

National Art as Legitimate Art: 'National' between tradition and Ideology in Ceausescu's Romania

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Nationalism was one of the most persistent hallmarks of the Romanian communism.¹ It played an important part in the construction of the official discourses within various fields and disciplines and it became gradually the all-encompassing tissue which fed Romanian communism for such a long time.² The appeal to nationalism became an efficient means of channeling and furthering popular enthusiasm on behalf of the Party and its leadership. It also offered the Romanian leadership the needed ideological framework in order to legitimate itself. Although the field of art was far less touched by the employment of nationalism as an ideological tool, it contributed nevertheless to the orchestration of the official nationalistic discourse.³ The present paper is an attempt to investigate the forms that the discourse on nation took within the field of art creation and to point to the ways in which the syntagma of 'national art' was employed in order to reinforce the official discourse on nation.

Political steps within the process of defining the 'nation'

Romanian nationalism, in its communist variant, manifested itself both as a *defensive* and as an *offensive nationalism*. *Defensive nationalism* appeared

¹ The secondary literature on this topic is relatively rich. The most important study so far is Katherine Verdery. *National Ideology under Socialism, Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 1991). For the period previous to the Ceausescu's rule see Kenneth Jowitt. *Revolutionary Breakthrough and National Development, The Case of Romania, 1944-1965* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971). For the Ceausescu Era see Lucian Boia. *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* (Budapest: Central European University, 2001).

² See for this issue the article *Rumanian Nationalism* (Survey, Spring-Summer, 1974, vol. 20, no 2/3, 91/92), in which George Schöpflin identifies four fields where the ideological use of nationalism was most manifested: economic, language, historiography and concept of the nation.

³ For an analysis on the way the discipline of History was affected by the intervention of the communist power see Alexandru Zub, *Orizont închis, Istoriografia româna sub comunism* (Iasi: Institutul European, 2000). For the same topic in the field of philosophy and sociology see Vladimir Tismaneanu. *Academia 'Stefan Gheorghiu si formele coruptiei ideologice*, în *Arheologia terorii* (Bucuresti: Ed. Eminescu, 1992).

mainly as a reaction to external, political or economic factors, perceived as intrusive interventions in the internal affairs of Romania. Such was the case when Romanian leadership reacted against the Soviet initiative of limiting and imposing the economic development of each country within the Soviet bloc.⁴ According to this plan, Romania would have become a supplier of raw materials and agricultural products for the more industrialised members of the communist camp, such as East Germany, Poland or Czechoslovakia.⁵ The reaction of the Romanian leadership to this plan was made public in the official newspaper of the Party in April 1964, when the autonomous economic policy was vehemently stated.⁶

The alteration from a defensive form of nationalism to an offensive one took place in August 1968, when Ceausescu denounced and refused to take part - along with the other members of the Warsaw Pact - to the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Romanians, as well as foreign observers, catalogued the reaction of the Romanian leadership as a genuine concern for the fate of the Czechoslovaks and the reforms undertaken by Dubcek at that time. This false assessment of Ceausescu's words led to an unprecedented popular support on behalf of the Party as well as to the international singling out of Ceausescu as an 'autonomous', 'dissident' leader within the communist camp.⁷ It matters less at

⁴ Graeme J. Gill. *Rumania: Background to Autonomy*, Survey, Summer 1975, vol. 21, no 3 (96), 95-96, Daniel N. Nelson. *Romanian Politics in the Ceausescu Era* (New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1988), Michael Shafir. *Romania. Politics, Economics and Society, Political Stagnation and Stimulated Change* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1985).

⁵ Khrushchev's plan, presented in Moscow on 3-5 August 1961. See Dennis Deletant. *Romania under Communist Rule* (Bucharest: Civic Academy Foundation, 1998, 142).

⁶ 'Statement on the Stand of the Romanian Workers' Party Concerning the Problems of the World Communist and Working Class Movement' (Scântea/The Spark, April 23, 1964). It has been argued that the inception of the Romanian separation from the Soviet tutelage can be fixed for an earlier date. Stephen Fischer Galati mentions that 'as least as early as 1955 Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and his associates were cautiously pursuing national policies first formulated in 1945 and envisaging a possible eventual assertion of independence from the Kremlin' (*The New Rumania. From People's Democracy to Socialist Republic*, Cambridge/Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1967, 7). Kenneth Jowitt chooses 1962 as the beginning of the Romanian autonomous course (*op. cit.*, 198-228).

