

MILESEVA: ITS HISTORY AND PAINTING

(Resume)

In western Serbia, on the territory of the former state of Raska, in the valley of the Lim above the small town of Prijepolje and on the banks of the Milesevka stream, in a pleasant and sheltered spot under the foothills of Mount Zlatar, lies a historically and artistically very important monument of Serbia's past, the monastery of Mileseva, the foundation of the Serbian King Vladislav I (1233—1242), second son of King Stephen the First-Crowned. Vladislav, following the custom of the Nemanic kings, began the building of the Church of the Ascension as his own mausoleum in 1234, immediately after his struggle with his elder brother King Radoslav (1227—1233), from whom, the latter being "driven crazy by his beautiful wife", Vladislav seized the throne. He built the monastery with the blessing of his uncle, Saint Sava of Serbia, the founder of the independent Serbian Orthodox Church, and dowered it with a rich treasure of ornaments, ecclesiastical vessels, and lands. The foundation ranked high, indeed in the second place, among Serbian churches. Situated on an important international trade-route, on which it was one of the chief halting-places, the monastery, both as an artistic and ecclesiastical-political centre, was for centuries the intersection-point of influences from Eastern and Western Europe.

The monastery church with the old narthex was finished when St. Sava of Serbia, on his return from Palestine, unexpectedly died at Tirnovo in Bulgaria in 1235. His body lay for two years in Bulgaria until, after lengthy negotiations, King Vladislav brought his uncle's remains with great ceremony to his own church of Mileseva, and buried them in a tomb in the ex-narthex, whence they were afterwards transferred to the old narthex. Later, Vladislav himself, by that time long deposed, was buried in a tomb prepared in the body of the church. Modest in his life, Vladislav was overshadowed also in death by the fame of his great uncle, for it was as the burial-church of St. Sava that Mileseva became famous. In the XI 11th and the first half of the XIV century the monastery is more often mentioned as housing St. Sava's tomb than as a centre of culture and art. In the days when the Serbian state was advancing towards the south, Mileseva remained apart from the main course of events. But after the tragic year 1371, when the Serbs suffered their first great defeat in the battle against the Turks on the Marica, in which the Serbian King Vukasin (1366—1371) was slain and the Serbs were forced to withdraw from the southern regions, — in the years of devastating Turkish inroads and general political instability, the monks of Mileseva, as guardians of the tomb of St. Sava, were able to take advantage of the situation. They spread the belief that King Vukasin had perished by the curse of Saint Sava, because he had usurped the throne of the incompetent Tsar Uros, son of Tsar Dusan.

Six years after Vukasin's death, in 1377, the monks of Mileseva took further advantage of their prerogative as guardians of the legitimacy of the State. In that year they crowned in their church the Bosnian "Ban", Tvrtko (1353—1391), as King of Serbia and Bosnia. The fact that the Mileseva monks acted as a fraternity competent to create a King, as "Kingmakers", conferring legitimacy on Tvrtko's rule, did not remain without consequences. Seventy years

