THE CONTRIBUTION OF A PAINTER TO THE FULFILLMENT OF A COMMUNITY

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Abstract: Sava Henţia is considered one of the great painters of the 19th century, the creator of a valuable work that enriched the cultural heritage of our country. The present study intends to rediscover, based on documents from archives, an episode from his artistic career: the circumstances which led him to paint several icons for the Răhău parish church, Alba County. The episode is emblematic for the painter's nationwide renown: although he had been living in Bucharest for several decades, Sava Henţia was still remembered and appreciated by the local community in Transylvania.

Keywords: *painter, icon, archive, document.*

1. Who was Sava Hentia ?

The painter and graphic artist Sava Henţia was born on the 1st of February 1848 in Sebesel¹ village. He was the fifth son in the family of a priest – Ilie Henţia and Ana (born Dăncilă)². His childhood was marked by hardships and poverty since he belonged to a large family (14 children), also, the fact that the country was under foreign rule, offered him little chance for personal development. He first attended school in his home village, then in Sebeş at the German Secondary School.

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¹ Village situated on the middle course of the Sebes Valley (Romania).

² Nicolae Afrapt places the date of birth on 1st January. See Nicolae AFRAPT, *Sebeşel – Satul de pe Valea Sebeşului (Sebesel - the village on the Sebes Valley)*, Alba Iulia, Altip Publishing House, 2009, p. 327.

Fig.1: *Sava Henția*

Quite early in his youth he gained local recognition for his religious paintings on glass, this art being well developed along the Sebeș Valley. His early success motivated him to follow a different path than his brothers, who all became priests³. In 1862, at the age of 14, he left for Bucharest, moving with his uncle on his mother's side, the photographer Zaharie Dăncilă (Dănciulescu)⁴, for whom he helped touch up photos. A year later, he became seriously ill⁵ and, due to an inadequate treatment with a quinine overdose, he remained deaf for the rest of his life⁶.

Between 1865 and 1870, he attended the courses of the Bucharest School of Art, studying painting and following the great tradition established by the founders of the school Teodor Aman and Gheorghe Tattarescu⁷.

Between 1870 and 1873, he continued his studies in Italy and

³ *Ibidem*. The bibliographic sources do not mention how many brothers and sisters the artist had.

⁴ Zaharie Dăncilă, brother to Sava Henția's mother, was the son of the priest from Răchita (the village is closely situated to Sebeșel). Cf. *Ibidem*.

⁵ Some sources believe that he had typhoid fever, according to Iulia Ramona DAN, *Noi contribuții la cunoașterea vieții și activității pictorului Sava Henția (1848-1904)* (New contributions to the life and work of painter Sava Henția), în „Anuarul Sargetia”, p. 699 (on-line: <http://www.anuarulsargetia.ro/noi-contributii-la-cunoasterea-vietii-si-activitatii-pictorului-sava-hentia>; accessed at 24.02.2017).

⁶ According to Muzeul Municipal „Ion Raica” Sebeș, *Colecția Sava Henția – Pictură/Grafică* (Municipal Museum “Ion Raica”, *Sava Henția collection – Picture/Graphics*), Alba Iulia, Altip Publishing House, 2004, p. 3. During the same year he nearly drowned being caught in a fishnet in Dambovită, see Ion FRUNZETTI, *Artă românească în secolul XIX (Romanian Art in the 19th Century)*, București, Meridiane Publishing House, 1991, p. 354.

⁷ One of his professors was Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu, his course was entitled *Istoria românilor în raport cu pictura* (History of Romanians and its influence on painting). Cf. Nicolae AFRAPT, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

France⁸. At the end of 1873, after his return home, he married Irma Tanko from Petrești⁹, with whom he had 6 children. In order to provide for his family, he combined his artistic career with teaching. From 1875 until the end of his life, he taught drawing and calligraphy at a number of institutions: “Doamna Elena” Asylum, the Secondary School for Girls and two Pensions ‘Pompilian’ and ‘Negoescu’¹⁰.

