

# *The Representation of Architecture on the Donor Portrait in Lesnovo*

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In the first zone of the main monastic church, dedicated to the archangel Michael and Holy Father Gabriel of Lesnovo, in Lesnovo, on the northern wall of the nave, beside the entrance to the prothesis, there is a representation of the church founder, Jovan Oliver who is represented frontally, holding a church (fig. 1). According to the assumption already accepted in the science, this representation, together with the fresco decoration of the nave, was done in 1346/1347.<sup>1</sup> The three-nave building with a dome, high drum and three windows with transennae is represented, while the narthex is omitted. Below the dome and above the portal, there is a tambour-carré with two connecting windows, also with transennae. In the lunette of the main portal there is a half-figure representation of Archangel Michael meticulously painted and signed.<sup>2</sup> The façade is dominated by the huge double door consisting of six decorated panels. On both sides of the door, high on the façade, there are three more openings, richly decorated. Above the door, there is a meticulously painted doorframe with a floral motif. The façade is uniformly painted in green and further decorated with a huge ornament of a stylized lily and a heart-like one voluted and inserted in circle. The ornamental repertoire is further enriched with rectangular stripes of darker color with volutes. The roof and the dome consist of grey tiles.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ГАБЕЛИЋ, 1998, 33.

<sup>2</sup> The inscription beside the patron reads: О АРХ(АНГЕЛОС) МИХ(АИΛ).

<sup>3</sup> The term *representation of the church* or *donor's (founder's) representation of architecture* is used here instead of conventional term *ktetorial model*. More on this topic: MARINKOVIĆ, 2007, 145-153.

Until now, the representation of the church that Despot Jovan Oliver holds in his hands has not been a specific topic of scientific interest. It was Svetozar Radojčić who first drew attention to it, stressing that, according to the way representations of the churches on founder's portraits were decorated, one can assume that "the 'models' on Serbian medieval portraits were made from wax or rather from metal," and that ornaments "used for its decoration were goldsmith ornaments".<sup>4</sup> Thus, he had equalized the *donor representation of architecture* with the metal model in the shape of the church with the artophorion function. This opinion was accepted much later by Smiljka Gabelić.<sup>5</sup> Besides precisely describing this representation in her book about the Lesnovo Monastery, Gabelić has stressed its size and its *unusual position* near the altar screen. She also concluded that the morphological features of the church in the hand of the donor are "certainly those of Lesnovo itself"<sup>6</sup> and that it represented the view from the *western side*.

Without questioning the basic opinion of this author – that we are dealing with the representation of the Lesnovo church – we would like to draw attention to some circumstances that prevent us to accept it fully, and are redirecting our consideration. Namely, we are of the opinion that the interpretation according to which the church held in Jovan Oliver's hand is presented from its western side should be reconsidered hoping that this will help us understand its unusual position mentioned above.

At first sight, the lack of the apse on the representation of the Lesnovo church points towards the opinion that the represented façade really is the western one. Thus, the church in Lesnovo is not of the three-nave plan, as it first appears, but of cross-square with a dome (fig. 2). This means that its three-nave structure is visible only at the roof level. So it is more likely that this three nave-structure is being seen from some other side than the western one.

Further, comparing the morphological elements of the southern façade with the one depicted on the donor representation, we can find the following similarities:

<sup>4</sup> РАДОЈЧИЋ, 1997, 76.

<sup>5</sup> ГАБЕЛИЋ, *op. cit.*, 113. In his book about the building techniques in medieval Serbia, Nenadović (НЕНАДОВИЋ, 2003, 47) also mentions this assumption. This opinion has recently been challenged by D. Vojvodić (ВОЈВОДИЋ, 2002, 102).

<sup>6</sup> ГАБЕЛИЋ, *op. cit.*, 113.

1. The openings in the upper part of the south façade of the church form a so-called Constantinopolitan window,<sup>7</sup> which largely corresponds to two connected windows with transennae depicted below the dome's tambour carré and above the lunette of the door. This window does not exist either on the western or on the northern façade of the church (fig. 3). The difference between the existing (three) and depicted (two) numbers of windows could be explained by the small surface of the façade as well as by the appliance of the *reductio numeri* principle.<sup>8</sup>

2. On the south façade, on both sides of the door, two pairs of blind niches exist (fig. 4). On the represented architecture, on both sides of the door and high on the façade, tree semicircle openings are depicted. To the contrary of the depiction of windows with transennae, for these elements one can assume that represent the blind niches<sup>9</sup>.

