

Drawings in the Antiquarian Research: Historical Architecture of Romania in the 19th-Century Arts*

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Abstract: *This article explores the documentary-artistic value of historical architecture in the works of a few artists working in Romania after the mid-19th century, against the dream of 'neutral' depiction or scientific objectivity in rendering historical vestiges and architectural monuments through art. For any antiquarian interests in the drawing of architecture as an art subject in the second half of the 19th century, in the Romanian case the searches are limited to very specific artists, trained in Western or Central-European academies of art, usually not ethnic Romanians in this interval, who worked in the Romanian Principalities (then, Romania) occasionally or permanently, and in most relevant cases were commissioned by the State institutions or directly by the future King to produce such art. How we could use their art works in the field of historical and architectural studies and what are their limits, will make the object of this article.*

Keywords: *19th-century art; Romanian architecture; medieval / premodern monuments; antiquarianism; archaeological drawing; restoration; detail*

Motto:

“The antiquary rescued history from the sceptics, even though he did not write it.” (Arnaldo Momigliano, “Ancient History and the Antiquarian”, 1950)

1. Origins and place of the architectural drawing in the 19th-century Romanian art

Due to its formation in the Post-Byzantine cultural area, the Romanian art did not have traditions of naturalistic representation or

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topographic depiction before the advent of the modern age in the 19th century. Even in Central-European Transylvania – included in the Austro-Hungarian Hapsburg Empire until 1918 –, architectural representations began in the late 18th century with local Germans who had studied at academies of art in Vienna, Budapest, München or Düsseldorf.¹ Such representations were first included in the cityscapes (*vedute*), and aimed to suggest real places and trigger recognition of the place through iconic buildings.² This is how historical architecture on the territory of present-day Romania enjoyed the benefit of the “descriptive academist documentarism”³ thanks to drawings, woodcuts, etchings (sometimes watercolored) or lithographies. Besides, a recent propensity toward preromantic ruins – felt in the manner of Volney or of the mythical Ossian – also took to the vague depiction in drawing of remains from a precious architectural heritage. From a formal point of view, the mimetic representation progressed slowly throughout the century, so that in all the images of Romanian architecture before the mid-19th century, just like in other parts of Europe too, very few details could be deemed relevant for archaeological study.⁴ The Romanians also possess sporadic *vues fantaisistes*⁵ of their main towns drawn by foreign artists, but these were rather medieval effigies than actual urban landscapes, which in the end indicates their documentary irrelevance.

In principle, the popularization of any sort of images played a major role in further demand and their increased circulation. In Transylvania the lithographic *incunabulae* date back to the first two decades of the 19th century, and were printed in Austrian workshops before the first local lithographic centers were soon opened in Sibiu and Cluj, and even a Lithographic Institute was established in Sibiu in 1822. Immediately afterwards, in 1825 the first lithograph appeared in the former principality of Moldavia, thanks to the Italian background of the artist, writer and political man Gheorghe Asachi (1788-1869), also the editor, in 1840-1841, of a journal illustrated with pretty rough, primitive woodcuts.⁶ The urge to develop new reproductive technologies in their own country was felt by the

¹ Doina Pungă, *Grafica pe teritoriul României în secolul al XIX-lea. Litografia și gravura în acvaforte*, Oscar Print, Bucharest, 2009, pp. 31-32. See Franz Neuhauser the Youngest, involved in the project *Pittoreske Reise durch Siebenbürger* (A Picturesque Voyage to Transylvania), or Hungary and Transylvania in art images with the illustrating artist Ludwig Rohbock of Nürnberg, at p. 34.

² *Ibidem*, p. 33.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 34. *Note*. Unless otherwise specified, all the translations are mine / S.D.

⁴ Radu Ionescu, “Dora d’Istria: o elevă uitată a lui Felice Schiavoni”, *SCIA*, Tom 10/2, 1963, p. 479.

⁵ See a collection of *vues fantaisistes* of Bucharest in the 17th and 18th century in Adrian C. Corbu (ed.), *Bucureștii vechi. Documente iconografice*, with a preface by Horia Oprescu, Atelierele “Cartea românească”, Bucharest, 1936, plates not numbered.

⁶ Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, *Artă și document. Arta documentaristă în România secolului al XIX-lea*, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1990, p. 301, note 29.

artists until late, mainly in order to reduce the costs and to have more benefits from their work. We even have a late example when, moved to Bucharest, toward the end of the 19th century the Hungarian-Romanian artist Carol Popp of Szathmári complained in a letter to a friend about the costs of outsourcing the printing of his works, and therefore was telling to his friend how he had managed to open a second typography in his own house.⁷

An important rationale for the development of documentary art about masterful architecture or relevant vestiges of a nation derives from the complex realities of the nineteenth century, which was a time of modernity progressing at fast pace in Romania. The former Principalities Wallachia and Moldavia were politically united in one country in 1859, and the modern state Romania (not including Transylvania until 1918) was born under the reign of Alexandru Ioan Cuza and soon under Carol I, a prince from the German dynasty of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen. The latter became the head of the Romanian dynasty that was about to rule until the establishment of the Communist political regime by force in 1947. As architectural drawings are concerned, in the 19th century the origin of their production lay in the drive of the new State and of the people of culture to build a nation, a concept that operated well despite the various ethnic origins of the nation's founders. To reach the said purpose, the State needed to map out the Romanian historical vestiges from medieval and premodern times, which for a long time from now would rarely be seen as works of art in themselves, but first and foremost as signs of remembrance of the glorious deeds of the Romanians' ancestors.

In the production of the 19th-century Romanian art – which reveals sufficient richness, and still has resources to explore or reassess – the drawings on relevant architectural subjects are by far outnumbered by the results of more general ethnographic interests (popular costumes, traditional customs, specific physiognomies seen as “national beauties”, etc). The latter were more consistent with the *Zeitgeist* about people and emergent new nations, with the search for a “national specificity”, not much the less with Orientalist stands, and this art was also manageable by a larger number of artists, irrespective of their formation. The ethnographic subjects were also in more demand on the general art market, were purchased by various sorts of collectors and were used to illustrate the columns of exotic news in European newspapers and journals about the European “Orient”. With architectural subjects, on the other hand, also due to the complexity of their object, whenever images of Romanian architecture or vestiges came to be multiplied and popularized in Europe, they mainly circulated with errors of identification, if not in total anonymity, accompanied by the all-encompassing adjective “picturesque”.