Early in his artistic career, he embraced religious and historical subjects. Inspired by the great events and personalities of the past, Hentia started painting the “portraits of all voievods and all important monuments in the history of the nation”. He particularly enjoyed the Dacian - Roman period (“The Sacrifice of Trajan at Drobeta bridge over the Danube”, “The Conquest of Sarmizegetusa” (1870), “The Triumphant Entrance of Emperor Trajan in Sarmizegetusa”¹¹). From medieval history, he was particularly interested in the personalities and deeds of Michael the Brave and Steven the Great.

In the year 1877, (during the Romanian War of Independence), at General Carol Davilla’s request (General Inspector of the Sanitary Section of the Army Head Quarters), Sava Hentia was included in the group of painters sent to the front as “war correspondents with a brush”¹². The special conditions of work and the contact with the bitter

⁸ It seems that he had won a scholarship with the mythological painting „Orfeu și Euridice” (lost today). He renews his scholarship at the Art Academy in Paris (between 1871 and 1873) with another mythological work „Psyche părăsită de Amor” – according to *Sava Henția collection*, p. 3. From the information listed above we can conclude that Sava Henția stayed approx. 1 year in Italy (1870-1871) and 2 years in France (1871-1873). Nicolae Afrapt provides the information that his professors were Alexandre Cabanel and Pierre Paul Prud’hon (*op. cit.*, p. 328). In Cabanel’s case the information is plausible (he did teach in Paris between 1864 and 1889- the year of his death), on the contrary Pierre Prud’hon had died in 1823 so he could not have been Sava Henția’s teacher.

⁹ Irma was the daughter of the Hungarian count Potoscky, according to Nicolae AFRAPT, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

¹⁰ Colecția Sava Henția, p. 3.

¹¹ Mural at Căldărușani Monastery, painted after a previous sketch. Sarmizegetusa can be seen burning in the background, while, in the foreground, Emperor Trajan enters triumphantly surrounded by Legionnaires. According to Nicolae AFRAPT, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

¹² Doctor Carol Davilla gave him the following recommendation: “Mr Hintzea Savu, drawing teacher at “Doamna Elena” Asylum, the Secondary School for Girls in Bucharest, is attached to the ambulance of the General Headquarter for the duration of the entire war. [...] All the people who meet Mr. Hintzea should know that he

realities of war changed his artistic point of view. The artist was forced to access new ways of expression based on quick sketches, as opposed to elaborate paintings that took a long time to complete.

His works, mostly drawings and sketches, cover the whole war period, from the beginning of the hostilities until the triumphant return of the troops home¹³. After this stage, we notice a wider diversity of topics: landscapes, mundane scenes, still lifes but also portraits, which remain the dominant subject.¹⁴

For his activity, he was rewarded with diplomas, silver and bronze medals. At the Romanian Exhibition in Sibiu (1881), he received 27 prizes for his “pencil drawings, water colours and oil paintings”. The diversity of his interests is evident from his collaboration in book illustration, interior decorations (Vernescu House and the ceiling of the National Theatre¹⁵), the murals from the churches in Vintu de Jos, Brebu and Sebes. He also painted the iconostasis of the churches in Vințu de Jos and Răhău and several icons for the churches in Sebeșel and Săsciori.

Sava Henția died on the 21 of February 1904, at the age of 56¹⁶. Out of 238 known works of his, 44 are exhibited in the “Ion Raica” Museum in Sebeș.

2. The Contribution of the painter Sava Hentia to the adornment of the Rahau parish church.

The document base of the Orthodox parish church in Rahau, part of the Alba County Service of the National Archives of Romania, keeps

suffers from almost complete loss of hearing and finds it a bit difficult to interact with other people”. *Apud. IbIDEM*, p. 330. The group of artists sent to the front also included Nicolae Grigorescu, C. D. Mirea și C. Popp de Szathmary. According to *Vârstele orașului. Sebeș – 750 de ani de atestare documentară (1245-1995) (The ages of the town. Sebes - 750 years since its first mention in documents)*, Sebeș, 1995, p. 132.

