, did not properly understand the extrasensory Christian virtues.31

Perhaps the answer to the problem that arose with regards to the Žiča icons and to the relationship between the traditional and the modern lies in a presentation by Z. Gavrić and G. Tošić at a conference held in Žiča in 1995, the subject being, Icon and Modern Art. Among other things, they stated that an icon should not be viewed as contemporary nor in the terms of linear time, since its essence does not recognise such a notion.32 In this particular case it was about the contemporary church art crisis and the reluctance of the local population to accept the works of great contemporary artists who in their style, way of thinking and determination, were ready to create religious pieces of art.35

Then again, there was another issue of whether it was appropriate to place the icons in the altar screen intercolumniation, when there was a desire to provide an original piece of art that corresponded to the period when the Žiča Monastery Holy Ascension Church had been built. We find an answer to that in the years-long research of mediaeval Serbian churches’ templons and iconostases, in particular one recently defended doctoral thesis at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of Belgrade, which treated the subject. Taking into account the examples of the reconstructed templons in the Studenica Monastery Church of the Virgin,34 in the Žiča Monastery Holy Ascension Church,35 the Mileševa, Sopočani,36 Gradac37 and Arilje38 the altar screen intercolumniations did hold the icons on wooden panels, but there were just curtains. According to the Patriarch Nicephorus’s (792-828) testimony, the area between the colonnettes in Byzantine churches was always closed with curtains decorated with embroidered images of animals and beasts. At an early stage, such altar screens were supplemented with festivity icons in the proskynetaria on the sides. Large fresco-icons of Christ and the Virgin on the east pilaster pair in Žiča, painted in the 16th century, replaced the previous proskynetaria in a shape of two leaning ciboria.39 Les grandes peintures icones as Grabar calls them, with the figures of Christ, the Virgin, the church patron or a saint whom the founder venerated in particular, flanked the iconostases in Byzantine churches from the 11th to the 14th century.40 In the 10th century, the Church of the Dormition in Nicaea, on the east columns of its erstwhile screen, had mosaic icons with the tall figures of Christ Antiphonitis (Pantocrator) and the Virgin with Christ.41 In the Daphne Church from the late 11th century, on its lateral columns by the screen, parts of the mosaic icons of Christ and the Virgin remained under the stately marble frames. Numerous examples from the 10th to the late 13th century show that the festivity icons, with the life-size figures of saints, featured on the eastern columns in churches from the time of the Comneni, were considered as typical of the altar screen.42 Large figures of Christ and the Virgin in a standing position were painted either in the fresco technique or in mosaic on columns, pilasters or walls, usually framed in meticulously cut marble, placed to the left and right of the altar screen, which indicates a desire to emphasise their particular significance and role. Physically, those images are not part of the screen, but in terms of their subject, concept and programme they are connected with it. At one point, those monumental images were moved from the lateral sides of the templon to the two main openings between the altar screen columns, thus establishing a thematic decorative pattern that has remained to modern times.43 It is assumed that the change occurred in the 14th century. According to some researchers, the first example is the St George's Church in Staro Nagoričane where the images of the Virgin Pelagonitissa (“The Virgin with the Playing Child”) and St George were painted in the fresco technique in the intercolumniation,44 whereas the altar screen icons of Christ and the Virgin were featured on the adjacent columns.45

It cannot be confirmed with certainty what the technique was of the screen icons placed in stately frames in the shape of proskynetaria in the Raška churches. Their base points to the mosaic technique, as in the original Žiča icons and in those made later on in Sopočani.46 On the other hand, it was found that the screen icons in the Gradac Monastery were painted in the fresco technique,47 however, in the renewed proskynetaria of the altar screen, the icons painted on wooden panels were placed, the work of the monastery abbess Euphemia.48 Only in the Žiča and Mileševa churches were the icons painted on a wooden panel placed between the colonnettes.
In Mileševa those are the images of St John and St Sava of Serbia, while in Žiča we have images of Christ and the Virgin. In the Middle Ages, no images of the Serbian saints were featured on the templon, so the occurrence was interpreted as a compliance with the contemporary practice, as in the case of Žiča, where two authentic fresco-icons of Christ and the Virgin were featured on the pilasters by the altar screen, while their copies painted on wood (fig. 6), with two figures from the waist up, were placed alongside.⁴⁹

In the end, instead of a conclusion, a question could be asked: Should those icons have been placed in the altar screen intercolumniation in the first place? In fact, it was most probable that the original altar screen proskynetaria held mosaic icons, while the intercolumniation was closed with curtains. The altar screens in the other Raška churches were made in the same fashion: the Church of the Holy Virgin in Studenica, as well as the churches of the Mileševa, Sopoćani, Gradac and Arilje monasteries.

