

A Nation's Contemporary Artists from a Romanian Museum Analysed by an Art Historian

Ana-Magdalena Petraru *

Valentin Trifescu, *Artiști maghiari din colecția de artă contemporană a Muzeului Național Brukenthal/ Hungarian Artists from the Contemporary Art Collection of the Brukenthal National Museum*, Editura Muzeului Național Brukenthal Sibiu, 2023, 119 pages.



This volume authored by the Transylvanian art historian, Valentin Trifescu, PhD was published thanks to the exhibition on the topic at the Brukenthal National Museum in Sibiu between November 10 – December 31, 2023, and was edited by its manager, Alexandru Constantin Chituță, PhD. It is structured in four parts with a critical introduction and a rich list of 73 illustrations.

In the introduction, V. Trifescu argues that the city of Sibiu/ Hermannstadt is one of the most representative for Transylvanian Saxons and has gained major importance for the Romanians living here since the 19th century due to the headquarters of seminal cultural and religious institutions. Yet, even more Hungarians than Saxons live here nowadays; among the artists, we mention the reputed sculptor Miklós Borsos (1906-1990) and the influent painter from the communist period, Zoltán Andrásy (1910-2006). The original painter Ferenc Incze (1910-1988) spent his childhood here and some painters are still active in the present, i.e., Imre Kasza (born in 1952) and Ștefan (István) Orth (born in 1945). The motivation of this work is the

* Lecturer, PhD, Faculty of Letters, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, email: alina.petraru@gmail.com.

lack of research in the field of Hungarian artists from Romania and the opportunity provided by the rich cultural heritage of the Brukenthal National Museum. The selection of the works was made based on ethnic criteria, except for the sculptor Márton (Martin) Izsák (1913-2004), Jew of Hungarian culture. The author wonders whether the ethnic criterion is superficial in the choice of the artists and if it influences in any way their art, also drawing on Magda Cârnci's views that involve the changing politics that reflect less on artistic production and the artists' autonomy along with the exchanges with international art¹ (pp. 9-11). Leaving political considerations aside, V. Trifescu stresses that a significant part of the Hungarians in the catalogue had a teaching activity and mentored many Romanian artists: Zoltán Andrásy, Imre Gyenge, Márton (Martin) Izsák, András (Andrei) Kós, Imre Nagy, Jenő Szervátiusz, Artúr Vetró or Szabolcs Veres. Some of them were taught by Romanian professors in Bucharest or Iași, hence the intercultural collaboration² (p. 14).

The first part, "Chemarea naturii"/ "Nature's Call" investigates the painting of nature which was not considered neutral during the communist years, but subversive, decadent, a mark of bourgeois taste so the artists had to insert industrial features, musical scenes or peasants, a compromise they made in the 50s based on the collections of Brukenthal Museum (see *Sălciile/Willows* by Imre Nagy (1893-1976)) (p. 16). According to V. Trifescu, the artist's merit was he succeeded in accomplishing the identity landscape of his home village, similarly to Áron Tamási (1897-1966) in the field of literature (p. 18). At the same museum, a 1952 landscape by Ferenc Incze can also be admired; the 19th century *plein-air* technique only allowed the work to circulate on the black market, being destined to the bourgeoisie and sharply criticized at official level (p. 19). The author finds esoteric meaning in an apparent simple theme, linking it to the next work, shown in figure 4 of the illustrations, *Vis/ Dream* (1952) in which the painter expressed a purely instinctual unconscious feeling as opposed to the paintings to come in which compositions become more consciously fantastic³ (pp. 19-20). Ideological and mindset changes of the 60s reflected in an unprecedented freedom of expression at artistic level as can be seen from *Peisaj de toamnă/ Autumn Landscape* by Dórián Szász (1924-2006) acquired by Brukenthal Museum in 1969. The rural world was depicted in a realistic manner with no work scenes or ethnographic intention; a completely deserted village was shown with no people, schematic leafless trees, hills, houses and fences, a feature of minimal

¹ For more details, see Magda Cârnci, *Artele plastice în România (1945-1989), Cu o addenda 1990-2010*, second revised edition, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2013, p. 156.

² A detailed account is given by Vasile Radu in „Artiștii în fața furtunii politice (III)”, *Tribuna. Revistă de cultură*, IX, no. 185, 16-31 May 2010, p. 26 and Zoltán Banner in his Hungarian works.

³ See also György Székely Sebestyén, *Incze Ferenc (1910-1988)*, Komp-Press Kiadó, Kolozsvár, 2010, pp. 50-51.

artistic means that reinterpret the tradition of cubist avantgarde through the lenses of Romanian peasants from Transylvania (pp. 20-21). Ferenc Incze's works in the collections of the museum display the muse illuminating the artist after the contemplation of nature, coming from the earth as a spiral of the spirit rising to the sky in *Drumul/ The Road* (Fig. 9) or is able to reach the sun and protect it in *În apărarea luminii/ In Defense of the Light* with the help of oversized hands, a paradigmatic metaphor in the painter's creations⁴ (p. 22).