¹³ At the end of the 1877 war, most of the paintings from this military campaign were bought for Prince Charles I's private collection and the artist received the *Bene Merenti Medal* class II. According to Ion FRUNZETTI, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

¹⁴ *IbIDEM*, p. 4

¹⁵ Which was destroyed during WWII

¹⁶ His death is briefly announced in two newspapers: *România Muzicală* and *Bucarester Tageblat*. According to *Colecția Sava Henția (Sava Hentia Collection)*, p. 4.

several letters that Sava Henția exchanged with the priest Nicolae Cărpinișan. We are now going to present the correspondence in chronological order.

The first reference to Sava Henția appears in the minutes of the Răhău Parish Committee meeting on the 11th/23rd August 1896¹⁷. The object of the meeting was to decide on the painting of four imperial icons for the iconostasis of the church, an old wish of the committee members. In order to fulfill this wish, the committee urged Fr. Nicolae Cărpinișan to get in touch with Simeon Hința¹⁸ in Bucharest to ask him to paint the icons. The artist responded, writing a letter to the priest, mentioning that he would make “four large icons and four small ones, according to the annexed model for the sum of 240 florins.”¹⁹ Furthermore, since the painter was spending the summer holiday at his relatives in Sebeșel²⁰, on the 3rd August, at the request of the parish committee members “he came in person to the church, contemplated the place and took the measurements for the icons. In accordance with the shape, size and type of execution, he now demands 620 lei, the equivalent of 279 florins. The committee has to meet again to discuss the matter”²¹. The committee appreciated the gesture of the painter to come in person in order to get precise information, and decided to order “4 large icons: Lord Jesus Christ, sitting on a throne, dressed as a bishop and wearing a crown, The Mother of God sitting on the throne as Eternal Empress wearing a crown, the icon of St. George standing with the defeated dragon under his feet, (but without a horse), and the icon of St. John the Baptist, standing. For each one of these icons, a small version must be also painted. The panel must be of populous wood and

¹⁷ Romanian National Archives, Alba County Branch, the fund of the Răhău Orthodox Parish, sheets 19 v. și 20.

¹⁸ We do not know the reason why the first name of the artist appears to be Simeon instead of Sava in this document. In our opinion, the situation could have two possible explanations: either the members of the committee didn't know his name for sure, or it was just a mistake of the person who kept the minutes. The first explanation is less plausible, since Sava Henția had already sent a letter to the Răhău parish office, he had also signed the letter.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, sheet 19 v.

²⁰ Sava Henția used to visit his birthplace every summer alone, since his wife didn't want to accompany him, according to Nicolae AFRAPT, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

²¹ *The Răhău Orthodox Parish*, sheets 19 v. and 20.

the frames must be covered in gold leaf. The icons will be sent after completion and the committee will offer 240 fl, the sum will be collected from parishioners during the autumn of 1896 and from the treasury of the church”.²²

The decision was given to the artist by a parish delegation to Sebeşel, within a few weeks, before his return to Bucharest.

During this meeting, in the presence of Sava Henția's brother, Nicolae, the parties settled the price, the deadline being announced later on by post. This is why on the 16th October 1896, the artist sent a letter from Bucharest, telling the priest from Rahau that “the big icons are ready except the gilding of the frames, consequently I'd like to inform you that the deadline was set to November, and I did my best to comply”²³. The painter asked for further details about the way the icons should be packed and posted, and the way in which the money would arrive to him: “we will have to agree on how you want the icons to be sent and where, in the village or in Sebes. As for the method of payment, will you send the money before or after receiving the icons?”. He recommended “unpacking at Sas-Sebeş in the presence of the of His Reverence the Protopope to attest that the icons of the Mother of God and Jesus Christ look like the ones in the church at Sebeş”.²⁴

On the 5th November 1896, Sava Henția sent another letter to Fr Cărpinişan, asking for forgiveness for not replying sooner, but “to this date” he was not able to finish gilding the frames. After promising to finish them by the 10th of December, he added: “Please send me 100 florins as soon as possible, as for the rest, I can wait a little more. This money is very useful for presents, because I wouldn't like to send them in two rows. I have sent you all the 8 icons at once, to avoid spending double and wasting time, since I am very busy.”²⁵

On the 27th November/ 9th December 1896²⁶, the ledger of income and expenditure of the Rahau parish church attests that 103 florins and 45 krajczárs had been taken from Sebeşana Bank and 101 florins had

²² *Ibidem*, sheet 20.

