

On Romanian Imagery and Artistic Heritage from a Transdisciplinary Perspective

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Corin Braga (coord. general), *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România, vol. V*, Liviu Malița (coord.), *Imaginar și patrimoniu artistic/ The Encyclopedia of Romanian Imaginaries, vol. V, Imaginary and Artistic Heritage*, Polirom, 2020, 504 pages.



The project of Romanian imaginaries is a unique one coordinated by prof. Corin Braga and has gathered specialists from the humanities that contributed to various fields, i.e. literary (vol. 1), linguistic (vol. 2), historical (col 3), religious (vol. 4) and artistic (vol. 5). There have been many echoes in the press¹ and our focus is on volume 5, in general and on the chapters devoted to architecture and visual arts, in particular. According to the coordinator, Liviu Malița, the aim was to illustrate all significant arts and the approach is holistic,

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¹ Cf. “Enciclopedia imaginariilor în România, Masă rotundă moderată de Ovidiu PECICAN cu Corin BRAGA (coordonator general), Elena PLATON, Sorin MITU, Ioan CHIRILĂ, Liviu MALIȚA și Adrian TUDURACHI, coordonatorii volumelor din Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România (pagina de Facebook a Editurii Polirom, 17 decembrie 2020)”, *Observator cultural*, 25 Feb. 2021, <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/enciclopedia-imaginariilor-din-romania/>. Retrieved on March 29th, 2024.

overviewing the subfields from a transdisciplinary viewpoint, diachronically (p. 12). Archaism can be grasped in the anthropological and aesthetic discourse, and drawing on masks, it allows Ștefana Pop-Curșeu to account for an archetype of theatre. Moreover, the way in which avant-garde reinvents tradition, through revisiting, is the perspective adopted by Rada Niță in her discussion of folklore in modern and contemporary Romanian visual arts. An impulse of recovery and reconnection to nature in Romanian art over the last 60 years is highlighted by Adrian Guță (*ibidem*). Valentina Sandu-Dediu speaks of a constant concern of postwar Romanian composers to cite and process traditional folklore songs so as to reconnect to interwar modernism, after the hiatus imposed by socialist realism and a tendency towards western neo-modernism. A defining factor in our culture is ruralism as Ioan Pop-Curșeu points out, i.e., we are ‘a people of peasants’ (p. 13). An enticing study is that of Corina Iosif and Adrian T. Sîrbu on folklore as media product (p. 14).

Regarding religious imagery, Romanian mentality, similarly to the European one, draws on the Judeo-Christian paradigm, as testified by Cristina Cojocaru’s research on religious imagery in modern fine arts. This can also be seen in Romanian fine arts starting with the first lay paintings that pragmatically conceptualize notions related to religion and sacrality. The chapters in this volume tackle the historical relation between religion and Byzantine culture (at an iconographic and architectural level), as well as between mystical structures and Orthodoxy. In Vlad Bedros’s study, for instance, post-Byzantine painting in Romania deals with the way in which the option for Orthodoxy led to the assimilation of specific formal configurations of the sacred space (icons, embroidery, furniture and other religious objects); the author reached the conclusion that stylistically, post-Byzantine cultural heritage in our country exhibits some variables of visual arts, tributary to a Byzantine Commonwealth. In music, this can be seen in chromatic writing (p. 15).

With respect to the integration of religion in a perennial conscience of national identity, the analytical approach has to do with the specificity of our country where there are significant gaps between the rural and the urban, traditional and modern, according to Bogdan S. Pecican. Politics and identity also have a say in a country’s identity and the debates on *ethos* reflected in Romanian art are part of the volume, as well. Anca Hațiegan deals with the relation between the birth of Romanian theatre and the shaping of its identity as mythology

(similar to religion), a state institution in the 19th and 20th centuries, focusing on Caragiale (p. 16). A similar approach pertains to Miriam Cuibus who, in an integrative methodological stance, allows the author to outline major stages of Romanian theatre from the perspective of Western influences (mainly French and German, to be replaced with the Soviet ones). She minutely analyses postwar theatre during the last decades of the communist period when the great directors part in self-exile, thus orphaning this art in our country (p. 17). Laura Pavel tackles the theatre of interiority with an egotistic imagery rendered by characters with hypertrophic subjectivities, a symptomatic perspective that suits not just modern formulas of dramatic writing, but also contemporary performance. She brings into play Matei Vişniec's meta theatricality and Vlad Zografi's postmodern drama to support her claims (p. 20).