⁷ Árpád Árvay, “Cîteva scrisori inedite ale lui Carol Popp de Szathmári”, *SCIA*, Tom 19/1, 1972, p. 145.

2. Antiquarianism and architecture: an explanation

As methodology in this article, my option for antiquarianism lies in the definition and appraisal of such practices by Arnaldo Momigliano, which also includes the significance that drawings may provide to the study of history. Momigliano showed with erudition and wit how modern antiquarianism emerged in the second half of the 18th century as a new emotion and taste for local, however insignificant, relics from the past, and how the antiquaries, long before that time deemed as “imperfect historians,” grew in importance to the modern historical science and even “posed essential problems,” up to effacing the frontier between proper historical studies and antiquarian studies.⁸ In my approach the idea of salvation from loss, and also the unsystematic collection of any types of proofs and relics, attempts to explore and safeguard the small contribution – if any – of artistic drawings in the study of Romanian historical architecture, and also to show how decisions in the field of conservation and restoration were supported by (or sustained with) art images.

The use of art as scientific proof is generally present in the practices of restorers and architects in Romania, but has not been studied theoretically or problematized. How an artistic image adds some bits of information to the science of a particular monument, is usually mentioned in the historical or architectural studies, but little explained, or not at all, especially because the contribution of art can from the very beginning be estimated as minor in this respect.

Nevertheless, just like in many cultures, in Romania artists were called to contribute with their skills to the positivist science, which is consistent, for the older interval discussed here, with the finding – also emphasized by Momigliano – that, short before 1700, there had already been published European treatises claiming for the superiority of the archaeological evidence over textual sources.⁹ Therefore, visual proofs were preferable to textual ones, which also implies the importance of some by-products like the drawings and photographs of the archaeological vestiges and monuments.

For any positivist interests in the architectural drawing, in the Romanian case we should limit our searches to very specific artists, trained in Western or Central-European academies of art, usually not ethnic Romanians at the beginning, who in the 19th century worked in the Romanian Principalities (then, Romania) occasionally or permanently, and in most relevant cases were commissioned by the State institutions or directly by the future King Carol I to produce such art. The discussion of their results should

⁸ Arnaldo Momigliano, “Ancient History and the Antiquarian”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 13, No. 3/4, 1950, pp. 292, 286.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 299.

always include their artistic background, specific traits and even personal tastes: the Romanian art criticism usually detected their preferences, and also limitations, although a new body of evidence and conclusions about each of them is possible – and advisable – due to the non-publication of their entire work, or to the ideological limitations and interests of former critical discourses.

In general terms, in the 19th-century Romania the more technical the artists' archaeological or architectural drawings were, the less they were appreciated by the large public, or were relevant to the critics. The aesthetical canon, one that was in formation precisely in those decades after the mid-19th century, was rather an emotionalist Romantic one based on the humanist doctrine, quite eclectic and occasionally self-contradictory as a matter of fact, as we can see from the cultural press of the time.¹⁰ This canon was later to be reshaped retroactively by the tastes and words of the most influential inter-war and post-war Romanian art critics (for instance, George Oprescu) to look like we should cherish mainly the local *plein-air-ist* and modern Romanian art, which in such interval was only in the making. Therefore, if a time of glory for academist art was generally skipped in the praises of the Romanian modern critics, the credits owed to the possibilities of using such art to the profit of science were not analysed sufficiently.

The state of facts in the age discussed can easily be noticed in the 19th-century press and in the artists' own selections to participate with works in exhibitions (most times they selected works of ethnographic art and landscapes), and can also be proven by the fact that much of their artistic-documentary work on architecture has remained buried in museums or, if more complex, is known nowadays mainly thanks to other qualities (composition, iconography, scenery, colours, etc). The difference between *ritratto* and *imitazione* (even in what regards 'city portraits') operated even in the modest aesthetics affirmed in the post-mid-19th century Romanian press: the art critics sometimes were also writers of fiction, historians, politicians and, in general, versatile personalities of good use to the newly-founded State – but all knew, despite certain naiveties or their precarious critical discourse, that proper "imitation", according to the principles of Aristotelian *mimesis*, exceeds the requirements to show mere similitude. The artists were judged after commandments of emotion and true *mimesis* different from any purposes dictated by non-artistic needs, and the art critics required from the artists not to be "servile in imitating nature," or wished from the first statues of cultural Romanian personalities to "look more like a human than like

¹⁰ See 19th-century Romanian art criticism and information on the relevant exhibitions in the volumes of Lidia Trăușan-Matu (ed.), *Cronica de artă. Despre pictori și tablouri în paginile gazetelor românești din veacul al XIX-lea (1860-1900)*, Mega, Cluj-Napoca, 2017, 2018.

white and cold marble”.¹¹ An artist like the Swiss Henri Trenk, for instance, was directly invited to abandon his laborious painting, forget about the original authentic sketches he used to make *in situ*, and try to “steal the nature’s secrets, find how to interpret it.”¹² Such considerations occasionally did not spare the artists of the verdict of “mediocrity” even from critics who otherwise appreciated the quality of their works as reliable archaeological proofs or “first-rank documents”.¹³

3. Artists for antiquarian research: who and why

Largely overlapping the former Dacia conquered by Trajan in the 2nd century CE, Romania enjoyed a modest stratum of Roman (and even Greek) antiquity, basically peripheral in a larger cultural area but very important to its Latin origins, which were singular in the south-eastern part of Europe. Nevertheless, when the Romanian state needed to map out its vestiges and establish the first museal institutions in the 19th century, the “cult of antiquities” most often envisaged the identification, collection and display of remains from the medieval age, including the early modern period.¹⁴ In the first place the explorers and collectors had indeed preferred proper ancient artifacts and material vestiges of Roman inheritance, but their searches were soon to be marked by much dilettantism, looting and loss.¹⁵ On the other hand, not the less important it was to the first Romanian policy-makers to safeguard and preserve the signs of a medieval anti-Ottoman past, which had marked the former Principalities profoundly and lasted until very recently (1821), when the last Phanariot rulers had been expelled from the two countries with great difficulty. The first archaeological campaigns and interventions of the new State to make inventories of the historical monuments and classify them, also to confine the movable religious treasures to the first Museum of Antiquities, started even before the secularization of the monastic estates in 1863, as we see with the archaeological campaigns undertaken in 1860.

