

Abstract: This investigation has started from the necessity of identifying some icons found on the territory of Alba county as part of a POSDRU project that aims to make a repertory of the artistic patrimony of this area. The icons of this category were first noticed at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, their whereabouts have remained for a long time mysterious. Their number is quite high and the icons of this category are easily recognizable. The visual impact is insured by their impressive dimensions, brightness of colors and golden background. The recent publication of a monograph has not helped clarify questions of attribution, on the contrary, it has succeeded to make these aspects more obscure by assigning uncritically to one painter works that differed in manner of painting and which clearly originated in different painting centers. The icons analyzed so far allow us to explain unknown aspects and to distinguish the authentic Ieranuțeni icons from those which were usually called as such. The icons belonging to the second category were produced by a group of artists, among which two were master painters who taught an impressive number of apprentices, a fact that explains both, the similarity between them as well as their geographical expansion. The use of the same patterns, the same color nuances and the same producer of wooden frames demonstrates the close relationship between the two main masters, which allows the hypothesis of the existence of a family workshop. The physiognomic features, the decorative elements and generally the manner of painting specific to Nicula painting center suggest this place as the location of the workshop. This hypothesis is reinforced by the pattern used for the Mother of God icon, which follows the engraving of the miracle working icon, which came into the possession of the Jesuits from Cluj, and was printed in Vienna. However, this pattern is accompanied by the miniatures of the archangels, as it appears in the icon from Nicula. This workshop has played an important role in the spreading of this image among Romanians, at a time when the miracle working icon from Nicula became object of pilgrimage. It also allows the examination of the beginning of glass painting at Nicula offering the possibility of determining the date and of understanding the mechanism by which this manner of painting grew to such an extent as to be associated with the entire community. As was the case in other painting centers, the beginnings consisted in the work of one or two master painters, who taught a number of apprentices. The success of their products contributed to the development of an "industrial" scale of production, which had the consequence of degeneration from art to handicraft.

Keywords: Mother of God, miraculous icon, Nicula, Popa Sandu, copperplate.