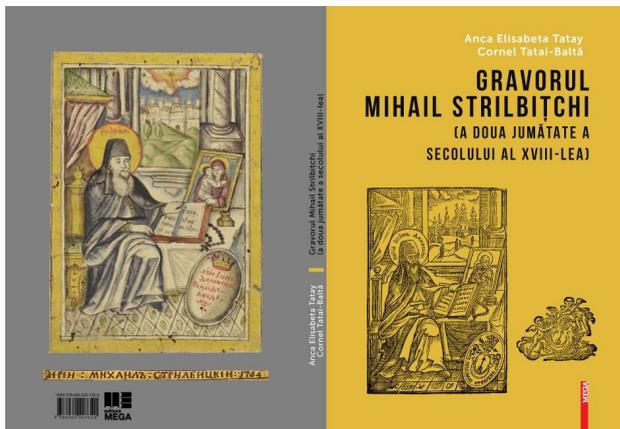


BOOK REVIEW:

Anca Elisabeta Tatay and Cornel Tatai-Baltă, *Gravorul Mihail Strilbițchi (a doua jumătate a secolului al XVIII-lea)* [*Mihail Strilbițchi, The Engraver (Second Half of the Eighteenth Century)*], Editura Mega, 2023, 345 p.



Anca Elisabeta Tatay and Cornel Tatai-Baltă are well-known researchers of the art and technique illustration of early Romanian book (1508–1830) and authors of reference books on the engravers who worked in the printing press of Blaj, Sibiu, Brașov, and Bucharest, and at the Romanian section of the printing house in Buda in the seven-

teenth-nineteenth centuries. Their recent book, published in 2023 by Mega Publishing House in Cluj-Napoca, is the first work in Romanian literature focused solely on Mihail Strilbițchi's engraving activity. The volume also builds upon the authors' previous contributions to this topic, which were presented in three articles published between 2021 and 2023. As pointed out by Anca Elisabeta Tatay and Cornel Tatai-Baltă in the introduction, while the works of the most important engravers who illustrated early Romanian books are well known, "the same cannot be said about the graphic works created by Mihail



Strilbițchi (...). That is why we considered it necessary to publish a comprehensive study dedicated to the most valuable and prolific engraver in Moldavia in the second half of the eighteenth century” (p. 10).

A complex personality, the priest Mihail Strilbițchi (about 1730–1805/7) occupies a special place in the world of book and printing during the Phanariot reigns. He was not only an engraver, but also a bookbinder, printer and owner of printing press and editor. Towards the end of his life, he contributed to the establishment of the Neamț Monastery printing press, to which he donated part of his own printing inventory. He was also a translator from Russian language, and, an intelligence agent for the Russian army commander. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, different aspects of his biography have been subjects of interest for researchers from various fields (history, art history, literary history, history of book and printing). The Romanian and foreign bibliographic sources, meticulously identified and critically analysed by the authors of the book, reveal that over time Mihail Strilbițchi has been investigated from various perspectives. However, his work as an engraver has been insufficiently and often superficially explored. During their research, the authors discovered that the exact number of Strilbițchi’s engravings had never been determined, and that previous opinions in literature about their artistic value were conflicting. Some specialists, such as N. Iorga, Gh. Oprescu, G. Ștempel, and M. Tomescu, appreciated Strilbițchi’s qualities as an engraver, while others, such as Gh. Racoveanu and Al. Busuioceanu, criticized his illustrations.

Was Mihail Strilbițchi a talented engraver or not? How many engravings did he actually produce, and what was his role in the history of Romanian book and printing? To find the answers to these questions, Anca Elisabeta Tatay and Cornel Tatai-Baltă conducted a thorough investigation of the thirty prints preserved in various libraries and published in Iași, Dubăsari, and Movilău, to which Strilbițchi contributed in various ways. The researched graphic material included all types of his illustrations: engravings, frontispieces, title page frames, the coat of arms of Moldavia, and his typographic mark.