¹¹ Rocărescu, “Espoziția de tablouri. D-nii T. Aman, G. Tătărescu, H. Trenk, C. Stăncescu”, in Lidia Trăușan-Matu (ed.), *Cronica de artă...*, Vol. II, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Mega, 2018, p. 49.

¹² “Expozițiunea artiștilor români în viață”, no author, in Lidia Trăușan-Matu (ed.), *Cronica de artă...*, op. cit., vol. II, p. 70, *emphasis mine*; Delavrancea, “Salonul Atheneului”, *Revista Nouă*, year II, no. 3, 1889, pp. 95-101, in Lidia Trăușan-Matu (ed.), *Cronica de artă...*, op. cit., vol. I, p. 90.

¹³ See G. Opreșcu about Michel Bouquet, in G. Opreșcu, *Țările Române văzute de artiști francezi (sec. XVIII și XIX)*, Ed. Muzeul Literaturii Române, Bucharest, p. 69.

¹⁴ Horia Moldovan, *Johann Schlatter: cultură occidentală și arhitectură românească (1831-1866)*, Simetria, Bucharest, 2013, p. 116. Also see the idea of Cezar Bolliac to edit a *Dacian-Roman Album* that also included medieval vestiges, in Al. Istrate, *De la gustul pentru trecut la cercetarea istoriei. Vestigii, călătorii și colecționari în România celei de-a doua jumătăți a secolului XIX*, Editura Universității “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” Iași, Iași, 2015, p. 273.

¹⁵ Al. Istrate, *De la gustul pentru trecut...*, op. cit., pp. 366-379.

In two (out of four) cases artists accompanied the so-called *commissaires* appointed by the State in 1860 to visit four or five districts each, and document the architecture and patrimonial assets of the entire Wallachia. In both cases – that of the distinguished archaeologist, writer and policy-maker **Alexandru Odobescu** (1834-1895), and that of Major **Dimitrie Papazoglu** (1811-1892), ex-military man and a famous *dilettante* in historical studies, geography and art collection –, the painter that accompanied them was commissioned by the inspector himself, and paid by the same. In Papazoglu's case, we do not even know who the artist was, but we know an artist like Karl Danielis with whom he further worked to an elaboration of a few etchings and litographs about the Romanian patrimony.

In Odobescu's case, his collaboration with the Swiss artist **Henri Trenek** (1820-1892), trained at the Academy of Fine Arts of Düsseldorf, took to the most professional and lasting results after their first campaign together in 1860 in the districts Argeş and Vâlcea, and then in 1871 in Buzăului Mountains, where they explored the site of the great discovery of a golden treasure at Pietroasa.

In parallel with the said four inspectors, the same year 1860 also includes the archaeological voyage of the artist Gheorghe Tătărăscu (then Italianized by himself to *Tattarescu*), from whom a notebook of 36 sketches in pencil was left, now at the section of Graphic Arts of the National Museum of Arts of Bucharest.¹⁶ **Gheorghe Tattarescu** (1818?-1894) is the prolific painter of about 80 churches, and at the time discussed he was deemed as the most promising “indigenous” young artist by the Romanian authorities, who also appreciated his “noble and patriotic feelings”.¹⁷ Tattarescu had studied at Accademia di San Luca in Rome and was influenced by Natale Carta and Giovanni Svilagni.¹⁸ Famous for the “Westernization” of the Romanian church painting, he was perceived by his contemporary art critics and fellows as influenced by the school of Raphael and Guido Reni,¹⁹ or by Salvator Rosa in landscapes.²⁰ When going to Italy at 27 years old, Tattarescu had already mastered drawing after a serious training at the school of religious painting of his uncle, a prolific church

¹⁶ S. Albu, “Un jurnal al Consiliului de Miniştri din 1860 pentru întocmirea «Albumului Naţional» de către pictorul Gh. M. Tattarescu”, *SCIA*, Tom 12/2, 1965, p. 342.

¹⁷ Romanian National Historical Archives – Head Department, fund of Ministry of Cults and Public Instruction, file no. 120/1860, f. 65, *apud* Al. Istrate, p. 233, note 110. The original phrase “*unul din tinerii indigeni*”, at a time when the Romanian language copied French terms extensively, now sounds pejorative, self-Orientalist, and yet incredibly candid, being also used as a noun here.

¹⁸ Emil Vîrtosu, “Pictorul G. Tătărăscu şi Italia”, *Studii italiene* V, 1938, excerpt, pp. 1, 7, 13.

¹⁹ By the academic artist C. I. Stăncescu in a press article of 1866, in L. Trausan-Matu (ed.), *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 57.

²⁰ Georgeta Wertheimer, “Pictorul Gh. Tattarescu şi peisajul”, in *SCIA*, Tom 3/3-4, 1956, p. 293.

painter (*zugrav*) in Buzău.²¹ Tattarescu's archaeological sketches are dated 1860-1861 and include only a small number of architectural drawings, outnumbered by the drawing of votive portraits of Romanian voivodes, with detailed costumes and jewellery. (**Fig. 1**) His activity as a “documentarist”, however, seemed to the art historians “strange and dissonant ..., split between the severe academic studies and the Neoclassical religious painting”, but even so he was still perceived as “full of grace” and artistically praiseworthy.²²



Fig. 1

Of much more importance to the production of “artistic-cultural documents” of architecture was **Carol Popp of Szathmári / Carol Szathmári** (1811?-1887²³), one of the outstanding Romanian artists who became one of the predilect artists of the Romanian Royal House of Hohenzollern. He left many documentary works, some of them architectural, in various media (drawings, watercolors, prints, photographs). Szathmári was one of the favourite artists (unlike Henri Trenk) of the influential art historian and critic George Oprescu, and as a documentarist artist of much complexity

²¹ Emil Virtosu, “Pictorul G. Tăttărăscu și Italia”, *Studii italiene* V, 1938, excerpt, p. 7.

