

THE AUTHOR'S SIGN AS A SELF IDENTIFICATION IN THE VISUAL ARTS FROM ANTIQUITY UNTILL XX CENTURY

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This research work is a study of an autographic material that is quite rare and in most cases totally unknown of. The examination of the author's inscription as a *concept* in the ideological context of the work is a new theme in the Mediaeval studies and its corrective would be the autographic tradition. For this reason, the research was focused in the region of the Mediterranean countries and the Near East from the Antiquity and the Middle Ages down to the Modern Epoch in a wider cultural context. The signed works are arranged in chronological and at the same time in typological principle, which makes the orderly statement of the text rather difficult and to some extent compensated by the reference tools. I hope that the future art expert research work would specify the methodology of the analysis, using historiography, prosopographic and topographic devices for research, the more so, the tradition of signing *throws* light also on the contemporary author's perception.

The main subject of the research is the shape of the author's dedication and the place it takes in the artistic and ritual area. This led to the identification of the standardized (often stereotype) author's attitude towards the inscription, which gives us reason for systematization. During the ages, the creator represented himself as author and possessor of individual prosperity, being at the same time owner and producer. The research makes the author's dedications not only an aim for personification, but rather clarifies the ideological position in them, i.e. the priority of the research is the *presence* in

the preliminary area of the artwork. Using such method of approach would not be considered as wrong if we include the epigraphic material with a sacrifice as being characteristic, where the reading and identification as being that of the author, is hypothetical:

- **because it might not be read owing to its secrecy or fragmentariness;**
- **because it's autographic identification is not certain.**

The regulated existential presence of the producers of wealth (masters and donors) in their art works, give reason for placing the autography question, the more so, there is evidence of identification of the artist-producer of images with the owner producer of the real objects (most often weapons, church plate and textile). The aim of the present research work is not to examine the problem of the authenticity of the author's inscription, which taken alone could be a subject of a separate research work. The signing by another person, regarded as misleading nowadays, is also an interesting phenomenal case, also dependent on the autographic practice, because it personifies the creator from the position of his social and professional recognition. In this case the reference of the author in his (sometimes also in somebody else's) artwork from *the other one* is typologically similar to the donation- comp. the commemoration of the church donor by the icon painter and/or by the clerk.

The problem is new in its character for the historiography of art not only in our country, since universal was the concept about the anonymity of the Mediaeval masters. In many of the anonymous records, there is more than one

author's signature that is being identified. That same tradition for signing the art works is still retained in the modern epoch.

The typology of the autography leads us to two types of dedicational inscriptions, which could relatively be described as:

- **triumphant mentioning and discreet mentioning.**

We should mention, that the boarder of the author's visible and hidden presence in the artistic and ritual area is variable, not only for the authors themselves, but also for these who get informed about them through their signatures. The triumphant mentioning could be hidden and their function is in the most part for the initiated ones, while the discreet mentioning (including the secret ones) are sometimes mannerly emphasized. That autographic variety identifies the canonic dimensions of the creative act.

The study of the autographs is connected with a number of obstacles of different kind. In the first place, these are the methodical and terminological matters. The conception during the Antiquity and the Middle Ages does not clarify the position of the master from the one of the donor in the art work (comp. the words for *make, build, paint*), being the reason why the traditional prosopography idea for definition of the author's presence in many cases is not beneficial and should be placed on another methodical background. When we identify the epigraphic formulas, such as: "*God, please, mention the outcry of God's servant*", "*God, please, have mercy upon Thy servant*", "*God, please, help Thy servant*", we also come across the principle of impossibility to distinct the author's signature from the donor's inscription when an explicit indication is missing. The master and the other donors (he himself could be a donor) are triumphantly present in the proscomedean

memorial service during the liturgy as well as in the donor's inscription. That triumphant presence of the master could be also crowned with his self portrait, as the donor's one, since the commemoration formula from the Prothesis rank is universal and it is meant for the living and the dead and that applies to the donor's portrait.

At the same time the master identifies himself most often with the praying and the ones bearing the sacrifice in the church and his presence is discreet or secret for the worshipers, i.e. the signature has an *intimate* character. This kind of discreet existential locality in the art work is not characteristic for the donor and most probably it reveals the preliminary idea of the author's presence. The authors inscribe their names in the artwork by the traditional for the East antique style for belittlement before the Great Creation – a monogram with a few ligature letters, the first letter of the name (initial) shortenings, epilogue, margins, the usage of separate images and cryptographic systems, which makes it difficult to decipher, whereas, the prosopographic reconstruction is hypothetical. This fact shows, to a great extent the universal praxis of the church decorators and the copyists and miniature painters, identified also in the conception tools:

ἔγραψε 'write', 'painted'; ἔγραψεν 'wrote'; υπεγράψε 'signed'; ἔργον 'deed'; ποίημα 'work'; ποίησε 'creates', ἐποίησεν 'created'.

A more up to date method for reconstruction of the author's presence would be the analysis of the signature in its preliminary context, i.e. the autograph is to be regarded as an iconic concept in the existential area of the artwork. This made necessary the usage of *topos*, which would situate the inscription

according to the personal standardized with the coefficient inventiveness concept for the preliminary and artistic area. The topos in this case reveals the place of the signature in:

- 1) the morphology of the art work – margin, area, content;
- 2) epigraphic practice – formulas, paleographic, graphological and orthographical signs;
- 3) the typology of the autography – regulation, personal invention (for which there is a description *pretext of the author*).

The topographic approach of this research work gives the possibility of discovering the author's presence within his different conception forms. In the Christian context, for example, one could identify stages of anonymousness according to the personal ideas for artistic expression with the innate feeling of sinfulness and underestimation of the author's presence before the Great Creation. However, as well as it is known, the Church does not overlook the person, but in the frame of the allowed (canonic) forms of behavior points the location, which it takes in the liturgical and social realm. In that symbolic context the author places his sign not so much as to inform about his work, but rather to testify before God his diligence in achieving his own salvation. The creative work in the church is being accepted as existential, as well as the uttered prayers with a lit candle before the holy images. Even when the master emphasizes his name in the donor's inscription, the priority goes not to the merit of the donation, what is more, he receives his due payment for his work, but it is his personal request for salvation and confirmation of the Christian deed and his artistic diligence is that guarantee. The signatures reveal the different models in the concept of the creative act as being personal. On one

hand, they contain the stereotypes of the autograph practice, but on the other hand, they state the inventive attitude, and for that reason quite a number of signatures (especially from the Modern epoch) remain without analogue.

That is because the inscription embodies the individuality of the artist.

Having in mind the new scientific problems, the main contribution of this united work would be its experience in offering methods of research and putting in systems the autographic variations in tables. That would be useful in connection with a future research of the Bulgarian autographic material, and still more, giving a meaning to the author's presence is necessary also for the modern artistic praxis, because the art work by tradition is being identified with its creator and *speaks instead of him*. In this sense, the study could be of help to the modern artists, even to the abstractionists, who are open to replace the author's identification with their own human identity. The present text brings forward the problem of the stereotypes and the standards of signing (even the false, i.e. *by the other one*), since the conceptional presence and the existential covert of the personality are not products only of today's regulated social and private life.