Florinela Popa approaches the Europeanizing imagery in Romanian music dealing with the process of institutionalization from the second half of the 19th century to the end of the interwar period accounting for the embrace of West-European forms and genres which led to the establishment of conservatories, symphony orchestras, choral societies and musical publications, to name but a few; herein, George Enescu's music particularly distinguishes itself by means of personal syntheses that dilute its eclecticism. Daniel Iftene studies how historical fiction in film overcomes the documentary function and defines national identity since at the beginning of the 20th century, Romanian cinematography favourably relates to national identity to become slightly negative in the communist period (when national history was mystified and mythicized) and gloomier after 1989 (p. 17).

Research on architecture pleads for the existence of a national style. Thus, Virgil Pop approaches the imagery of Transylvanian architecture by advocating for a unique architectural program kept as such, i.e., that of the Church with the instance of Transylvania in which an eclectic style was formed (pp. 17-18). Ana Hajdu would focus on the architecture of Moldavia and Wallachia in a regional and European context, expanding on the ideas that a national heritage has to do with modernisation, hence the local appropriation of European models, as in the case of Ion Mincu who distinguished himself as key figure for the departure from the pure Byzantine style (p. 18).

Studies such as Ruxandra Demetrescu's deal with a more special identity, the artist's creative one that changed in status during modern Romanian civilization from craftsman to artist. Theodor Aman

is chosen to illustrate this as the signature of the artist is a mark of artistic identity and the self-portrait, of emancipation. Our first modern painter is considered to be Grigorescu. In his study, Horea Avram exclusively deals with the postwar condition of the artist by historically and critically approaching media art in Romania, in general and the technological imagery after 1960, in particular (p. 20).

Regarding transition, Liviu Malița claims that there is a lack of a communist imagery if we leave aside propaganda works or those reflecting socialist realism. As Radu Toderici shows in his study, films dealing with the period 1950-1989, namely contemporary dramas and political films are such an exception. Claudiu Țurcuș also underlines the way in which anti-communist discourse, post-communist transition and the phantasm of Western civilisation have shaped the imagery of Romanian films for 30 years (pp. 21-22).

Of particular interest to visual artists are the chapters on architecture in which Ada Hajdu deals with the genesis of the national style in the field, since active architects in Romania between 1850-1950 draw on history in creating a national heritage to employ as source for their own projects². It was Alexandru Odobescu (1834-1895) who urged Romanian architects to study the past and involve it in contemporary architecture (p. 271). The author considers Byzantine architecture to be local heritage and provides Romanian sources for a national Romanian style, the interest in ruins showing in literature, as well (p. 274). Cozia, for instance, enters architecture, through history (p. 275). Stavropoleos church in Bucharest was associated with Brâncoveanu's style as one of the privileged sources of a national style (p. 278). Vernacular architecture is also a source of Romanian national style in the sense that architecture views Romanian specificity as associated to outstanding instances in history such as those pertaining to the Gothic (p. 280). Ion Mincu is deemed as the architect with the most important role in creating a national style in our country (p. 282). National style competed with the eclecticism of French influence which seemed modern and progressive and during the interwar years,

² Nowadays, the tendency is towards 3D modelling of the cultural heritage for research, restoration and educational purposes. In Romania, wooden churches are particularly aimed at, and a record of a case study in the field is the "Saint Martyrs Constantin Brâncoveanu and His Sons" wooden church from Oradea Municipality, Bihor County, Cf. Herman G.V., Caciora T., Iliș Dorina Camelia, Iliș A., Deac Anca, Sturza Amalia, Sonko, S.M., Suba N.S., Nistor S. "3D Modeling of the Cultural Heritage: Between Opportunity and Necessity", *Journal of Applied Engineering Sciences*, VOL. 10(23), ISSUE 1/2020, pp. 27-30, <https://intapi.sciendo.com/pdf/10.2478/jaes-2020-0005>. Retrieved on April 2nd, 2024.

formal allusions to the medieval past which were incorporated into architecture, started to be questioned (p. 286). The author concludes that conceptual labour is required for tradition to be assimilated by modernity to avoid the depersonalization of architecture (p. 289).