²² A.-S. Ionescu, *Artă și document...*, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

²³ Year corrected (against former belief that he died in 1888) after thorough research, in Árpád Árvay, “Cîteva scrisori inedite...”, *art. cit.*, p. 146.

he was appreciated also by the French journalist Ulysse of Marsillac, a long resident in Romania. In 1874 the latter wrote that Szathmári made “a national work” with all his “souvenirs of the past”, “customs, clothes and even monuments that are increasingly disappearing, and soon not a single trace of them will ever be found but in his drawings”.²⁴

Szathmári had a productive and much-discussed artistic exchange, and most probably also a friendship, with the Maltese artist **Amedeo Preziosi** (1816-1882), son of a count of Italian origin and of a mother who was probably French. He was born and raised in Malta and then lived in the Ottoman Istanbul until his death. He had studied at the academy of arts in Paris, travelled a lot to the Orient, understood the Romanticist and Orientalist artistic stands well, and also had been acquainted to Courbet and to his realistic art. In spite of such combination of influences and experiences, Preziosi is usually defined as mainly Neoclassical,²⁵ somehow contrary to the vibrant appeal of colors and luminosity in his watercolors, to the preference for human faces and to the richness of physiognomical and anecdotal details spotted and fixed by the artist in one instant. Preziosi was sometimes analyzed in parallel with Szathmári,²⁶ especially in order to understand the nature of their collaboration, and to differentiate the signatures of the second, who signed original compositions and copies differently. While imaginative and prolific himself, Szathmári also undertook extensive copying of other artists, and he is known to have made copies and lithographies after Preziosi that further passed as works of the first,²⁷ but which Szathmári himself most probably perceived as a sort of first-degree, refined copies in which he also took pride.

Preziosi was unparalleled as self-discipline, rapidity and precision in drawing. He used to sign and date all his works, with mentioning the place too, and in his Romanian travels his personal record was reported to be of 12 watercolors per day once in a voyage on the Danube, as compared to his average production of four. He also used the finest materials, which prevented the fading of the colours up to the present. Preziosi accompanied Prince Carol I in several visits in the country in 1868 and 1869, and remained one of his favourite artists, together with the German Emil Volkens. But unlike Szathmári, both Preziosi and Volkens did not spend a long time in Romania. Volkens did not even paint architecture, which makes him of no interest to this article. Last but not least, Preziosi himself could barely be limited to stick to one thing, even with a masterful monument of late-

²⁴ Apud A.-S. Ionescu, *Artă și document...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 230-231, note 55.

²⁵ Marin Nicolau-Golfin, *Preziosi*, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1976, p. 28.

²⁶ G. Oprescu, “Carol Popp of Szathmary desinator”, *Analele Academiei Române. MSL*, Seria III, Tom X, Mem. 2, 1941, pp. 16-18; also see A.-S. Ionescu, *Artă și document...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-199, etc.

²⁷ M. Nicolau-Golfin, *Preziosi*, *op. cit.*, pp. 23, 25; A.-S. Ionescu, *Artă și document...*, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

Brancovan style like the Stavropoleos church of Bucharest. His complex compositions are usually so vivid and replete with interesting characters, that they sometimes inspired a simili-prose with peasants, merchants and monks in the iconographic descriptions of the Romanian art critics, often seduced by the ‘moral effect’²⁸ of Preziosi’s art.

4. Details of architectural drawings in the antiquarian search

The archaeological study of religious architecture was still a priority – and given a “place of honour” – at the second Exhibition of the National School of Architecture held in Bucharest in 1908, initiated two years before on the occasion of the Jubilee of 40 years of reigning by King Carol I, and 25 years from the proclamation of the Kingdom of Romania (1881).²⁹ In the meantime, a lot of historical restorations of churches and monasteries had occurred in the country and an important French architect, **André Lecomte du Noüy** (1844-1914), a disciple of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, had been replaced by a new generation of Romanian architects after a long-enduring scandal. The idea of ‘scientific restoration,’ although pleonastic, had been repeated persistently to the ears of the decision-makers and to the public opinion, given the fact that only a few decades ago a restoration was still understood in Romania as liberal ideas on how to repair and, as further reproached even to a professional architect like Lecomte du Noüy, in some cases even as demolition and the fanciful reconstruction of a new monument. The first generation of Romanian architects, after studies at the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* of Paris, insisted on the restoration of the Romanian monuments “in their primitive, and the only important, form”,³⁰ as vestiges of a national past and authentic inheritance from great voivodes and ktetors. They even published in press the friendly support of Charles Garnier, who had replied warmly to the letters of the Romanian architect George Sterian, and encouraged them all to fight for the right application of the guiding principles in the conservation and restoration of architecture.³¹ In the following, the opposition and controversies aroused in the eventful decades of the 1880s and 1890s around the Romanian patrimony will be channelled in this article toward everything that concerns the preservation – in exchange of everything that was lost – of a visual history of drawings, watercolors, prints and historical photographs.

²⁸ See a desideratum of the true “imitation” contemplated in a brief theoretical article in *Analele arhitecturii*, An I, nr. 6, Iunie 1890, p. 130.

²⁹ A.L. (Alex. Lapedatu), “Expoziția Școalei Naționale de Arhitectură”, *BCMI*, 1908, No. 2 (Apr.-Iun.), p. 93.

³⁰ Arch. G. Măndrea, “Studiu asupra mănăstirelor și bisericilor ortodoxe”, *Analele Arhitecturii*, I, 5/1890, p. 105.

³¹ Excerpts from the warm reply of Charles Garnier were published in G. Sterian, “Restaurarea monumentelor istorice”, *Analele Arhitecturii*, I, 4/1890, p. 79.

In the first half of the 20th century, the 19th century was about to be increasingly perceived as a “barbaric” time of “vandalism” for the Romanian monuments, in addition to what was anyway regarded – with respect to the new architecture that replaced them – as “a time of decadence in our old architectural craftsmanship”.³² In Romania civil architecture had gladly flourished with newly-imported Western styles after mid-19th century, but in the pre-war and inter-war decades of the following century reconstructed churches like Zlătari of Bucharest were facing the risk of “declassification” as historical monuments because of their total reconstruction, or the aggressive alterations of their forms.³³

A few details to be discussed in the following will reveal a number of visual documents that captured the image of old Romanian churches, of which the Episcopal Church of Curtea de Argeș and the Three Holy Hierarchs Church of Iași (former monasteries) will make the most prominent examples. The article does not intend to produce a thorough analysis of the selected drawings, but to confront them to historical data about the state of the monument depicted (in all the cases, a church), and – based on inside artistic information – to reflect in what terms we could possibly discuss the value of such visual documents to the proper historians.