3. The southern entrance to the church has the marble lintel decorated with the carved floral motif, depicted very realistically. (Fig. 5).

4. Decorative ceramoplastic ornament, visible in the upper western part of the southern façade of the church (fig. 4) is represented with the cross-in-circle ornament depicted on the right side of the donor representation. Its reversed location (on the left side instead of right) can be explained by applying the *inversio* principle.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Transennae with coloured oculi until recently stood in the high drum of the dome. Cf. ГАБЕЛИЋ, 1994, 37-41.

<sup>8</sup> The *reduction of the number* (*reductio numeri*) principle of architectural schematization is one of the six main principles of architectural representation, where identical architectural or decorative elements are being reduced for the purpose of a clearer representation of the whole. The reduced elements are usually the windows of the high drum of the dome or of the façade; small arcades, blind arches and niches. This principle is particularly visible when showing the number of windows – there are often fewer than the actual number. Cf. МАРИНКОВИЋ, 2007, 47-48.

<sup>9</sup> On the ktetorial representation in the nartex of the Mileševa Monastery, the same mode of depiction of blinde niches was used.

<sup>10</sup> According to the research done by Anka Stojaković (STOJAKOVIĆ, 1988, 225-231) due to the velocity of painting on the fresh plaster, some architectural elements were represented as seen from inside. This led to the *relocation* of architectural elements by 180° in relation to their position on the real building, however correctly presenting that element's shape. This *inversio* prin-

It is important to stress that in Serbian Medieval Monumental Art, to which this church historically belongs, the church in the ktetor's hand was, as a rule, painted from one of its lateral sides – the northern or the southern.<sup>11</sup> A frontal depiction of the western façade occurred rarely, since it was impossible to depict the apse, which is, besides the cross, the most important element of any Christian building – a kind of *topos* of donor architecture. The simultaneous representation of the frontal look of a building was very popular in the Art of Antiquity, and was therefore in most cases omitted in representations of Early Christian architecture – in order to avoid possible confusion.<sup>12</sup> Later on, medieval artist preferred the simultaneous representation of at least two sides of the building, thus rendering a more realistic representation of the structure, especially in the case of the ktetor's architecture.<sup>13</sup>

Taking into consideration these facts, as well as a presumption that the endowment depicted on the donor's portrait was made according to the finished building, we can assume that the donor representation in Lesnovo was depicted as seen from the southern side.<sup>14</sup> The lack of the apse representation, in this case, could be explained with the fact that the apse in Lesnovo is very shallow and thus hardly visible from the southern side (fig. 2). In addition, the building appears to be three-nave only from this side – the

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ciple was often applied when depicting the windows. More about this topic in: МАРИНКОВИЋ, *op. cit.*, 49.

<sup>11</sup> The northern façade is represented in the nave of Mileševa, Studenica, (southern chapel of the exonarthex), Sopoćani, Gradac, King Dragutin's Chapel in Đurđevi Stupovi, Arilje, Dobrun, Mateič, Psača, Ramaća, Rudenica and Ohrid, (SS. Constantine and Helen). The southern façade is represented in the nartex of Mileševa, Kučevište, the Patriarchate of Peć (Holy Virgin Hodegetria), Dečani (south side of the NE pillar of the nave), Pološko, Treskavac, Ravanica, Manasija, Vevi. From the western side, it was probably depicted only in the Bela crkva karanska church but, due to great damage of this depiction, it is hard to state that with any certainty.

<sup>12</sup> In Antiquity, frontal depiction of temples was very common on the coins and reliefs. Cf. PICK, 1904, 1-41 and LAMPL, 1961, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Church is depicted from NW side in Studenica (southern chapel of the exonarthex), King's church and in Gračanica, and from SW side in Ston, Staro Nagoričino and Bijelo Polje.

<sup>14</sup> In most cases, donor architectural representations are made after a completed church. Cf. МАРИНКОВИЋ, 2007.

difference in the roof level of the cross and dome drum are most visible from this side.