In "Istorie, tradiție și identitate"/ "History, Tradition and Identity", it is emphasized that since the interwar period, Hungarian artists have received important public orders with a strong Romanian dimension such as the obelisk devoted to *Horea, Cloșca și Crișan* in Alba Iulia created by the sculptor József Fekete (Iosif Fekete-Negrulea) who collaborated with the architect Octavian Mihălțan in 1937 to honour one of the deepest identity trauma of Romanians from Transylvania, the martyrdom of the initiators of the peasants riot in 1784 (p. 23). In the 50s, András (Andrei) Kós (1914-2010) created *Monumentul de la Bobâlna/ The Monument at Bobâlna* (with the architect Virgil Salvanu) which commemorated the peasants' riot of 1437-1438 and the statue group devoted to its head, *Budai Nagy Antal* (p. 24). The Székely sculptor Imre Gyenge based in Sibiu sculpted in bronze the busts of several landmark Romanian personalities such as Andrei Mureșanu and Andrei Șaguna which can be admired in the Astra Park. Brukenthal National Museum hosts an unsigned bust bearing no date (probably from the 1970-1980), most likely showing Alexandru Papiu-Ilarian (Fig. 15) and is attributed to Imre Gyenge (p. 25). Sculptors in wood attracted by the Transylvanian village in more than an artificial, romanticized manner are also mentioned: András Kós, Jenő Szervátiusz (1903-1983) or Péter Balogh (1920-1994) (p. 27). If András Kós's work bears a romantic mark, Jenő Szervátiusz's distinguishes itself through a specific Gothic tension. This is the case of Szervátiusz's 1956 *Plutașii/ Floaters* (Fig. 20) from the collections of the museum (p. 28). More recent works also attempting a recovery of peasant civilization are Miklós Borsos's *Ursitoare/ The Fates* (Fig. 19) donated to the museum in 2012 or Szabolcs Veres's painting, *Flowers* (Fig. 21) especially recalling the world of the Transylvanian village due to the flower vases in front of window blinds (p. 29).

"Oameni"/ "People" capitalizes on several Hungarian figures present in the museum's contemporary collections. Zoltán Andrásy's 1974 *Tânărul din brigadă/ The Young Man in the Brigade* (Fig. 22) is a politicized painting portraying three young workers on a construction site. Despite its pompous

⁴ V. Trifescu draws our attention to a coincidence, pointing to the movie *La Science des rêves* (2006) in which the director and screenwriter Michel Gondry employs the theme of the main character's oversized hands in a dream, being unsure whether the French film maker was aware of Ferenc Incze's work.

title subscribing to mainstream communist propaganda, Dórián Szász's *Răspuns prin fapte marilor îndemnuri/ Responding to Great Exhortations through Deeds* (Fig. 23), also from the 70s, is viewed as brave in its modernity with three workers in the yellow wheat fields next to a fragment from a shockingly red agricultural machine suspended in a surrealistic stance carried out by means specific to Pop Art, similarly to the artist's sports works, *Sport 74-96* and *Sport 74-126* (Fig. 28-29) (p. 31). Ferenc Incze's paintings are also part of the museum's collections and they show a flat being built (Fig. 24) or ballet repetitions (Fig. 25). An attempt to distance himself from the socialist realism of the 50s can be seen in the 1965 *Strada/ The Street* (Fig. 27) depicting the stronghold in Cluj (p. 32). Regarding sculpture, Artúr Vetró made a woman's head (Fig. 32), a testimonial of Romanian fashion in the 70s thanks to its hairstyle. A marble head with barely perceptible anatomical forms by Márton (Martin) Izsák, a prominent cultural figure of Târgu Mureș, is also present in the museum's collections. The head of Romain Rolland from the 80s made by József (Iosif) Fekete (1903-1979) was sculpted in a similar manner as part of a series of historical portraits commissioned via public order: Mark Twain (1951), Petru Groza (1961) and Iosif Vulcan (1964) (p. 34).

"Apocalipsa maghiară"/ "The Hungarian Apocalypse" focuses on several self-portraits by Ferenc Incze, part of the collections of the Brukenthal National Museum. A purely descriptive one (Fig. 51) and psychological ones (Fig. 52-55) stir in us strong feelings like tension, torment, depression, nightmares or introspection in solitude (pp. 34-35). Some of his other works describe periods of 'artistic and spiritual androgyny' (Fig. 60-61), moments of sacrifice required in the achievement of *Magnum opus* or graceful moments when there is inner enlightenment of a true cosmic dimension (Fig. 62-63) (p. 36). Ștefan Orth's *Erupție/ Eruption* (Fig. 69) also gave us an apocalyptic landscape by the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in an expressionistic manner in which tension is majestically built to shake both earth and the sky. A religious stance can be encountered in Robert Strebli's *Gândul care te înghite/ The Thought That Swallows You* (Fig. 70) and *Sacralitate virtuală/ Virtual Sacrality* (Fig. 71), the former portraying a bishop wearing the miter on his head, eating his own body, the latter accounting for the 'new religions', i.e., the recent pseudo-secular religions embodied by a character resembling a Sacerdote holding the Facebook logo instead of the cross in one hand and the Twitter logo in his blessing hand, a black bird thus replacing the white dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit (pp. 37-38). A somber atmosphere can be grasped from István Betuker's *Hide & sick* (Fig. 72) encapsulating the idea of disease and retreat in a feminine nude that attempts an absurd escape through an unnatural escalation of a room wall. In Zsolt Berszán's *Vopsea neagră pe hârtie/ Black Paint on Paper* (Fig. 73), all is reduced to black, thus implying rotten matter, affording V. Trifescu an

exercise of intertextuality with Julia Kristeva's *Soleil noir. Dépression et mélancolie* (1995).

To conclude, the volume is a minute radiography of the Hungarian artistic presence in one of the greatest museums in Romania providing useful insights not only to art historians, but also to researchers from various fields (visual arts, history, philology) due to its intertextual treats. Last but not least, we recommend it to the general public and art lovers that could admire the exquisite illustrations of the artworks.