4.1. First, ‘the two gems of the Romanian art’, Curtea de Argeș and the Three Holy Hierarchs churches

The most distinctive and exploited case in various analyses is the monastery of Curtea de Argeș, built by the Wallachian voivode Neagoe Basarab and already consecrated in 1517 before its painting. It is why in a few pencil drawings by **Gheorghe Tattarescu**, with the ktetors holding the model of the church, we do not have only Neagoe Basarab but also his immediate heirs, who continued his ktetorship through painting and endowing it with objects of cult. (**Fig. 1**). We speak of a stupendous monument much intriguing for its indistinctive Oriental and even Islamic influences³⁴ (**Fig. 2-3**), which are strictly present at the architectural level (and not in the painting). They raised innumerable hypotheses about their origins, even took

³² Arch. I. Vulcan, “Mănăstirea Hurezi. Descriere generală arhitectonică”, *BCMI*, 1908, No. 4 (Oct.-Dec.), p. 148.

³³ A request of the Commission for Historical Monuments formed of I. Kalinderu, Gr. G. Tocilescu, Gr. Cerkez, N. Gabrielescu (and A. Lapedatu, as secretary) in the General Report on the works of CHM in 1908, drawn up in January 1909 (*BCMI*, 1908, No. 4, 177).

³⁴ Synthetized in Lăzărescu 1967, briefly in Minea 2022, also mentioned in Chihaiia 1969. See E. Lăzărescu, “O icoană puțin cunoscută din secolul al XVI-lea și problema pronaosului bisericii mănăstirii Argeșului”, *SCIA*, Tom 14/2, 1967, pp. 187-199; Cosmin Minea, “The Episcopal Church of the former Monastery of Curtea de Argeș”, 2022, *Mapping Eastern Europe*, <https://mappingeasterneurope.princeton.edu>, M. A. Rossi and A. I. Sullivan (eds.), article accessed Feb. 20, 2023; Pavel Chihaiia, “Considerații despre fațada bisericii lui Neagoe din Curtea de Argeș”, *SCIA*, Tom 16/1, 1969, pp. 65-84, etc.

to the comparison of the church to a mosque, and practically enforced such conclusions also because the church did not (or could not) stimulate local imitations. As a result, speaking of it in a nationalist discourse would be the worst decision of all, while on the other hand we could rather speculate that the establishment of a nation-founding myth based on this monastery (the legend of master mason Manole, the “architect”) was precisely a way by which the Romanians managed to appropriate and internalize this unique architectural masterpiece which they both loved and felt alien to their cultural ground.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

In order to illustrate how art reminds of a few significant issues around Lecomte's restoration of this former monastery in the period 1875-1886, I selected the image of the church and of its proximities in 1860 by **Henri Trenk**, the church before restoration painted in 1869 by **Amedeo Preziosi** and, respectively, the church after restoration in one of the many copies or replicas attributed to **Carol Popp of Szathmári** by his immediate heirs.

Trenk's unfinished composition (**Fig. 4**) reveals the original landscape surrounding the church, which was suffocated by an agglomeration of outbuildings, and was closely sided by a bell-tower built in the 17th century by the voivode Matei Basarab. The upper part of the bell-tower was described as made of timber,³⁵ which can also be recognized from this image. The declivity of the land in the middle of which the former monastery lies, strongly suggests the irregularities of a dry waterbed about which a legend actually spoke, telling that the church was built on the bottom of a former lake.³⁶

Trenk's watercolor is good as a site perspective, but lacks much distinctive details about the proper architecture of the church. It is obviously an unfinished work, since the artist did neither sign, nor dated it. But despite this lack of signature and dating, it is attributed with certainty to Trenk and originated in the first archaeological campaign that he pursued in 1860 in the districts Argeș and Vâlcea with Alexandru Odobescu. The latter kept all the drawings and sketches taken by the artist on that occasion,³⁷ which were deemed scientific by him³⁸ and whose "moral author" Odobescu himself was considered by Trenk. The artist would later borrow them from Odobescu for any further elaboration of other works,³⁹ but the owner remained Odobescu, and their original scientific purpose prevailed to him.

³⁵ Mentioned in the first report on the church, drawn up on Austrian request. See "Biserica episcopală de la Curtea de Argeș" (author not specified), *Analele Arhitecturii...*, I/10, 1890, p. 178.

³⁶ D. Berindei, "Repede ochire asupra arhitecturii byzantine", *Analele Arhitecturii*, I/9, 1890, pp. 166-167.

³⁷ A.-S. Ionescu, *Artă și document...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 224-225.

³⁸ Al. Odobescu, "Însemnări despre monumentele istorice din județele Argeș și Vâlcea. Călătorie făcută în 1860 din însărcinarea Ministerului cultelor și instrucției publice", *Opere II*, M. Anineanu, V. Căndeș (eds.). 1967, *passim*.

³⁹ A.-S. Ionescu, *Artă și document...*, *op. cit.*, p. 173.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Complementary details about the former monastery of Curtea de Argeș can be added from Amedeo Preziosi's watercolor of 1869 (**Fig. 5**), when within a short interval of years after Trenk we have the last notable image of the old architecture of the church. The same details can also be confirmed by the pedantic, cold drawing executed by Gheorghe Tattarescu in pencil (**Fig. 6**), which actually was only the starting point for a more elaborate work (a national album, he hoped). The original architecture of Curtea de Argeș episcopal church will eventually be contrasted below to its post-restoration image in a watercolor by Szathmári (**Fig. 7**), which is not dated but indicates the first years after the restoration of the church, or even a pre-completion stage very close to the end.



Fig. 7

All the issues publicly discussed and the polemics heard in the architectural press of 1890-1893 (the journal *Analele Architecturei...*) between André Lecomte du Nouÿ and the Romanian architects contesting the judgments of the first,⁴⁰ can be visualized sufficiently well in these artistic-documentary works. At Preziosi and Tattarescu we see the original four

⁴⁰ See the series of polemic articles between the architects in *Analele Architecturei...*, 1890-1893. For a problematization of the relations between arch. Lecomte and a new generation of Romanian architects, see Al. Istrate, *De la gustul pentru trecut...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-144 & *passim*; also Cosmin Minea, "Foreign and Local Entanglements in the Creation of Romanian Architectural Heritage in the Late 19th Century", in Dragan Damjanović et al. (ed.), *Art and Politics in the Modern Period. Conference Proceedings*, University of Zagreb, Croatia, 2019, pp. 293-301.

domes (*turle*), out of which the two smaller ones, designed in torsades, originally lacked the small decoration of fleurons further added by Lecomte. This addition of ornaments made them look similar to the bigger domes, which originally was not the case. The domes also lacked the lead decorations that were later meant to embellish the four of them. The double cornice and the church walls were protected by a narrow drip ledge, probably made of tin, that was further removed, probably as inaesthetic. It was slightly projected outside the church walls probably to protect them from the rainwaters. The disappearance of this drip ledge is noticeable in all the post-restoration drawings, and it was also criticized at the time.

