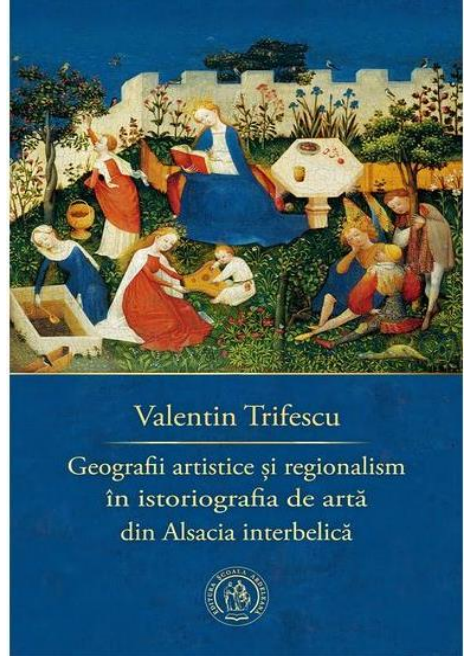


On Visual Arts and Cultural Regionalism in Alsace from the Perspective of a Transylvanian Art Historian

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Valentin Trifescu,
Geografii artistice și regionalism în istoriografia de artă din Alsacia interbelică/ Artistic Geographies and Regionalism in Art Historiography in Interwar Alsace,
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Art historian with a PhD degree awarded by Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca and the University of Strasbourg, Valentin Trifescu conducted his doctoral research in the field of regionalism in art historiography focusing on the art heritage in Alsace and Transylvania in the first half of the 20th century. The present book draws on his research in the field, the author admitting that what stirred his interest in the topic was a course he attended at the museums l'Oeuvre Notre-Dame from Strasbourg and Unterlinden from Colmar held by professors Philippe Lorentz and Elisabeth Clementz (p. 21). The material analysed by the Transylvanian author pertains to art-related historiography, the history of culture, history of literature, tourism and ethnography (p. 22) without the pretences of exhausting the subject, but simply give a taste for it to future researchers.

Divided into four chapters, the book deals with regionalism, in general (ch. 1), cultural regionalism and geographies of identity in interwar Alsace (ch. 2), hypostases of regionalism in the art historiography in Alsace

(ch. 3) and the art historian and museographer from Strasbourg, Hans Haug (ch. 4).

In ch. 1, regionalism in the first half of the 20th cent. is understood in the broader context of 19th cent. nationalism as it became spread after 1850. The author distinguishes between strong and weak identities, similar to major and minor cultures, thus defining strong national identities vs. weak regional ones (p. 25). Bringing into play Virgil Nemoianu's theory of the secondary, Valentin Trifescu argues that regionalism has its vocation (p. 26) as the centre is the one that renders periphery meaningful (p. 27); furthermore, the Garden of Eden turns the region into an island, an *axis mundus*, a centre in itself (*ibidem*). In Transylvania, for instance, both individuals and social groups developed several consciousnesses and identities in time, according to Lucian Năstasă, a researcher from Cluj (p. 33). Stereotypes equally contribute to the phenomenon (*cf.* Octavian Tătar, *ibidem*). Another aspect tackled by the author is identity as defined in relation to alterity (p. 34), drawing on both domestic (Victor Ivanovici, Lucian Boia) and international views on the topic (Solange Gras and Christian Gras) to support his claims, concluding that regionalism developed slowly, sequentially and in a non-linear manner (p. 52).

The second ch. is an overview of modern Alsatian identity and its developments, V. Trifescu laying emphasis on the fact that the region must be seen as a territory of confluences and contrasts, with open and close identities (p. 54). A reason for dispute between France and Germany, the identity of Alsace has been mainly defined as opposed to the German nation and through its denial (p. 56), and in some cases through the highlight of features that cannot be considered either French or German, Alsations qualifying the French as immigrants from the interior of the larger French nation (p. 57). Their specificity subscribes to *Heimat*, a general attachment to their small homeland (p. 60), its paradox consisting in a general attachment to the French nation, as opposed to the provincial personality of Alsace (*cf.* Emile Baas, p. 61) and discomfort (*le malaise alsacien*) caused by the war when the appurtenance to French centralism contrasted regional identities (p. 62). The violent breaking from Eastern Germany after WWI led to economic, agricultural and industrial instability of the province and adjustment difficulties to the French structures in their economic and production dimensions (*cf.* Fernand L'Huillier, p. 64). The language spoken was German, only 2% of the Alsatian population being fluent in French, as well, hence the German literature written in the province in the 20s. As a general remark, the Alsace remains a "*d'entre deux*" province with multiple identities that varied in intensity leading to features of border regional identity (p. 74).