later, in 1448, the powerful ruler of what was later Hercegovina, Stephen Kosaca, became "Herzog of Saint Sava". Although Mileseva was in the centre of political events in Bosnia and Hercegovina (to which it belonged), its fortunes remained linked with the Serbian "Despotate" which followed the ruin of Dusan's Empire. In 1405 the monastery was given five villages by the Serbian Despot Stephen Lazarevic, and in 1459, when the whole of Serbia fell under the Osmanli domination which was to last for several centuries, the monastery was set fire to and plundered, but released from taxation by edict of Sultan Mehmed II. This privilege was withdrawn in 1477, and for Mileseva there followed a time of severe oppression. Without the support of the rich Christian nobility, the monks now depended on the Orthodox population of the neighbouring township of Prijepolje, which in the first years of the XVI century was rapidly developing into a market-town. At the same time, Mileseva begins to be noticed as a literary and cultural centre. Good copyists appeared in the monastery, and also its first printers who, to learn their trade, went into "foreign parts, to Italy". They were among the finest printers of Cyrillic texts in the XVI century. The monastery had its own printing-press from 1544—1557. At the same time, it vigilantly guarded as holy relics the remains of St. Sava, to which, according to the reports of contemporaries, Turks and Jews offered even more gifts than did Christians. Many French, Venetians and Germans passed through the monastery at that time and left precious records of it and its monks and administrators, who maintained connections with the most far-flung posts of the European diplomacy of that time. In the middle of the XVI century, men from Mileseva penetrated as far as the Court of Ivan the Terrible at Moscow, their representatives journeyed to the Sultan at Constantinople and kept up connections with the rulers of Wallachia and Moldavia, who made rich benefactions to the monastery. Mileseva also carried on a trade in livestock with Dubrovnik. Its wealth could not be concealed, and the Turkish impositions, became heavier and heavier. Conditions became much worse after the death of the Grand Vizier of Constantinople, Mehmed Pasha Sokolovic, who is said to have been a pupil at Mileseva before he became a Moslem, and who was always its powerful protector. In the last years of the XVI century, Mileseva lost its greatest treasure, the relics of St. Sava, which were seized by the Turks in 1595 and burnt on Vracar Hill near Belgrade, on the pretext that Turks believed in them and feared them. Sinan Pasha, who ordered the relics to be burnt, destroyed in this way the belief in their indestructibility, but at the same time gave rise to new legends about the burnt saint's vengeance on the Turks, who from that time began to lose all their battles.

The historic mission of Mileseva lasted another hundred years. During that time the monastery suffered many misfortunes, but managed to exist. The links of the Mileseva monks with Russia and the Russian Czars became stronger and more frequent. The Russians took a particular interest in the Mileseva manuscripts and icons. With financial help from the Russian Czar, the old frescoes in the nave, the work of King Vladislav's artists, were covered with a new layer of paintings. But as none of the old compositions were damaged by hammer-blows to make the new plaster stick, the new paintings served as an ideal protection for the old frescoes during the time of the most violent attacks in the late XVII and entire XVIII centuries, especially in 1688, when Mileseva and other monasteries in that region met with complete catastrophe. The monastery was then burnt and laid waste, and the monks fled in all directions. It was the time of the Austro-Turkish war, when the Christian armies first advanced, then suddenly retreated, occasioning the great migration of the Serbs to lands north of the Save and Danube. Nevertheless, a few monks returned and the monastery partially revived, but during that period it was frequently pillaged and set fire to.

Mileseva begins the modern phase of its history at the end of the XIX century, as an artistic monument. Its frescoes, thanks mainly to the work of Gabriel Millet and N. L. Okunev, rapidly gained recognition and have taken their place in the history of mediaeval European art.

As an artistic monument, Mileseva is important architecturally because it represents the first clearly worked-out blending of Byzantine and Romanesque elements in old Serbian art. As a building dedicated to the practical needs of the Orthodox cult, the church has a fixed ground-plan, a definite arrangement of the various parts of the building, and dimensions almost dictated by custom. But, like other buildings of the Raska school, in spite of its conventional ground-plan, Mileseva shows considerable variation in its upper structure. Its architects, nearer to western ideas, emphasized the vertical lines of the edifice and reduced the diameter of the dome. Being on the threshold of the west, the architecture of Mileseva is the nearest approach in Serbian art to the Romanesque. As the church was several times burned, partially destroyed and rebuilt (its present form was given by anonymous builders in the sixties of last century), we can only judge of its original appearance by the models in the hands of the donor, King Vladislav. The proportions are particularly clear in the model of Mileseva in the earlier portrait of the King, above his tomb. The required Byzantine theological conception is architecturally expressed in a Romanesque composition. Romanesque is the rhythmic development in height of the masses and spaces. The dome, that typical Byzantine feature, is at Mileseva more like a Romanesque tower at the crossing of nave and transepts than a Byzantine cupola. The original Romanesque-Byzantine church had facades of predominantly Romanesque character. Recent investigations have shown that the finished church with its narthex was altered to suit the requirements of the painters immediately after the completion of the building and before the painting of the frescoes, so that the Romanesque conception of the facade was considerably altered. Doors were walled up on the northern and southern sides and the windows above them greatly reduced in size. Until all the later plaster has been removed from the facade, the exact appearance of the original building can only be guessed at.