Another detail, this time one of scenery that Preziosi's watercolor confirms, is the presence of a tree that seems to embrace the mysterious edicule built in front of the church, which was compared to a Muslim fountain for ablutions, but nevertheless does not contain one. The tree was revealed to have been a lime (*tilia*),⁴¹ while the fact that the Romanian architects and art historians identified the front edicule with so many names (*agheasmatar, cantar, chioșc, cerdăcel, tabernacol, baldachin*) is a proof that they understood it differently because it was unique. In restoration Lecomte also opted to increase its height, and also to remove the small triple crosses placed on the corners of each square base of the church domes, sixteen in total; these tiny crosses can also be seen at Preziosi and in Tattarescu's sketch, but are absent at Szathmári, in the post-restoration age of the monument.



Fig. 8

⁴¹ "Biserica episcopală de la Curtea de Argeș" (author not specified), *Analele Arhitecturii...*, I/11, 1890, p. 207.



Fig. 9

In what concerns the artistic image of the Three Holy Hierarchs church of Iași, we know that a destructive earthquake occurred in 1739, which may have caused alterations and a different repair of the vestibule of the church. A number of subsequent repairs were found, too, by the time of its 19th-century restoration. For this Moldavian church, a work in watercolor and ink by Carol Popp of Szathmári preserves the appearance of the church before Lecomte's restoration (**Fig. 8**) and, in comparison, an anonymous photo of the same shows it a short while after (**Fig. 9**). The photo was registered under a very small number in the inventories of the National Museum of Arts of Bucharest and attributed to **Franz Duschek** (1830-1884), but it was definitely taken after his death. The photo is only glued to a cardboard embossed with the name of Franz Duschek, but this could possibly indicate his surviving studio. The works on the church proceeded in 1882 and

the exterior restoration was completed in 1887,⁴² when Duschek had died. Besides, the clearance of the close proximity of the church of any precarious outbuildings and huts⁴³ indicates even a later date of the photo, probably around 1890, when an image of the Three Holy Hierarchs church – possibly even this one – was included in a series of representative Romanian monuments photographed for the first exhibition of architecture of Turin.⁴⁴



Fig. 10

The harsh criticism on the changes brought to this 17th-century Moldavian church, an exotic one pairing the Wallachian monastery of Curtea de Argeș like a ‘sister’, as the Romanians said, included the flattening of the nave and of the lateral apses from their original roofing, which was convex, and the new pyramidal shape of the two domes instead of the former bulb-shaped form (see **Fig. 8, 9**). The nave and the apses had been lowered apparently because Lecomte wished to better reveal the beautiful square- and star-shaped bases of the two domes, not well discernible when looked from the bottom. The most radical change was also felt in the new form given to

⁴² Al. Istrate, *De la gustul pentru trecut...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 119, 122.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 122.

⁴⁴ The information about this exhibition was found by Alexandru Istrate in the archival fund of the City Council of Iași, file 312/1890, f. 2. See Al. Istrate, *De la gustul pentru trecut...*, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

the two domes from bulb-shaped to octagonal cones, a decision on which Lecomte apparently had not been very sure.⁴⁵ The elevation of the domes with two additional rows of Moorish arches under the cornice, when added to the lowering of the nave due to the changing of the roof shape from convex to flat, eventually altered the church proportions and made it look like a “desecrated”⁴⁶ monument in the eyes of its critics.

The feelings that enlightened personalities of the time had towards the changes they were experiencing by then with their monuments, cannot be measured today in our own words. Only the connection between their own words and the right images, if we find some, could occasionally make us feel the rationale of their subjective, as we say today, reactions. See for instance how the influential artist **Theodor Aman** (1831-1891), founder of the School of *Belle-Arte* of Bucharest, was writing to his brother in 1879 about Lecomte du Noüy and its restoration at Curtea de Argeş: “instead of a monument of all imaginable beauty ..., he will leave us a sugary piece like you see in a cakeshop: gilded, whitened, and full of decorations that it didn’t need”.⁴⁷ A contemporary photograph of the church (**Fig. 10**) looks like speaking for Aman.

4.2. Science and inspiration with the Brancovan style

Like a third element in an architectural triangle of the medieval and early modern Romanian monuments we should mention the Brancovan style (in Romanian, *Brâncovenesc*), of which the monastic assembly of Hurezi (Horezu) is one example. It has been theorized in the Romanian art historiography as holding a strong Venetian influence upon the Romanian premodern art.⁴⁸ This influence started in the mid-17th century and continued for approximately one century ahead, including the first decades of the Phanariot rulers. This artistic style, which developed under the long reigning of the Wallachian voivode Constantin Brâncoveanu, was deemed as an original mixture with lasting effects upon the future of the Romanian architecture, and has several masterpieces of which the assembly of Hurezi (entirely rebuilt by the voivode) was said to present “the most unaltered original unity” in the Romanian old architecture.⁴⁹ At the other end of the

⁴⁵ Al. Istrate, *De la gustul pentru trecut...*, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

⁴⁶ A term that appears too often to count in the 1890s and afterwards.

⁴⁷ Theodor Aman, *apud* R.B. (Radu Bogdan), “Atitudinea protestatară a lui Theodor Aman față de monarhie și regimul ei politic”, *SCIA*, I/1-2, 1954, p. 225.

⁴⁸ For a historical perception among many others, see N. Gabrielescu, “Privire generală asupra monumentelor naționale și mijlocul de a împiedica distrugerea lor”, *Analele Arhitecturii*, I, 7/1890, p. 152 (about Hurezi: “the Venetian influence can be seen up to the smallest details of the sculptural ornamentation”).

⁴⁹ Tereza Sinigalia, “Spațiu și decor în arhitectura brâncovenească”, *SCIA*, Tom 37, 1990, p. 40. See the same appreciation of the monastery in the former observation of N. Gabrielescu as

aforesaid interval we find Stavropoleos (**Fig. 11**), a small church of Bucharest that was to be restored at the beginning of the 20th century by the founder of the Romanian National Style in architecture, Ion Mincu. Both Hurezi and Stavropoleos, together with other important ktetorships of Brâncoveanu and his followers, have inspired artists ceaselessly. By 1890 the monastery of Hurezi was still unaltered by faulty restorations, while in 1907 an altered bell-tower was restored to its original form (that is, the Brancovan one). Provided with four distinct regular yards surrounded by walls and opened to a beautiful valley, the monastery remained an attraction in the travellers' preferences until late. Special attention was given to several architectural parts of it that we are about to show in the following.