⁷ The term 'autonomous' is employed by Vlad Georgescu, who makes the distinction between 'autonomy' and 'sovereignty' stressing the fact that 'autonomy' is a more proper term for what happened in Romania in those years. (Vlad Georgescu. *Istoria românilor, De la origini pîna în zilele noastre/The History of Romanians, From Origins to Present Days*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 1992). Other characterisations of Ceausescu's policy in his early years of rule were 'dissident', 'partially aligned', 'independent' and 'deviant'. See for these denominations and their authors Ronald H. Linden. *Romanian Foreign Policy in the 1980s*, in *Romania in the 1980s* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1981).

this point of discussion that Ceausescu's condemnation of Czechoslovakia's invasion was a fearful reaction to sharing a similar fate rather than an approval of Dubcek's reforms.⁸ What is indeed significant in this episode is the massive appeal to nationalism. The employment of nationalism took of course the form of defending the right of every country to choose its own pattern of development.⁹ But Ceausescu went further and he started using an offensive form of nationalism which made room for the praise of national past, national heroes or personal communist credentials. The mixture between these elements became in the period of mature ceausescuism a salient feature of the Romanian communism as well as the most important mechanism of backing the extensive leader's cult:

It was said that in Czechoslovakia there was a danger of counter-revolution; maybe tomorrow there will be someone who will say that here too, at this rally, counter-revolutionary tendencies were manifested. We answer to all of them: the entire Romanian people will not allow anybody to violate the territory of our homeland... We are communists and anti-fascists who faced prisons and death, but we have never betrayed the interests of our working class, of our people. Be sure, comrades, be sure, citizens of Romania, that we shall never betray our homeland, we shall never betray the interest of our people.¹⁰

In this paragraph – which is a fragment from the public speech Ceausescu delivered on August 22, 1968 in front of the people gathered in the Palace of the Republic Square in Bucharest - originates the mechanism which subtly backed the peculiar Romanian nationalism. Ceausescu ascribed the nation rather than the working class the leading role in the process of communism construction in Romania. Furthermore, he identified the Romanian Communist Party not only with the proletariat but also with the entire nation and consequently he reinforced the link between him and the people.¹¹

⁸ Vladimir Tismaneanu describes this moment as follows: 'Ceausescu's anger in 1968 originated not in support for or solidarity with the Czechoslovak reformers. [...] His condemnation of the intervention stemmed from anguish. He and his clan feared the Soviets might think of "visiting" Romania too. In other words, again, it was not anti-Stalinism, but burning passion for personal power', in *Romania: a case of 'dynastic' communism* (New York: Freedom House, 1989, 30).

⁹ N. Ceausescu: 'The problem of choosing its own way of constructing socialism is the problem of each single party, of each single state, of each single people. Nobody can act as a counselor, as a guide when it comes about the construction of socialism in other country.' (*Scântea/The Spark*, August 22, 1968).

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ See for this issue Katherine Verdery, *op. cit.*, 118-119 and George Schöpflin, *op. cit.*, 93.

The offensive nationalism took a far more radical form in 1971, when the July Theses were launched. This moment is of utmost importance for the issue at stake here, as it marked the shift from economic and political nationalism to the ideological and cultural forms of it. The July Theses were elaborated by Ceausescu himself after he paid a visit in China and North Korea in the summer of 1971. He was there profoundly impressed by the popular mobilisation he could witness, by the power and status of the Party.¹² When he came back, he delivered two speeches within the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party¹³, which inaugurated what was later called the 'Mini cultural revolution', named after 'The great proletarian revolution'. On a more practical level, the launching of the July Theses marked the breaking off with the former reconciliation strategy towards the society and the return to the hard line of ideological and mobilisational activity. More precisely, the leader's initiative concretised in a neo-Stalinist-like attack against intellectuals and the freedom achieved by them in the period of relative liberty which followed Stalin's death. Furthermore, it led to the reinforcement of the Socialist Realist principles. The Theses concretised also in a stigmatisation of any kind of pro-occidental orientation and of its adherents and in the praise of national values and implicitly the national past:

A not very becoming practice has developed, comrades, to look only at what is being done elsewhere, abroad, to resort for everything to imports. This betrays also a certain concept of considering everything that is foreign to be better, a certain – let us say – prostration before what is foreign, and especially before Western makes... You well know that in the past Eminescu critised and made fun of such mentalities in his poems. The more so we have to do it today... We are against bowing down before everything that is foreign... Time has come for [emphasising] the need to resort to [our] own forces in the first place,... and only afterwards to appeal to import.¹⁴

The July Theses meant in fact an official demand that Party activists and intellectuals take over the topics of nation and national culture and redefine them

¹² As Daniel Chirot put it in a concise passage, the features that struck Ceausescu while visiting North Korea were: 'The discipline, the cleanliness of Pyongyang, the obedient marching masses, the enormous degree of self-reliance and independence, and most of all, the ability of the Party to mobilise such a tremendous effort on behalf of national development.' (Daniel Chirot, *Modern Tyrants, The Power and Prevalence of Evil in our Age*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994, 240).

¹³ The complete titles of the two speeches are: *Proposals of measures for the improvement of political-ideological activity, of Marxist-Leninist education of Party members, of all working peoples* (July 6, 1971) and *Exposition to the work meeting of the Party aktiv from the sphere of ideology and of political and cultural-educational activity* (July 9, 1971).

¹⁴ Nicolae Ceausescu. *Exposition to the work meeting of the Party...*, 49.

according to the new Party interests. They provoked indeed vivid debates on topics as the relationship between national culture and mass culture, the criteria according to which a work of art should be constructed in order to be widely perceived, the role of professionals and amateurs in the creation of works of art. All these discussions led ultimately to the exaltation of the past artistic creation, which was acknowledged as the perfect source of inspiration for the works of art to be produced. This trend is part of the large ideological-cultural phenomenon called protochronism. The protochronist theory, inspired by the virulent nationalism that had broken out in Stalin's Russia in the 1940s and 1950s, stated Romanians' pre-eminence in various cultural fields. The term was coined by the literary historian and aesthetician, Edgar Papu, an intellectual trained in the interwar period, who spent several years in a communist prison. He argues, in an article published in the series *Secolul XX*, that 'a number of Romanian literary developments chronologically precede similar achievements in other countries'.¹⁵ After analysing a series of examples (he sees, for instance, the 15th century *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Teodosie* as anticipating the European baroque literature, the early 18th century writer Dimitrie Cantemir as a romantic writer *avant la lettre* or the 19th century poet Mihail Eminescu as an ancestor of both existentialism and sociology), Papu concludes that 'protochronism is one of the dominant and defining traits of our literature in the world context'. Once the theory has been unleashed, both scholars and ideologists embarked upon the 'glorious' enterprise of finding Romanian 'firsts' in as many fields as possible. All this was doubled by an extensive praise of the Romanian cultural and political achievements. The discipline of history was one of those that suffered most, along with the literary field, from the aberrant application of the protochronist theory, but the field of art history was touched as well by it.

Defining 'nation' within the ideological-cultural context

The process of defining national art was tightly linked with the ideologically constructed discourse about the nation. The nationalist discourse, that idealized by exclusion and/or reinterpretation of historical data, a unitary nation in terms of its historic past, ethnic constituents or prospective goals was duplicated by a plead for a unitary art. The signal for taking up the issue of national art was once again given by Ceausescu himself as early as 1968. He stressed, at the National Conference of the Romanian Artists' Union in 1968 – the first at which he participated in his capacity as General Secretary of the Party – that 'each artist in his own manner, within his own style should render the unity of ideas that dominate today our socialist society...'¹⁶ The freedom of creation being

¹⁵ Edgar Papu, *Secolul XX*, No. 5-6, 1974.