The first part of the book contains a brief presentation of Mihail Strilbițchi’s biography. Born in Ukraine into a family of engravers whose origins are still unclear, Strilbițchi was a graduate of the Kiev Theological Academy. The ambitious young priest came to Iași around 1755 and initially worked as a bookbinder and engraver. His knowledge (not only in the field of wood engraving but also in metal engraving, a technique rarely used by printers-engravers in the Romanian Principalities due to a lack of technical means), ensured him the goodwill and protection of the metropolitans of Moldavia. Between 1756 and 1800, Strilbițchi worked at the Metropolitan Printing Press in Iași, as well as at his own printing press which operated in Iași, Movilău, and Dubăsari. He illustrated, printed, or

edited religious and secular books, including textbooks, a calendar, a volume of poetry, a treatise on physiognomy, and more. Most of the latter were published in his own printing press.

In addition to what the authors have presented, we note that Strilbițchi's success as a private typographer was also facilitated by the historical context of the eighteenth century. During this period, some Phanariot princes, as well as many boyars, and high-ranking clergy hoped that Russia, an emerging European great power, would save the Romanian Principalities from Ottoman domination, thus asking for its protection and often collaborating with its representatives. The Russian-Turkish (1768–1774) and Russian-Austrian-Turkish (1787–1790) wars and the Russian military occupation of Moldavia gave to Strilbițchi the opportunity to put his knowledge and his enterprising spirit to good use. He knew how to take advantage of these turbulent times, offering his services as a translator, printer, and information provider to the Russian authorities in exchange for a series of benefits.

The second part of the book describes and analyzes 45 engravings made by Mihail Strilbițchi alone, as well as those he made in collaboration with his son, Policarp, and with the monk Teofan (43 woodcuts and two metal engravings). Several frontispieces and vignettes signed or attributable to Strilbițchi are also included. In analyzing the engravings, the authors sought to highlight the relationship between text and image in accordance with the stated principle at the beginning of the volume: “With regard to book engraving, it (the image n. n.) can never be separated from the text it accompanies (...), and inscriptions can be a key to decoding the message conveyed by the image” (p. 17). The iconographic and stylistic analysis is supplemented by an in-depth examination of the sources of inspiration and influences in Strilbițchi's woodcuts. In this regard, the authors outline numerous analogies and comparisons. Compared to other contemporary local engravers, Strilbițchi relies less on traditional Byzantine models. He is inspired mainly by woodcuts with Western influences from books printed in the Ukrainian area.

The third part of the book explores Mihail Strilbițchi's work as a bookbinder, “a craft in which he seems to have excelled before becoming a renowned engraver” (p. 16). Ten of Strilbițchi's leather-bound volumes and a few ornamental engraving plates he made to decorate the covers were identified and described.

In the final section, the authors conclude: “Mihail Strilbițchi was undoubtedly the most important editor, typographer, and engraver in Moldavia in the second half of the eighteenth century. Through his publication of numerous ecclesiastical and secular books, some of which were pioneering works, he made a substantial contribution to the modernization of Romanian culture. As an engraver, he abandoned the models of the Byzantine tradition, with a few exceptions, and

appealed to Western works, particularly German ones from the Polish, Ukrainian, or Russian regions that stemmed from the Late Gothic, Renaissance, or Baroque periods” (p. 104).

Four tables summarizing bibliographical data on the books to which Mihail Strilbițchi contributed were added at the end, along with rich illustrations. The reproductions include Strilbițchi’s engravings, as well as analogies with illustrations from books and manuscripts created abroad, but also in Moldavia and Wallachia. Some of these illustrations served as sources of inspiration for Strilbițchi. Others were created using his engravings as a model.

The book is written in a clear style, and the arguments are well-reasoned. The text’s comments are explained and nuanced in the footnotes, with the authors demonstrating an excellent knowledge of the field of study and related bibliography. The comparative approach benefits from an appropriate terminological and conceptual arsenal linked to the latest research in the field.

In this comprehensive monograph on Mihail Strilbițchi’s engravings, the authors shed light on the interplay between tradition and innovation in graphic art for printed books in the Romanian Principalities, particularly in Moldavia during the second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century.

Daniela LUPU

Muzeul Municipiului București
E-mail: danielalupu67@gmail.com