²³ IDEM, file 109/1896, sheet 1.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, sheet 1 v..

²⁵ IDEM, file 108/1896, sheet 1 (see **Fig. 6**).

²⁶ The order of events forces us to take into consideration the dates in the new (Gregorian) calendar in accordance with the dates on Sava Hentia's letters.

been already sent “to Mr Henția in Bucarest for the icons”²⁷. On the same day, the artist sent the parcel with the oil paintings by coach, according to the postal letter.²⁸

On the 28th November, Sava Henția informed the priest that “the trunk with the icons inside have already arrived at the Alvirez railway station, because the post cannot carry a load bigger than 10kg, your reverence will have to go to the station and collect the trunk. We have already paid for the transport to the Predeal border; your reverence will have to pay for the transport on the Hungarian territory, because the authorities wouldn’t allow us to pay for the whole trip, it seems you will pay for the customs as well. Apart from the icons, the trunk contains two portraits of the Tipeiu protopope: so it is necessary to open the trunk at Sas Sebeș as well.”²⁹ At the end of the letter, the painter adds a personal request: “please show the icons to more people in Sas-Sebeș, especially the ones that I have contacted before. [...] And if other churches need icons, let us know beforehand, so we may have plenty of work there next summer. Please invite other priests to come and see the icons as well.”³⁰

On the 16th December, Sava Hentia sent a worried message to Fr. Cărpinișan: “I don’t understand why you haven’t replied yet to the letter

Fig. 2: *Sava Hentia's signature*

I sent with the icons! Maybe you haven’t received them, which I doubt. I sent the icons with great speed³¹ and they are, in any case, at Alvinez station. Please, send a reply, because we are a little worried. I sent the icons three weeks ago”.³²

On January 1st 1897, Sava Henția sent the message marking the end of the transaction between him and the Răhău parish: “Today at 12,

²⁷ IDEM, file 326, sheet 13 v.. Probably the difference of 2,45 florins between the sum taken and the one sent to the painter covered the dispatch costs.

²⁸ IDEM, file 110/1896, sheet 1 (see **Fig. 3**).

²⁹ IDEM, file 107/1896, sheet 1 (see **Fig. 4**).

³⁰ IDEM, sheet 1v (see **Fig. 5**).

³¹ Indeed, the postal letter mentions „great speed” on the envelope.

³² IDEM, file 106/1896, sheet 1 (see **Fig. 7**). This statement is rather puzzling since between 9th December (the date mentioned on the postal letter) and 16th December (the date in which his letter was sent) there are only 7 days (a week). Probably the 2 weeks difference was given by the calendars used (Gregorian vs. Julian).

I happily received the postal order with the payment for the icons (...) consequently, I am most grateful and I congratulate your reverence and the entire parish committee from Răhău. It would be nice if other villages followed your example. I would be extremely happy to work again among Transylvanian brothers”³³.

Conclusions:

The correspondence between Sava Henția and Fr. Nicolae Cărpinișan from Răhău shows the fact that the bond between Romanians were not torn by geographical borders. Moreover, the letters offer a more comprehensive image of the man behind the artist: a Transylvanian who is respectful and warm in conversation, a man who in spite of reaching great heights in recognition of his art, is not condescending towards his brothers, but on the contrary, is pleased to be of help. Being part of the era in which cultural exchanges between Transylvania and Romania intensified, we can honestly say that Sava Henția contributed to the crystallization of Romanian national conscience.

References:

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6. *** *The ages of the town. Sebes - 750 years since its first mention in documents (1245-1995)*, Sebeș, 1995.

³³ IDEM, file 105/1896, sheet 1 (see **Fig. 8**). We mention the fact that this letter is the only one the painter signed with the title „professor”.