¹⁶ State Archive, Fond 2239, RAU, File 14/1968, 357.

declamatorily hailed, Ceausescu highlighted nevertheless that artists had certain duties towards the Party and the Nation, which should be accomplished within the framework designed by the Party ideology. The Party ideologues as well as the art critics took over and discussed Ceausescu's formulation, fixing themselves upon a syntagma that seemed to encompass adequately the idea - 'diversity in unity'.¹⁷ As incongruous as it might sound, the syntagma referred to a controlled diversity of styles within a well-defined ideological framework, as it was revealed when the topic was dealt with further in various publications. It became 'a unitary artistic movement, guided by a clear ideological conception, by open and innovatory spirit'.¹⁸ The initially invoked 'diversity' was rapidly amended and circumscribed by the July Theses' reference to the necessity that works of art have the working people both as topic and main beneficiary. This meant a limitation of the artistic means used, as the works of art should be produced in an accessible, clear language. Discussions within the internal meetings of the RAU, as well as discussions that took place in the press highlighted the fact that the works of art inspired by Occidental artistic 'fashions' are not suitable for a working-class based society. Any experimentation in the field of art creation was theoretically banned and the return to the figurative tradition proclaimed almost as a rule.

Art critics and art historians played an important role within the process of defining the notion of 'national art'. This affirmation could seem an exaggeration, especially if we are the supporters of the theory according to which intellectuals were a marginalized category during communism, without real means to oppose the dictatorial power. My opinion is more nuanced. The communist society - in which discourse was both powerless and full of impact - functioned mainly on the basis of discursive 'reality'. Discourse was the tool that modeled/controlled the society and not other way round. That is why discursive articulations became important/influent, no matter whether they were sincere or not. In other words, intellectuals (backed by ideologists) were those who maintained the illusion that system was functioning, that what was said at the very top was true and should be supported.

¹⁷ Dan Nemteanu. *Omagiul plasticii românești, eroiceii epoci de la 1848/ Homage to the Romanian Fine Arts, to the Heroic Epoch of 1848* (Scînteia/The Spark, July 6, 1968).

¹⁸ Iulian Mereuta. *Mai multe schimburi de idei în sfera artei noastre plastice/ More exchange of opinions in the sphere of our fine art* (Scînteia/The Spark, September 13, 1968).

Other commentators drew upon the idea of 'moral unity' of the Romanian art, as it is revealed in the following passage: 'Some of our artists start from the idea of stylistic diversity and forget the unity of ideas, the moral unity of our art.', Radu Negru. *Unitatea etica și estetica a stilurilor în plastica noastră/The Ethic and Aesthetic Unity of Styles in our Fine Art* (Scînteia, 18, June, 1968).

As far as the specific problem of national art was concerned, I believe that initially art critics and historians felt comfortable with such a topic, as it was one with a long and established tradition in Romanian culture.¹⁹ The exaggerations, contaminations from the political sphere, the sometimes grotesque accents (that appeared especially in relation with the theory of protochronism) were only the result of opportunism, giving up, need to achieve public status. I shall attempt in the following pages to analyse the larger context in which the notion of 'national art' was discussed, as well as the manner in which the contamination of the discourse on 'national art' with the political one, influenced the former.

Due to a long tradition of focusing on and supporting national art creation, the general attitude of the Romanian critics during the communist period was rather conservative. This position would be revealed especially when discussions centered on the reception of art trends considered un-compatible with the generally accepted artistic currents appeared. Apart from the artistic production itself, a brief investigation of the official publication of the Romanian Artists' Union, *Arta*, reveals a moderate attitude of the art critics as regards the avant-garde manifestations or experimentalism in art in general. It can even be said that during the entire communist period, the art critics lagged behind the artistic evolution itself, favouring the 'tradition of common sense'²⁰ rather than experimental endeavours. This 'tradition of common sense' would be integrated in an organic conception on the development of Romanian art, according to which the main source of inspiration for the contemporary art production should be sought in the art of the past.²¹ The art critic Magda Cârneli considers that the year 1968 was a focal moment for the 'movement' that denied the experimental tendencies, 'movement' that she attributes to 'the fracture between the young generation and the rest of the artistic community'.²² It true that the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s represented a moment of openness, experimentation and borrowings from the Occidental art which probably disoriented the older generation of art critics. But behind this circumscribed

¹⁹ A similar idea is expressed by Katherine Verdery who explained in the book cited above the generally supportive response of the Romanian intellectuals to the nationalistic discourse during Ceauscu period as the consequence of a long practice in this direction in the interwar period. See for a similar explanation of the intellectuals support Mihai Botez. *Intelectualii din Europa de Est, Intelectualii Est-Europeni si statul national comunist, Un punct de vedere românesc* (Bucuresti: Fundatia Culturala Româna, 1993).