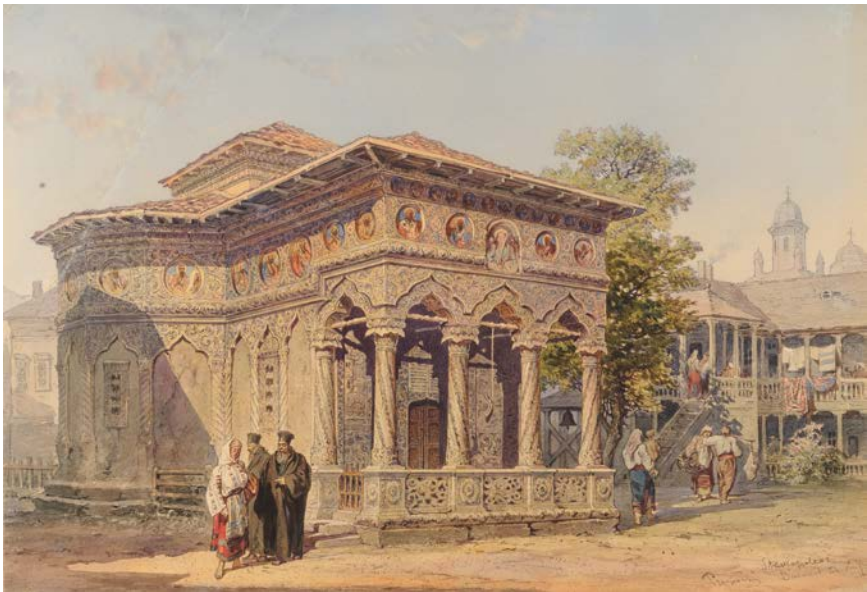


Fig. 11

Beside the main church, the loggia of the archimandrite Dionisie (built in 1754), or the ex-centric square pavilion with arcades in accolade facing the beautiful valley at the corner of one yard, were definitely an attraction to the artists. We see this pavilion as a point of interest in a picturesque composition by Henri Trenk, on the middle-left (**Fig. 12**), or painted distinctly in a late watercolor by **Nicolae Grant** (1868-1950) (**Fig. 13**), probably drawn around 1900 or even in the first decades of the 20th century.

“still complete in all its original compartments (*încăperile primitive*)”, in N. Gabrielescu, “Privire generală...”, art. cit., p. 152.



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

As a general remark, Grant was a minor turn-of-the-century artist from the family of the Scottish diplomat Effingham Grant, while Trenk had his top moments, but was never excessively appreciated by the critics or fellows. Such artificial composition as the aforeshown may be an answer. Trenk was good at rendering architecture, as proven by his drawing of churches and sketes visited in 1860 in the counties Argeş and Vâlcea, when he satisfied with promptness and probity the requirements of Alexandru Odobescu. He also illustrated with painted photographs the four-volume archeological treatise *Trésor de la Pétrosse*, written in French by Al. Odobesco in 1871. Yet, both of these two relevant contributions of him remained either unknown, or too scientific for a large audience. In drawing architecture he was definitely the most conscientious in what was called a dream of 'neutral' depiction or scientific objectivity in the presentation of historical vestiges or architectural monuments through art.⁵⁰ A critic even noticed "the precision of his technique, like that of the architects", or some "coldness, let us just call it architectural".⁵¹ To the art critics or the public of the day, such traits were not necessarily good qualities. See, for example, his

⁵⁰ D. Arnold, S. Bending, "Introduction. Tracing Architecture: the aesthetics of antiquarianism", in D. Arnold; S. Bending (eds.), *Tracing Architecture. The Aesthetics of Antiquarianism*, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, pp. 8-9.

⁵¹ Ion Frunzetti, "Etapetele evoluției peisajului în pictura românească pînă la Grigorescu", *SCIA*, Tom 8/1, 1961, p. 110.

drawing of the Cornet skete (in the Vâlcea district) (**Fig. 14**), as compared to an architectural project of arch. Ioan Sperl found in the archival funds of Bucharest (**Fig. 15**), which we here publish for the first time. Sperl's watercolor for a proper technical project of architecture is even more flamboyant than the artistic drawing of Trenk, which nevertheless has an air of discreet refinement.

5. “Even the great Homer is being drowsy”. Is art ‘wrong’?

In the first two decades of the 20th century, despite the continuous accumulation of prestige for an artist like the Hungarian-Romanian Carol Popp of Szathmári, a professional responder in the column Reviews of the journal *Arhitectura* replied with confidence to some fellows who raised objections to the restoration of Dionisie's loggia of Hurezi Monastery with arguments based on a watercolour by Szathmári.⁵² The reviewer is now – as years have passed – competent enough not only to acknowledge the original presence of two, instead of three, original side arches at the respective loggia, but also to understand artistic inadvertencies, and in general to remain on guard against the imaginative possibilities and liberties taken by artists or, we might add, about the free circulation of art copies. After further search, he also declares to have personally found in Szathmári a representation of two *mutually-exclusive temporal sequences in the same image*, one that depicted the episcopal church of Curtea de Argeş after restoration: in that image the church, he notices, could only have *either* its lateral monastic cells, *or* the short fence of fleurons sculpted in stone that delineate a tight perimeter around the monument. Even if this respondent does not mention the image, we can see the said two details together in **Fig. 7** discussed earlier in this article, which I indicated as a watercolor attributed to Szathmári by his own heirs, but which is not signed. The aforesaid columnist, most probably an architect himself, actually knew from a recent past that the cells surrounding the old church had been demolished *before* the new stone fence was built. This is sensitive information that he gives in order to discredit the scientific value of an art image, and defend the decisions of the restorers who definitely had used more reliable information.