Other elements of depicted ktetorial representation – the number of the high drum windows and the patron representation in the lunette above the entrance, could be characteristics equally of western and southern façade of Lesnovo.<sup>15</sup> Still, although it is usual for this period to have a depiction of the patron above the main entrance,<sup>16</sup> and although neither of these lunette representations are completely precise, it is more likely that the model for the patron in the lunette on the ktetorial representation was the *standing* figure of the Archangel from the southern door, rather than the *equestrian* one from the western door.<sup>17</sup>

The fact that can further sustain the presumption that what we are dealing with in Lesnovo is a representation of the southern façade, could be indirect. Namely, ktetorial portrait in Lesnovo has an unusual and until now unexplained position on the northern side of the nave of the church. According to the *parallelism* principle that is common in the representation of architecture on donors portraits<sup>18</sup>, this position will be justified only with the representation of the southern facade of the church.

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<sup>15</sup> The number of high drum windows, seen from one standing point, is always three.

<sup>16</sup> One can find such representations in Psača and Treskavac.

<sup>17</sup> According to S. Gabelić (ГАБЕЛИЋ, 1998, 218), remains of the fresco depicting a standing Archangel Michael were found in the lunette of the southern entrance to the church, belonging to the same period as the fresco ensemble of the nave.

<sup>18</sup> This term describes the inter-relation of the depicted and the real architecture, i.e. the relation between the place where the ktetor's portrait is situated within the architecture and the view-point of the depicted church. The represented architecture extends parallelly to the real building and, when observing the painted church, all the main elements point in a direction so as not to confuse the beholder. Therefore, if the painted representation is from the southern side of the church, its appearance on the ktetor's portrait is represented from the northern side, and vice versa. Thus, the painted apse is directed towards the altar, the painted portal towards the western façade, and the painted and the real façade extend in a parallel fashion, which in such a representation ensures the correct orientation. In Serbian Medieval Monumental Art this principle is obvious in more than 75% of cases. If

Another thing should be reconsidered in light of the donor's architecture depiction – the complex and ambiguous way of façade decoration. As mentioned above, although deliberate at first sight, the way of decoration of the façades led Radojčić to conclude that the ktetorial “models” were depicted after the artophoria, i.e. the metal models of the church, and that ornaments “used for its decoration were goldsmith ornaments”.<sup>19</sup> Recent researches on representations of the morphology and symbolism of the artophoria have shown that they are quite different from the representations of churches on donors' portraits. First, the artophoria always bear inscriptions, naming them “Zion” or “Heavenly Jerusalem”.<sup>20</sup> Second, the most common representation of artophoria in monumental painting is of a square box or rotunda, i.e., a building with a roof. First such representation in Serbian Medieval painting are to be found in the scene of the *Communion of the Apostles* in the Hodigitria church of the Patriarchate of Peć.<sup>21</sup> This type of building is rarely present in the ktetorial representations, only in the cases of representation of the chapel as a part of a larger structure.<sup>22</sup> At the present stage of research, it seems almost impossible to further sustain this opinion of Radojčić.

Still, the unusually rich ornamental decoration of the Lesново ktetorial representation can lead us to another possibility. Ornamental motifs present on it appear in various other scenes from the Archangel cycle.

1. A heart-shaped ornament decorated with two volutes above and two slivers below, from the left side of the portal of the ktetorial representation (fig. 6), one can find on the left door post of the church at the back side of the scene of *Archangel's Miracle with the Perjurer* as well as in the scene *Archangel healing the possessed Monk Michael* and *Archangel Destroying Saracens*.

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there are some exceptions, they can easily be explained by iconography. Cf. МАРИНКОВИЋ, 2007, 54-63.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. f. 4.

<sup>20</sup> СТЕРАИГОВА, 1988, 282-286 (with older literature on the topic).

<sup>21</sup> РАДУЈКО, 1993-94, 29-48.

<sup>22</sup> Examples in this group are almost exclusively buildings without a defined external appearance. The Venantius Chapel at the Lateran Basilica in Rome, the Chapel of St. Quiriquis and Julitta at the St. Maria Antiqua Church in Rome, and Chapel of Pope John VII at the Old Basilica of St. Peter in Rome, as well as the cave churches in Cappadocia (Belisirma Kirk dam alti kilise) and Udabno.

2. An ornament resembling a stylized lily (*fleur de lis*) at the right side of the portal of the ktetorial representation (fig. 7) one can also find in the decoration of the fortress in the scene *Archangel Appearing to Balaam*.