Since the competent committee had already made the decision to place Mladen Srbinić’s icons of Christ and the Virgin in the Žiča altar screen intercolumniations, there was no real reason, in technical, stylistic or iconographical terms, for them to be removed.

6. Žiča Monastery, altar screen (© Institute for the protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia, Belgrade)
М. ШУПУТ, „Мраморници у Жичи“, in: ЗЛУМС, 20, 1984, pp. 157-161, states a view that the floor, altar screen and other sections of the building interior had to be done in an exemplary manner; М. ЧАНАК-МЕДИЋ publishes a study reconstruction of the altar screen, indicating the church furniture made by the marble masons brought in by St Sava („Дело мраморника светог Саве у Жичи“, in: Споменик штоту светог Саве 1594-1994, Зборник радова, Београд, 1998, pp. 113-131); Б. МИЉКОВИЋ, Житија светог Саве као извори за историју средњовековне уметности, Београд, 2008, pp. 135-136. The author brings forward the Theodosius's testimony on the work of the Greek artists, the marble masons and fresco painters “from the Constantine's City”, being of the opinion that the well-known parts of the architectural decorations and church furniture do not provide enough confirmation for the assumption.

М. ЧАНАК-МЕДИЋ, op. cit., 1998; О. КАНДИЋ, „Архитектура средњовековних олаферских преграда у православним црквама Србије“, in: Иконостас као духовни и културни петеат православних хришћана, Крагујевац, 2007, p. 43. М. СРБИНОВИЋ, Исус Христос, 1991-1992, mosaic, 170x 30 cm, Уметничка збирка САНУ, inv. no. 2645; М. СРБИНОВИЋ, Богородица, 1991-1992, mosaic, 170x130 cm, Уметничка збирка САНУ, inv. no. 2646. We express our gratitude to our colleague Jelena Mezinski Milovanovic, Head of the SASA (Serbian Academy of Science and Art) Fine Arts Collection for providing us with the information, and to academician Dušan Otašević (director of SASA Gallery) for permission to publish images from SASA Fine Art Collection.

А. ВУЈНОВИЋ, Икона: српска духовна и историјска слика, Београд, 2011, кат. по 94. The Committee members were: Prof. Jovanka Kalić (chairperson), academician Vojislav Đurić, academian Vojislav Korać, Prof. Gordana Babić, Prof. Jovan Nešković, Gojko Subotić PhD, Radomir Stanić, Milorad Medić, Svetlana Popović PhD and Slobodan Đorđević arch. Two subcommittees were formed: one to deal with the questions of restoration and structural improvements (academian Vojislav Korać, Prof. Jovan Nešković and Slobodan Đorđević arch); the other one was to deal with the questions of the art work conservation and presentation (academian Vojislav Đurić, Prof. Gordana Babić, Gojko Subotić PhD, Radomir Stanić and Milorad Medić); see: M. ЧАНАК-МЕДИЋ, „Сажет преглед радова на Спасовској цркви у Жичи 1988 – 1994“, in: Плакат ДКС, 19, 1995, pp. 79-82.


Ibid., p. 55.


3 Ibid., p. 64; Л.У. УСПЕНСКИ, Теологија иконе, Манастир Хиландар, 2000, p. 337.


5 Ibid., p. 549.


8 For this information we express our gratitude to Ana Srbinović, daughter of the academician Mladen Srbinović.

9 Ф. ФЛОРЕНСКИ, op.cit., 1990, p. 60.


11 Д. МЕДАКОВИЋ, op.cit., 2005, p. 49.


37 О. КАНДИЋ, Градац: историја и архитектура манастира, Београд, 2005, pp. 144-150.


42 Ibid., pp. 17-18.


48 Ibid, p. 144, comment 132.


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28 For this information we express our gratitude to Ana Srbinović, daughter of the academician Mladen Srbinović.
37 О. КАНДИЋ, Градаци: историја и архитектура манастира, Београд, 2005, pp. 144-150.
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