ANNEXES

Fig. 3: Post letter of the coach used by Sava Hentia to send the icons to Râhău

406
28 Noiembrie
București. 1

Cucernice părinte.

Vă fac cunoscut cum că lada
cu icoane sunt sosite în gara
Albinoz; fiindcă posta nu poate
transporta greutatea mai mult de
10 kilograme; sfîntia voastră sunteți
nevoiti a vă duce la gară să scoateți
lada. — Transportul până la
granita Tredeal am plătit noi; iar
pe teritoriul Ungar sunteți nevoiti
și voastră a plăti de orece nouă mi
ne a primit a plăti până la locul
de destinație; în urmă, poate că o să
plătiți ceva vamă. —
În lada se află și două portrete

Fig. 4: Sava Hentia's letter on 28.11.1896 (p. 1)

de protopopului Sipin; de aceea
trebuie ca să desfăceți lada și la
Sas-Sebes; tot de o dată să arătați
și icoane ca să le vadați mai
mulți din Sas-Sebes, pe acei ce le-
am făcut cunoscut să vie să le
vada. —

Cred că o să vă placă icoane; și
dacă or mai trebui și pentru alte
Biserici vă rog să ne faceți cunoscut
ca la vora să avem de lucru pe
acolo; — Vă rog să faceți cunoscut
și la alți preoți să vie să vada
icoane. —

În speranța sf. văstre rămân
al sf. văstre devotat pictor.

Sava Hentia
M. Vranus 2.

Fig. 5: Sava Hentia's letter on 28.11.1896 (p. 2)

107
București 5 Decembrie 1896. 1

Onorate Părinte

Vă rog a suda să nu văm răspunsu
psămă acum la în privința Icoanelor
cândă este ca încă nici până astăzi nu s-au
putut termina cu aurul ramelor. Toem-
= are la 10. Decembrie sunt gata. ~~atunci pentru~~
câte pentru ce m-ați scris în privința plății
Vă ruga ca să mi trimiteți cât mai curând
100 fiorin pentru restu mai astăzi. Acești bani
sunt ca uzurare pentru cadouri. m-mă
convine de loc să le trimit în două rânduri
cu vile trimite pe totu 8. de ore ce să fac
cheltuiel suble și perdere de timp. fiind
foarte ocupat. Săi în grabă ca ramele vor
fi gata, vile aspedat.

Termin străngându-vă mână, poflind
sanatate familiei.

Sava Hentia

Fig. 6: Sava Hentia's letter on 05.12.1896

105
Bucuresti 1
16 Decembrie.

Cnorate părinte

Am știu ce este cauza de
nu ne mai răspundeți la
scrisorile ce v'am trimis
o dată cu icoanele! - Dăte
că nu le-ați primit, că ce
nu cred. Icoanele le-am trimis
cu mare viteză; - și sunt în
tot casul la gara Alvinez. -
Vă rog răspundeți la această
scrisoare, fiindcă suntem cam
îngrijorați. Icoanele sunt tri-
mise de trei săptămâni. -

Fig. 7: Sava Hentia's letter from 16.12.1896

Bucuresti 1. Ianuarie 1897. 107

Onorate Parinte

Asta di la ora 12. am avut
 firierea a primi mandatul cu
 plata Teinelor eu eu in conside-
 ratie aceasta carna iduie sublima
 Sf. v. v. v. pentru care ma grabesc
 a va trimite calduosile mele multu-
 =niri si sincere felicitari Sf. v. v.
 pre-cum si intregul comitet paroh:
 ial. ali comunei Rohau. am fi
 frumos in data aui. in m. ita si alte
 comune, exemplul, D. v. v. eu din
 partem. m. a. si m. ita cel mai f. v.
 citu. g. l. e. a in t. v. v. f. v. v. transilva-
 nienii. Salutari si str. v. v. de
 m. a. v. v. intregi f. v. v. al Sf. v. v.
 eu cea mai de o. v. v. a. v. v. v.
 Sava Hentia V. v. v. 2.

Fig. 8: Sava Hentia's letter from 01.01.1897