It is the frescoes which give this historic building its high importance as art. There are three distinct sets of frescoes, painted at different times and by different teams of painters, and they show varying conceptions and artistic quality. In several places are to be found interesting marks, abbreviated instructions left by the master-painter for the workmen to indicate where they should place such and such a figure of a saint. From the language of these notes, we see that the master-painter was a Serb, and that the frescoes were painted by native artists.

The arrangement of the frescoes in the nave and narthex at Mileseva, which were the first to be painted, is not the customary one. Instead of the Biblical scenes running from left to right and from top to bottom, as in other churches, they here run from right to left and from below upwards. As a result, the fresco of the Ascension is given prominence in the cupola as the final illustration of the entire story of Christ's life on earth. Among the frescoes, the most striking are the four monumental compositions in the semi-circular spaces of the base of the cupola beneath the drum: on the eastern side, Christ appears to the Apostles before the Ascension; on the south is the Deposition; on the west, the Communion of the Apostles; and on the north, the Transfiguration. Fearing that their daringly constructed dome might collapse, and believing in the infallible power of miraculous symbols, the Mileseva painters placed under the pendentives eight discs, each of which is painted with three concentric circles which rotate in opposite

directions. These strange plaques, dazzling in their circular movement, stand as symbols of the Logos, the Word of God, on which all things rest.

Of the frescoes representing the Festivals of the Church, the following are preserved: the Annunciation, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, the Entry into Jerusalem, the Holy Women at the Sepulchre, and fragments of the Nativity, the Transfiguration, the Assumption of the Virgin and the Descent into Hell. To this series belong also the great figures of the prophets, of which fragments have been preserved. From the cycle of the Passion, several compositions remain: the Garden of Gethsemane, the Deposition, and the lower part of the Incredulity of Thomas. All the Festivals are painted in the nave, while the scenes of the Passion are found in the nave and the old narthex. In the entire pictorial decoration of the Mileseva church, individual figures are particularly numerous, both standing and in medallions, skilfully grouped and classified according to their rank in the heavenly hierarchy. Outstanding is the more than life-size figure of Archdeacon Stephen. Many medallions of heads appear in the space beneath the cupola. The most beautiful are the medallions of the prophets above the old iconostasis.

In the old narthex, at one time divided from the nave by doors, we find another series of paintings, predominantly blue in tone. These were done by artists who were themselves monks, and whereas the Court painters of the main body of the church treated for preference Warrior-Saints in shining knightly apparel, and their well-nourished patricians seem to hint at a special paradise for departed souls of higher rank on earth, — here, in the old narthex, the monastic painters covered the walls with very different figures: monks, fasting saints, hermits, wild-looking fanatics in rags, a strange world which rejects all hierarchy, all rank. Among them are also the Serbian saints, Saint Sava and his father, Saint Simeon Nemanja. On the north wall, turning towards Saints Sava and Simeon, is a row of kings: Stephen the First-Crowned, Radoslav, and Vladislav standing modestly behind his elder brother (from whom he had usurped the throne). In the upper zone, above these standing figures, are the heads and shoulders of still more fasting saints, like monumental icons.

Thus in the old church of Mileseva two worlds met and clashed, the courtly and the monastic, and two opposite conceptions of a tried monumental art.

The outstanding qualities of the Court painters are monumental and decorative. Without the frescoes in the nave at Mileseva it would not be possible to understand either the formative process of the monumental style or its origin. This painting is unusual in technique: the background of the frescoes in the body of the church was covered with gold leaf. As in mosaics and miniatures, all the scenes are enacted under a golden sky. The earliest painters of the Mileseva frescoes wished to obtain the rich effect and intensity of colouring of costly mosaic work; they drew their figures and scenes after the manner of mosaics, and much of the Mileseva painting on gold grounds could serve as a foundation for tesserae. The advanced art of the Mileseva painters of the golden frescoes appears most clearly in their power of selection. All the superior qualities of Byzantine monumental painting are unchanged, and only here and there are details introduced — intelligently and with great tact — of a stylistic and iconographic nature borrowed from the Romanesque. These masters knew how to exploit the expressive power of the Romanesque style to emphasize an unusual pose or gesture, or to give

their figures facial expressions of a tender emotion foreign to the Byzantines.