The third ch. highlights the importance of geography as vital component for the understanding of political or cultural regionalism, landforms being envisaged as a scene decorum witnessing regional and local

past, providing more security for inhabitants, than history (p. 75). However, cultural regionalism has not simply been fuelled by the faith in the existence of a geographical determinism, art had a say, as well. Drawing on H. Taine's triple determinism imposed by race, milieu and moment, Montesquieu that tried to explain people's manners through the existence of an environmental and territorial determinism and Hegel who considered the study of art history as a means to know man, the Transylvanian art historian argues that such theories may be useful to regionalism if we refer to Italian artistic schools, each with a temperament of its own (pp. 93-94). According to Alsatian art historians, natural borders go beyond an East-West perspective, i.e., a national German or French one, they are enriched by the compass of geographical and cultural influences of the Italian South (p. 99). Inner regional space pertains to an ambiguous discourse, embezzled in its regionalist specificity, mainly pro French and anti-German (p. 107); a region of plains and mountains, Alsace has parochialism in its centre, the church, as beautiful as possible, being surrounded by vineyards as a landmark (*les clochers dans les vignes*, p. 116). The illustrator Hansi adds the French flag to the region and its bell towers which contributes to an image of a happy space (*L'Alsace heureuse, L'Alsacetricolore*, p. 120). Alsace has also been seen as a beautiful garden, an enchanting closed space resembling the Garden of Eden, a paradise on earth, as Goethe put it (p. 122). Regarding the province's specificity, art historians, however, focus on Alsace as a battlefield since its geographical position made it vulnerable (p. 125). When France was deprived of it in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871, a national traumatism could be observed, shown in the maintenance of a perpetual remembrance of the lost provinces (p. 126). It was this aspect that also determined the medieval aspect of cities with defensive walls that lasted to this day (*cf.* Robert Heitz, p. 127). Renaissance art particularly developed here, although the performances of religious Romanesque and Gothic art cannot be denied (p. 128). Traditional folkloric art was defined by stereotypes that the art historians attempted to escape from, namely women wearing a large black ribbon on their head despite the efforts of the illustrators to preserve it (p. 142). Mainstream art was influenced by local patriotism and in this respect, V. Trifescu brings into play Paul Acker's theory on the specialisation of each city, in part: Strasbourg was intellectual, military and administrative, whereas Colmar was a quiet town in which justice was served and art was made; moreover, Wissembourg particularly evokes the 18th century, whilst Mulhouse was the city of industry (p. 143). It was local patriotism that made each locality proud of its monuments: Saint Thiébaud church of Thann was the most beautiful one, the Strasbourg dome the highest one, and the one in Fribourg the largest (*cf.* Claude Odilé, p. 147). Apart from churches, the importance of museums should also be stressed, the Unterlinden, in particular constituting a total museum or a pantheon in itself.

The Strasbourg cathedral is dealt with minutely as both a national and regional symbol. Caught in-between the conflict of art historians, as a result of WWI, French specialists made a distinction between *le génie français* and *Kultur*, *civilisation* and *barbarianism* (cf. Jean-Noël Grandhomme, p. 156). To eliminate any pretences that the cathedral was a German monument and illustrate its French paternity, it was analysed piece by piece and percentages were given to assess its appurtenance (p. 159). Thus, the cathedral's tower, an outstanding achievement of the architecture of the Middle Ages, was biasedly deemed by French art historians the ugliest part of the monument because of the German influences (p. 160). Luckily, the Strasbourg cathedral nowadays escaped nationalist discourse and remains a puzzle-monument in both the French and German art of the Middle Ages (p. 162), a synthesis of Alsatian art that encompasses the entire medieval art of the province, not to mention Western European art, on the whole (p. 173).

The fourth ch. praises Hans Haug, art historian and museographer from Strasbourg who delivered a regionalist message at the anniversary of three centuries of French administration in Alsace (1648-1948). General manager of Strasbourg museums, Haug was a Frenchman who attributed Alsatian art to France and spoke of its regional specificity in his discourses, enlarging on it in his writings. If Lorraine has been considered to be essentially French in art ever since the Middle Ages, Alsace also displayed particular regionalist features, as shown above (p. 191). Haug's method was that of a double speech which helped him integrate less known artists into the generous framework of the art in France. This is the case of a painter who laid the foundations of still nature in the Alsatian school of painting and had artworks commissioned by the Alsatians, the Germans as Sebastian Stosskopf (1597-1657) and the French as Sébastien Stosskopff (p. 197). Concerning museography, Hans Haug's great merit was the establishment of the museum l'Oeuvre Notre-Dame from Strasbourg in 1931. Here, he had the occasion to put into practice all his conceptions on Alsatian art doubled by a visual discourse (p. 205). The medieval garden of the museum is also a place of memory and regional identity by which a lost regional space was restored (p. 210); it was inspired by engravings and paintings of 15th century artists such as the anonymous from Strasbourg known as E.S., Martin Schongauer from Colmar and others that depicted the Garden of Eden, garden scenes with lovers or the Holy Virgin surrounded by flowers in the garden (pp. 214-216). A beautiful, yet closed space specific to the Middle Ages, the garden, an atmosphere museum (p. 222) of its own, synthesizes Alsatian imagery in fine arts. The high brick wall isolates it from the outside and defends the artworks inside the museum.

The last three centuries of the Middle Ages best show Alsatian genius in art, according to Hans Haug and had the painter Grünewald as one of its main representatives; the rustic character of the cage accompanying

man is specific to the medieval art of Alsace (pp. 224-225). Nicolas de Largillière's 1703 *La Belle Strasbourgeoise* (The *Beautiful Strasbourg Woman*) is the only painting by the artist that testifies to the *genius loci* of Alsace and was acquired by Hans Haug for the museum at a very high price; soon, it became a Mona Lisa of the museums in Strasbourg, a landmark of good taste whose reproductions could be seen on refined chocolate boxes from the region (pp. 227-230).

V. Trifescu concludes that regionalism in art history research is in its inception and discourses of the periphery, margin, province and region on art and the world need further elucidation (pp. 233-234). We strongly recommend the volume to whoever is interested in the topic of regional art history and geography so as to get acquainted to the Secondary and its logic.