Architectural imaginary of Transylvania is analysed by Virgil Pop starting from Romanesque art that follows the model of Southern Germany, the oldest preserved being the one in Cisnădioara (p. 291). The Gothic follows and the first construction works date from the second half of the 13th century in Cârța (p. 299). Transylvanian Renaissance is derived from the Renaissance at the north of the Alps and the current was a fashion coming from Italy (p. 302). In some cases, the Renaissance makes itself felt as a wish to take over some forms in the pipeline, yet adjusted to the situation as in the case of the house on Avram Iancu street in Sibiu with wooden frames of the window (p. 305). Regarding baroque, due to political developments, Transylvania remained isolated from Europe and the first church pertaining to the movement is the Jesuit one in Cluj (pp. 306-307). With respect to eclecticism and modernism, in the 19th century, westernizing and emancipation show themselves more and more strongly; furthermore, in Transylvania modernisation came from Vienna and in the second half of the cent., from Budapest. The company Fellner & Hellmer would project over 60 theatres in Europe, including the ones in Cluj, Oradea, Iași and Cernăuți (p. 315). The author concludes that along with the communist regime, the regional character of Transylvanian architecture vanishes³ as it was the centralism of the totalitarian period that made this aspect of the daily and cultural life uniform (p. 317).

The chapters on visual arts deal with the path from craftsman to artist in modern Romanian civilisation, Ruxandra Demetrescu tackling modernity and the occidentalising trend in 20th century Romanian art, the former being defined as rejection of classical academism pertaining to the French painting of the 1860s and the American one of the 1960s (p. 321). The latter shows in the instance of the foreign artist, the artist travelling to the Romanian principalities, one of the most illustrative

³ Art historians generally mention troubled times in the regional art of Transylvania, arguing that artistic monuments testified to Hungarian superiority over the Romanian one in culture if politics dictated it. For an account of the (inter)war period, see V. Trifescu, "Écrire l'histoire de l'art pendant la guerre. Les églises en bois des Roumains de Transylvanie dans l'historiographie hongroise de 1940", *Text și discurs religios V*, Ed. Universității "Alexandru Ioan Cuza", 2013, pp. 207-223, <https://www.diacronia.ro/ro/indexing/details/A219/pdf>. Retrieved on April 15th, 2024.

cases being that of Karl Storck from the German city of Hanau (p. 322) as from the perspective of continuity between art and craftsmanship, he resembles Tattarescu and distances himself from Aman (p. 324). The signature of the artist is considered to be a symptom of artistic dignity in a process of ongoing continuity against the background of a paradigm shift in art from religious to lay; thus, the signature functions as intertextual presence of the creative subject and authenticity mark (p. 325). It is also a self-portrait, mark of modern artistic personality drawing on Renaissance self-portraits of the 15th and 16th centuries when they linked the creative self and the receiving public (p. 327). In our country, the 1848 moment undoubtedly witnessed a development in the emancipation of the artist and the configuration of modern identity since along with writings of literary figures on artists, the first portraits of artists are recorded. Thus, August Strixner (1820-1862) carried out the portrait of Tattarescu working, whereas Theodor Aman and Karl Storck would mutually achieve their self-portraits eleven years later (p. 329). Theodor Aman is a significant figure from the viewpoint of his biography, between myth and the artist's status, a challenge for artistic historiography; it was concluded that as mentor, forerunner, institutional builder, he was overcome by Grigorescu, the 'national painter' (p. 331). The latter is also representative as the first modern, marking the transition from lateness to synchronization and 'the gift of forgetfulness', in Andrei Pleșu's terms. The former helped him on the path of his artistic career, ranging from a minor icon painter to a painter drawing on Barbizon after having assimilated and overcome the classical and romantic lesson (p. 333). The Prolog group is regarded as a return to apprenticeship where the drawing on visuality and the lesson of nature mingle with an apologetics of apprenticeship understood as obedience of glance and spirit (p. 335).

