

EXHIBITION REVIEW

The Icon Collection at the Archaeological Museum in Nessebar, Bulgaria

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Nessebar (old name Mesembria), a small peninsula on the Black Sea coast in Bulgaria, is one of the main attractions for lovers of medieval art and architecture. Several dozen of churches are scattered throughout the ancient town, which was probably founded as a Greek colony in the 6th century B.C. The most famous churches are the highly ornate ones from the 13th and 14th centuries, but there are remains from much earlier edifices, going back at least to the 6th century. All these buildings testify to the importance of the town in the medieval period, as well as to the continued production of icons. There are icons in the medium of fresco, such as the late 16th century cycle in the fully decorated church of St. Stephen. There are also portable icons, an important sample of which is on display in the crypt museum of the cathedral in Sofia. Here, I would like to draw attention to the collection in the Archaeological Museum in Nessebar. The icon hall in the museum is relatively small but it houses some interesting examples that bear witness to the evolution of painting in Nessebar from the 13th to the 19th centuries.

The earliest piece is the 13th century *vita* icon of St. Nicholas. The narrative scenes surround the image of the saint in the center from all four sides. This image is a good example of the embeddedness of icon-production in Nessebar in artistic developments ranging from Mount Sinai – where the greatest number of 12th and 13th century *vita* icons has been preserved – to Italy, where the *vita* genre took off in the 13th century. The major emphasis of the collection in the Archaeological Museum falls, however, on later works. One of the intriguing aspects of these post-Byzantine pieces is the relationship with Western art. There are obvious Western influences, but what is probably more interesting is the so-called “refusal to borrow”, which can be just as illuminating. See, for instance, the icon of St. Eleutrius (Plate 1),

which depicts the figure of the saint standing in a room with a tiled floor. One is reminded of interiors in early Renaissance painting, where the purpose of the tiled floor was to draw attention to the use of linear perspective. The Nessebar icon does exactly the opposite – the parallels of the tiles tend to diverge in a manner known as “reverse perspective”. The use of “reverse perspective” at the end of the 18th century is a gesture that aims at undermining standard perspective, which was one of the hallmarks of Renaissance-inspired pictorial art and affirming, instead, the age-long tradition of constructing space in the icon.



Plate 1: St. Eleutrius, 1781
Archaeological Museum, Nessebar, Bulgaria

There are a number of large, wooden, painted crucifixes in the collection, mostly from the late 18th and the 19th centuries (Plates 2, 3, and 4). In form they could bring associations to earlier, mostly Tuscan, large painted crucifixes. The Eastern Orthodox ones, though, have a different function, as they were not meant to be seen on their own but as parts of the high iconostasis in an Orthodox church. The iconostasis evolved from the earlier Byzantine *templon* by the 14th century, possibly earlier. The high iconostasis would contain the full set of icons, surmounted by a crucifix carved out of wood, often gilded. Interestingly, the composition of the Nessebar crucifixes is quite consistent – there is the figure of Christ on the cross with closed eyes in the center and the allegorical representations of the four evangelists at the end of each of the arms of the cross. For comparison, Italian medieval crosses frequently show a variation of the Deesis, i.e., Christ is flanked by the Mother of God and St. John the Baptist.

The icon collection at the Archaeological Museum in Nessebar may be small, but art lovers may find it of interest for showcasing examples of icon-production in the region in the Late Byzantine and the Ottoman periods.



Plate 2: Painted crucifix, 19th c. Archaeological Museum, Nessebar, Bulgaria.



Plate 3: Painted crucifix, 19th c. Archaeological Museum, Nessebar, Bulgaria.



Plate 4: Painted crucifix, 19th c. Archaeological Museum, Nessebar, Bulgaria