Although some authorities insist on the unity of style in the body of the church at Mileseva and in the old narthex, the blue paintings of monastic character in the old, ascetic-looking narthex are very different from the golden frescoes of the Court painters of the nave. The difference between the two styles is subtler than at first appears. Rejecting grace of form and decorative monumentalism, the monastic artists developed an art of the highest aesthetic qualities. Their asceticism appears in the general outward effect, but the curtain of modesty and strict severity conceals the restrained, tried art of highly cultured men. They cultivate rather the inner qualities in their painting and create a more homogeneous style. It is true that they too, like the painters of the nave, make use of old models: the great half-portraits in the upper zone are like monumental icons in mosaic; the great fresco of St. Sava, monumental and fresh in colour, is entirely in the tradition of the Hellenistic portrait. This unemphatic painting is full of secret beauties which call for long and concentrated observation.

The third set of frescoes is in the exo-narthex which King Vladislav built before his uncle's body was brought to Mileseva, and in which he prepared his uncle's tomb. This narthex has two floors: on the upper, which has a dome, there are no traces of painting. The frescoes on the ground-floor, which was dark, elongated, in the form of a monumental ossuary, remained until not long ago quite unnoticed. It is only quite recently that investigations have shown that these frescoes too belong to the XIII century. Here, in this dark interior without a single window, on the vault and on all four walls, are the scenes of the Last Judgment. Here, for the first and last time in old Serbian painting, the theme of Christ's Second Coming occupies a whole interior. Moreover, this is the most unusual Last Judgment in early Serbian art, directly inspired by the famous homily of St. Ephraim the Syrian on "Christ's Second Coming."

On the east wall, round the doorway leading to the inner narthex, are represented the chief Judges: Christ on a rainbow, the Virgin on his left, St. John on the right, with a guard of angels round them. There are Adam and Eve, with the Apostles depicted on the vault, and behind them the heads of the countless mass of the heavenly host of angels. The unusual features of this Last Judgment begin to appear in the frescoes on the south wall. There, as the main motif, practically the same scene is repeated four times: four groups of lost souls flee westwards — to Hell. Some have fallen, some are turning in fear to look back for the last time at the Judge. Angelic guards are pitilessly driving forth the damned with hands and spears: false prophets and apostles, unjust rulers, sinful bishops and lying monks. The total artistic effect of the Mileseva Last Judgment is now unfortunately lost. The frescoes on the north wall, representing groups of the righteous — apostles, rulers, bishops and monks, turned towards the Gates of Paradise — have completely disappeared.

The artistic treatment of the Last Judgment is very different from the rest of the Mileseva paintings, especially in its inwardness. The theme, which might have been interpreted in painting of a monumental character, is concentrated in a powerful vision of a definitely inner experience. The fiery logic of Ephraim the Syrian's words has found in the art of the Mileseva Last Judgment a truly adequate expression.

Thus the three series of the Mileseva frescoes definitely illustrate by their qualities three stages in the artistic life of Mileseva in the years when the monastery was being completed and when it received, from the artistic point of view, its final form. All three series of these XIII century frescoes were executed in the lifetime of the founder, King Vladislav. All the changing fortunes of his reign are reflected in the frescoes of his church. The brilliant start of the young usurper is marked by the bright frescoes with their gold grounds in the body of the church. The frescoes in the narthex, of monastic character, already indicate new conceptions. The King is painted in the company of the monks as a member of a distinguished family whose founder had been a ruler and a monk. The frescoes of the Last Judgment, unusual in conception for a royal foundation, showing as they do kings and bishops among the first to be brought to judgment, could hardly have been so unequivocal in the foundation of a fortunate king. Most probably the frescoes in the Mileseva exo-narthex were done after 1243, when the monastery, planned as his mausoleum, served the deposed monarch, already in his lifetime, as a place of refuge.

The too modest selection of reproductions in previous works on Mileseva and old Serbian painting has failed to give a full picture of the quality and variety of its frescoes. In the present volume are collected and reproduced for the first time all the Mileseva frescoes which time has not reduced to indecipherability. Recently cleaned and fixed, they have, in a way, come back to life. Certainly, for the men of today, they cannot live again in their original brilliance. But perhaps some of them will attract new admirers, especially among those lovers of art who have not lost a feeling for the beauties of early painting.