In "Post-Byzantine Painting on Romania's Territory", Vlad Begros argues that our population was under the religious Byzantine sphere via Balkan intermediary, a fact under debate by ecclesiastic history (p. 336). During middle and late Byzantium, the sacred space is envisaged as a microcosm that reiterates the celestial world; thus, the imperial Byzantine court was perceived as a mirroring of the perfection of the Celestial King's Court. A parallel with Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass* is attempted in the sense that critics viewed such type of court as the image of the other since it was possible for the characters to cross it for the mirror mediated the

reflexion in question⁴. The Mother of God plays a seminal role in the iconography of the apse (at Curtea de Argeş or in the paintings dating from the time of Stephen the Great, Petru Rareş and Neagoie Basarab, the instance of Arbore stylistically distinguishing itself during the 14th-16th centuries) (p. 340). Furthermore, the Holy Communion of the Apostles and hierarchs officiating religious services are the closest related to Eucharistic sacrifice. Sometimes a grotesque stance is added for Judas is depicted as holding the bag with the 30 pieces of silver in 16th century Moldavia at Humor or wearing a devil on one of his shoulders at Hârîlău (p. 341). The iconography of passage from the nave and the apse of the altar has the role of threshold, of passage to sainthood. A central theme is that of Deisis (p. 344) in which problematic iconographies of Late Byzantium with Trinitarian participation to Eucharistic sacrifice are present (as in the case of Moldova in the 16th century at Probota) (p. 345). The author reaches the conclusion that the Byzantine Commonwealth has eventually become an Orthodox one in which mutations would only be recorded in the early modernity of South-Eastern Europe (p. 352).

As previously mentioned, in her study on religious imaginary in modern Romanian fine arts, Cristina Cojocaru claims that the mentality of our space in the field circumscribes fundamentally to the Judeo-Christian paradigm; in addition, particularly during 1927 and 1947, maximum interest in domestic spirituality was recorded because of the political context that favoured radical right views, only to disappear completely after WWII until the 70s in the communist period (p. 353). There are three major directions in 19th-20th century fine arts that give the expression of religious imaginary, i.e., concerning the subject, the form/ style and the spirit/ idea/ concept; rare are the works in which the three converge, an exception being Olga Greceanu's (1890-1978) that managed to render the idea of sacred in iconography along with the preservation of the lay character (p. 354). The first motif derived from religious art to be integrated in lay art is the silhouette of the ecclesiastical building (p. 355), and a canon of enlightened rulers can be grasped under the sign of romanticism and academism, to reach historical mythology for the popular masses during the totalitarian regime (p. 356). Free art manifested itself after 1989 and some artists that enjoyed recognition

⁴ Cf. Henry Maguire, "The Heavenly Court", in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, Washington, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1997, p. 248, *passim*.

before publicly affirmed their conversion to religious discourse (Horia Bernea, Sorin Dumitrescu, Silvia Radu and Vasile Gorduz, Ion Grigorescu, etc.); an orthodox radical wing also rose with the New Jerusalem of Pucioasa (p. 368).

Rada Niță's view on folklore in modern and contemporary Romanian visual arts starts from the premise that artists generally offered their own perspective on the traditional world and folklore based on their artistic and sometimes political orientations. The Avant Garde was known to be international in character, yet it showed interest in traditional art, as well as can be seen in the works of the surrealist Victor Brauner (1903-1966) who drew on Romanian fairy tales and domestic mythical figures according to Amalia Pavel (p. 370). Alongside artists, the role of institutions promoting folklore cannot be denied; two seminal ones are the Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest founded in 1990 and The Comparative Art Museum in Sângeorz-Băi established in 1995 (p. 384).