3. A rectangular ribbon of dark green color with volutes appearing on the ktetorial representation is very common in the depicted architecture in Lesnovo, for example in the scene of *Archangel healing the Lepers*.

4. The doorposts in the shape of porphyry columns at the lateral door sides of the ktetorial representation are very similar to the architectural columns in the *Dormition of the Virgin* scene, and to the doors in the *Wise and Foolish Virgin Parabola* scene.

It seems that we can conclude that, according to the examples of ornaments depicted on donor's portrait, as well as in other scenes – as presented here – we are dealing with the *common repertoire* of architectural decoration in Lesnovo.

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To conclude: the representation of the church that Jovan Oliver holds in his hand is the Lesnovo church, seen from its southern side. In this depiction, we have the exact basic silhouette of the building, and many characteristic details – windows, niches, decorated marble doorpost as well as some decorative façade elements that were precisely depicted after the completed building. It is obvious that the real structure was the very basic inspiration for the ktetorial representation, although we can find in it some generalizations that are a part of medieval painting conventional forms. The representation of real architecture – the completed building – shown through existing architectural elements represented as-realistically-as-possible, is much more present in the ktetorial representations than the *evocation* of architecture that is present in other kinds of architectural representation i.e. in so-called *décor architectural*.<sup>23</sup> This is not without reason. Beside its representative function, the ktetorial portrait illustrating the founder holding his endowment, in pictorial form, expressed the type of founder's right defined by the charter or *typikon* in written form. The custom of writing the founding charter on the wall of a church, immediately beside the founder's portrait, leads to the assumption that the founder's portrait with the church was a

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<sup>23</sup> Tania Velmans was the first one to use this term. See: VELMANS, 1964, 183-216.

certain type of visual equivalent to the charter as a legal act.<sup>24</sup> So the very concrete building, the genuine subject of the monastic founder's donation, had to be represented in a precise way.

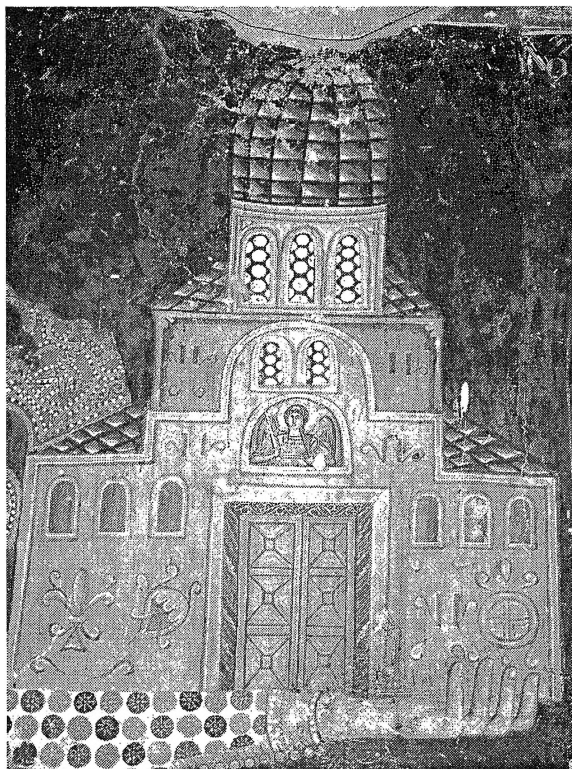
We have highlighted from various points the assumption that the church depicted on the ktetorial portrait in Lesnovo was painted after the real building, according to the principles of medieval architectural representation, comparing the real and the represented architecture. We have shown that the relation between the place where the ktetor's portrait is situated within the architecture and the view-point of the depicted church are strongly co-related, i.e. we have drawn attention to the *parallelism* principle, one of the most important principles of architectural representation that strongly, although indirectly, leads us to the conclusion that the ktetorial representation was made after a real building. Hence, based on the Lesnovo representation, we can conclude with high probability that no kind of three-dimensional objects (the artophorion or project model) were the basis of this representation, but that it was made after the real, completed architecture. Above all, the idea upon which the church endowment is based is eschatological. The founder stands before the Lord's throne hoping for mercy on the Day of Judgment, carrying his church – not its maquette.