We might see here a case when “even the great Homer is being drowsy” (*quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus*), considering the large amount in the production of “artistic-cultural documents” by Carol Popp of Szathmári. He is known to have left many documentary works in various media, but he was also experimental, sometimes unequal, openly interested to increase his market share also by an extensive production of copies,

⁵² R. (?), “Recenzii”, *Arhitectura*, I/3-4, 1919, p. 107.

inclusively after the works of praised fellows like Amedeo Preziosi.⁵³ In 1908, the professional journal *Bulletin of the Commission of Historical Monuments* was announcing with pride the inclusion of a series of cromolithographies after the drawings of Szathmári in its pages, and presented them as “precious historical testimonies of the state of our churches and monasteries about fourty years ago”.⁵⁴



Fig. 16

Now, if we go back to the objections about the loggia from Hurezi (after an art image not indicated by the columnist), we can still find its accurate representation in an old photograph taken by the same Szathmári in

⁵³ For instance, copies of the watercolors by Amedeo Preziosi given at Fig. 5 and 11 and signed *Szathmari* in red, not dated, slightly bigger in size, are held by the Art Museum of Cluj-Napoca, Romania. They were published in *Carol Popp de Szathmari, pictor și fotograf*, exhibition catalogue, Cotroceni National Museum, Bucharest, 2012, pages not numbered. For an expert transcription of Preziosi’s works included in the Royal Collection of the Romanian Kings of Hohenzollern, see a full list in Busuioceanu 1934, pp. 5-8.

⁵⁴ A.L. (Alexandru Lapedatu), “Biserica cea mare a mănăstirii Cozia”, *BCMI*, April-June 1909.

1867. In addition, that photograph was most probably taken as the model, and copied at some time later, by Henri Trenk in a watercolor (**Fig. 16**). We can guess this model-copy relation from their resemblance in every detail and the precision of the view from the same angle, which can rarely be achieved in the actual practice of seeing a monument. In both the photograph (not presented here)⁵⁵ and Trenk's watercolor, the two lateral arches of Dionisie's loggia cannot be missed. Therefore, art can be 'drowsy' sometimes, but it is still in its power to rule out the errors.

6. Conclusions

In the 19th century, to their co-nationals the Romanian medieval and early modern monuments seemed in full accordance to the *genius loci* and to the soul of the nation even when they were not built after coherent local traditions. They were seen like inventories of the past and guides to the future even when they were not aesthetically appreciated.⁵⁶ In the conditions given, certain historians believe that the modern Romanian State did not have the means to act better in restoration matters⁵⁷: like-minded autochthonous specialists with both good practice and sound roots in the local traditions were not born yet. In certain cases, the critics of those years could admit the advanced state of ruin of some old Romanian vestiges and their inexorable fate toward extinction. Some of them, at the very least, sometimes expressed regrets when a church was being pulled down in broad daylight under the eyes of a stupid, non-reactive crowd "without at least taking a photo of it as you do even with the last convict".⁵⁸ Simply put, these were part of the background realities that gave rise to the particular type of documentarist art discussed in this article; one that nowadays gives glimpses over monuments that were either lost, or reconfigured.

As formal artistic expression, we could say that the needs to capture an authentic image of the monuments did not prevent the artists from idealizing the general landscape while trying, on the other hand, to be as exact as possible with the architecture. We see how art could be well composed with clean surroundings and picturesque sceneries even when in reality persistent complaints about the precarious maintenance and hygiene of distant or deserted holy places were often heard in the Romanian textual

⁵⁵ Trenk's work looks like an exact copy in watercolors after a sepia photograph taken by the photo studio *C. P. Szathmari*, dated 1867, 0. 297 x 0.36 m, now at the Library of the Romanian Academy. It was published in *Carol Popp de Szathmari, pictor și fotograf*, Cotroceni National Museum, Bucharest, 2012, exhibition catalogue, page not numbered.

⁵⁶ See the articles of Petru Verussi in *Convorbiri literare* in 1875 on the 'national art' ("Despre Artă Națională"), in L. Trăușan-Matu (ed.), *Cronica de artă...*, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 73-104.

⁵⁷ Al. Istrate, *De la gustul pentru trecut...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-111.

⁵⁸ N. Gabrielescu, "Privire generală asupra monumentelor naționale și mijlocul de a împiedica distrugerea lor", *Analele Arhitecturii*, I, 8/1890, p. 160.

sources.⁵⁹ Also see the artificial architectural landscape with deer in the forefront that Trenk drew for the Hospital Church of Hurezi Monastery (Fig. 12), or the many mountainous landscapes integrating the monuments that he was documenting, but which in this article have deliberately been left behind.

We note that the artists tried to remain accurate with the degradation of the old monastic precincts, and show the limestone eaten by time, the dried coating falling off the walls (Fig. 13), the soiling or damping of the walls (Fig. 16), or the serious cracks caused by the earthquakes in towers or domes.⁶⁰ We also see how they used to multiply the same representations by rendering the same monuments or copying works after one another: Szathmári after Preziosi, or Trenk after a photograph. The interchangeability of media and techniques should also be remarked: while the photography might seem the ideal in precision, in practice it could prove unsatisfying as emerging practice, especially when the Romanian artists faced obstacles and technical failures. See, as a final example, how Szathmári wrote to a friend on 1st January 1882 that he had “given up photography for good, and dedicated [himself; n.n.] entirely to painting”.⁶¹ We find that a few months earlier, on 11 May 1881, after the Coronation Day of King Carol I, the bad weather ruined the clarity of his photos, taken during the subsequent ceremonies.⁶² This kind of bad luck with technology must have depressed him and contribute to his decision. Therefore, it is a highly distinctive biographic anecdote which should make us cherish with more enthusiasm the antiquarian relevance that art drawings can luckily provide to the study of history.

⁵⁹ Al. Odobescu, “Însemnări despre monumentele istorice din județele Argeș și Vâlcea...”, *op. cit., passim*. Also see, out of innumerable and non-controversial sources, the testimonies of Grigore Musceleanu, synthesized or quoted in Al. Istrate, *De la gustul pentru trecut...*, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

⁶⁰ See, for instance, the damaged gate tower at the church of Stănești, drawn by Henri Trenk (1860, inv. no. 4260, MNAR), or the tower of the princely church of Cîmpulung Muscel by Szathmári (inv. no. 10814, MNAR), etc.

⁶¹ Á. Árvay, “Cîteva scrisori inedite ale lui Carol Popp de Szathmáry”, *art. cit.*, p. 144.

⁶² Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, “Universul lui Szathmari – universalul Szathmari”, *Carol Popp de Szathmari, pictor și fotograf*, Cotroceni National Museum, Bucharest, 2012, p. 29.

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