Nature in contemporary art is accounted for by Adrian Guță considering the years after 1960, a traditional perspective drawing on the representation of nature in fine arts and its siblings (sculpture, photography, etc.); moreover, the artist may initiate or carry out actions or *performance art* in nature, not to mention the particular case of *land art* that can be included in *environmental art*. Our first instances of landscape as autonomous genre are represented by an urban view showing the church in Câmpulung around 1837 by Ion Negulici (1812-1851) (p. 386). Between 1960-1980, realism, postimpressionism, neo-expressionism and the fantastic movement coexist, the author arguing that Țuculescu's paintings influenced the beginnings of the School of Poiana Mărului in the 60s (p. 387). Regarding nature and the other media, the relation between sculpture and nature was given by the symposia of sculpture that took place in open air between 1970-1980 (at Măgura Buzăului and other locations) (p. 391). Furthermore, the Bucharest workshop on engraving located on Str. Speranței had been one of the friendliest spaces of art for decades during the second half of the 20th century and nature was one of their topics (p. 392). With respect to performance and land art, the neo-Avant Garde Sigma group of Timișoara (1969-1980) consisting of Ștefan Bertalan, Constantin Flondor, Doru Tulcan, Ioan Gaita, Elisa Rusu and the mathematician Lucian Codreanu practiced alternative art forms aiming at urban aesthetics (p. 393).

The identity imaginary in the digital era tackled by Bogdan S. Pecican starts from the (modern) metaphysics of the subject in philosophy (p. 396) and passes to the metamorphoses of the postmodern subject that can be traced in cyberspace, a product and effect of the technological and communication revolution (p. 397). The *new media* constellation took shape, and it includes interactive *multimedia* such as *hypermedia*, *intermedia* and *transmedia* (p. 398). The new media thus pertains to a 'semantic basin' and the art deriving from such contexts is 'an emergent Avant-Garde' (p. 403). Last but not least, the status of the artist is uncertain: is there a new artist out there or simply another form of subversion of a marginal, *underground* artist? (p. 405) In Romania, where the concern for cybernetics and computers anticipated similar western developments (thanks to Ștefan Odobleja), progress was delayed by communism and art was desynchronised in the 1980s with few experiments in the media field (exceptions are the cineclubs among popular art schools in Arad and culture institutions of the students in Cluj-Napoca or Timișoara) (p. 408). However, it is difficult to quantify how Romania takes part in the art of new media in recent years, the sheep Miorița finding itself reproduced in bytes or among pixel storms with the preservation of the space of alternance between valley and hill (p. 413).

The last chapter deals with the technological imaginary in visual arts, Horea Avram claiming that media technology developed mainly in Western Europe and North America, contemporary art revolving around it, whereas the communist block, Romania included, stood in the shade of Yalta (p. 415). Against this background, from a chronological viewpoint, there are four stages with intersections and overlaps among them: a progressive utopian one (1965-end of the 1970s), an underground one (1970-1980), a connection one (in the 1990s) and a diversification one (after 2000) (p. 415). Even during the communist period in the magazine *Arta* there were articles discussing topics in the pipeline such as cybernetics, Cinetic art or computer art despite the low interest of museums in the field (p. 417). Underground is seen as strategy of resistance against the totalitarian ideology as the art in question operates outside the *mainstream* channels of distribution (via Paul Neagu, Horia Damian, Geta Brătescu, Ion Grigorescu, Mihai Olos or Diet Slayer) although some ambiental works conveyed a political message (p. 420). The group kinema ikon founded in Arad in 1970 has been a constant presence for over 50 years in Romanian

underground (p. 421), the author concluding that in our country, the option for media art has been a statement in itself (p. 434).

To summarize, this book invites readers from all fields of art to plunge into Romanian imaginaries, minutely accounted for at all levels from a multi and transdisciplinary perspective. Students, researchers, and professors may use it as bibliography for their mainstream courses in theatre, film, music, architecture, and visual arts studies.