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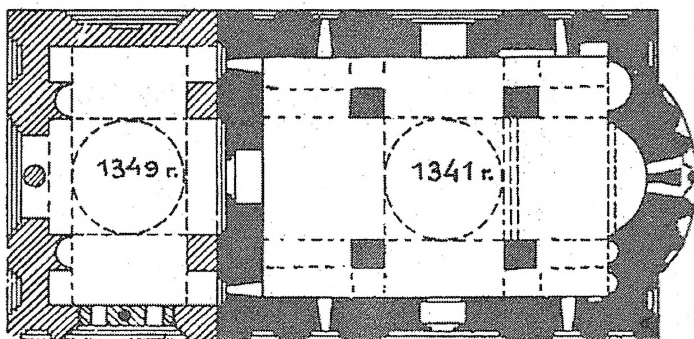
<sup>24</sup> Charters were written on the walls of the churches in Studenica, Žiča and Gračanica in Serbia and in Adreaš in Macedonia. More about the legal significance of the portrait on charters in: DJURIĆ, 1963, 251-269 and BABIĆ, 1979, 173. Henri FRANCES also believes that the portraits of founders had a legal role. Cf. FRANCES, 1992, 20. About the legal function of the ktetorial representation more in: МАРИНКОВИЋ, 2009, 321-336.



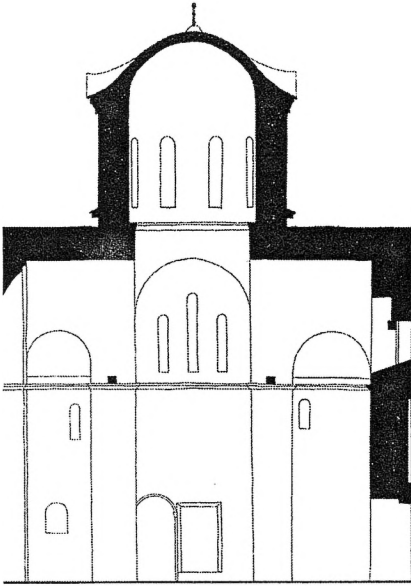
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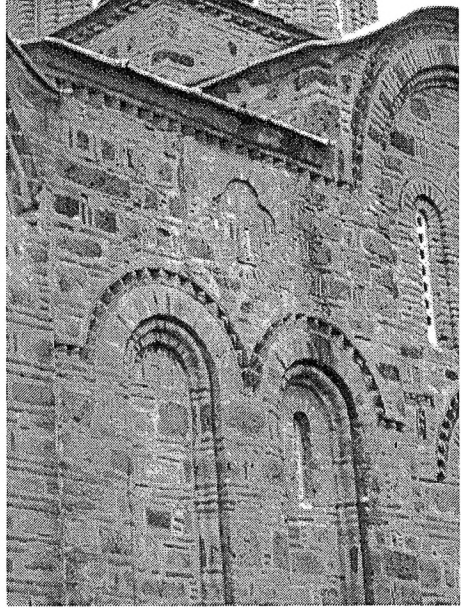
*Representation of the Lesnovo church: founder Jovan Oliver holding a church*



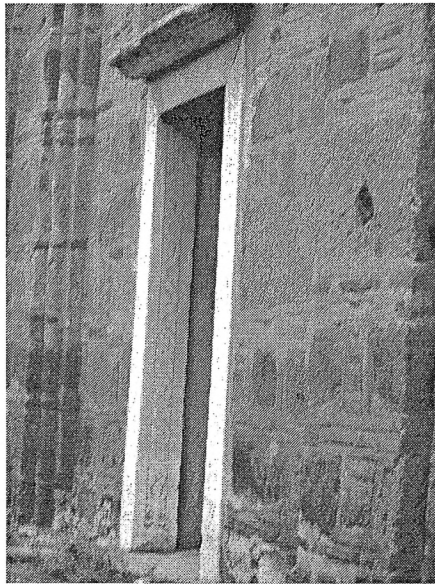
*Plan of the Lesnovo church*



*Lesnovo, cross-section, south side*



*Lesnovo, south façade, western section*



*Lesnovo, southern entrance, carved portal*



*Heart-shaped ornament decorated with two volutes above and two slivers below, ktetorial representation*



*Ornament resembling to the stylized lilly (fleur de lis) from the right side of the portal of the ktetorial representation*

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