²⁰ N. Argintescu-Amza. *Artistul si publicul/The Artist and the Public, Arta Plastica*, 1, 1965, 54.

²¹ 'In this sense, the promotion of creative talents, the highlighting of 'novelties' should mingle with the permanent care of not departing the solid and mysterious ground of the vivid values and tradition of our Romanian art, a ground of infinite complexity', Idem.

²² Magda Cârneli. *Artele plastice în România, 1945-1989* (Bucuresti: Meridiane, 2000, 96).

moment, which was due to the general context of liberalization, it can be noticed a constant and well-defined penchant of the art critics towards the appreciation of the traditional Romanian art against the international currents.

The declared 'resistance' to experimental undertakings influenced as well the relationship between the work of art and exhibitions. A work of art that was to be displayed within an exhibition should have a finite character. This meant that the art work should be in a finite form as far as its form and idea implied were concerned. Within the regular collective exhibitions as well as in the personal ones, there were not supposed to be permitted works of art that would give the impression that the artist was still in a tentative, explorative period. An exhibition should be, by all means, the finalization of an idea in a visual, readable form. As a matter of fact, the Union had no special spaces where young artists or those who had a natural penchant for art experiment could expose their ideas/works. When such manifestations took place, they were received unfavourably by public as well as by the official critics.²³ Even when explorations, searches, experiment – in other words all that could lead to styles incompatible with the official trend – were accepted as necessary steps in the formation or artistic development of an artist, they were supposed to take place within the studios: 'The exacerbation of subjectivity can lead to the situation when the public assists to exhibitions of 'explorations', without being able to discern what is searching for and for whom. The explorations (any artist in every epoch faced them) are necessary, but for the public they cannot be of any interest before they concretized in a finite work of art under every aspect...'²⁴ The preoccupation for what was exposed within the Union's spaces was justified by the care for the Romanian public, whose artistic receptivity was not supposed to be aggressed, but, on the contrary, modeled: 'If an artist aggresses excessively the exiting receptivity of art lovers, he/she has no right to complain against the 'opacity' of our public. The arpeggios, the scales, no matter what brilliant they are, are practiced at home no during the concert.'²⁵ All this manner of treating exhibitions – in the written press and in the way they were assembled as well – was the result of the way exhibitions were conceived – an occasion of educating the public.

This manner of conceiving exhibitions and the role of a work of art in general had as a result the re-emergence of the debates on militant art, which preceded the discussions about national art/national essence. Those debates were retaken

²³ The exhibition organised within the Apollo Gallery (which was a space that belonged to the Union) produced vivid discussions in the press. See for this C.R.Constantinescu (*Scînteia Tineretului*, 21 October 1970) and Alexandru Ivasiuc (*România literară*, 1 October 1970).

²⁴ Marcel Chirnoaga, *Artistul și publicul/The Artist and the Public* (*Arta Plastică*, 1, 1965, 7).

²⁵ N. Argintescu-Amza, *Artistul și publicul/The Artist and the Public* (*Arta Plastică*, 1, 1965, 6).

antinomies and arguments that remembered sometimes the great debates in the press of the 1950s, without having instead their virulence. The nucleus of those debates was the pair militant art – art for art’s sake. For example, the art critic Dan Grigorescu started an article where he was supposed to address the issue of tradition in art with a discussion about militant art in universal context.²⁶ He remarked the general tendency in the post 1945 period towards an art concerned with ‘the participation to the social existence’, disparaging at the same time those theoreticians who still supported ‘art as a form of pure contemplation, as a construction that justifies by itself and for itself, apart from any social and political purposes’.²⁷ The next step in the author’s argumentation was that of singling out the attempt of each nation to define its identity as one of the essential features of the postwar international politics, especially in the context of an increasingly dynamic society, where the exchange of information and ideas was so intense. Art was equally influenced by this rapid flux of dissemination of ideas and artistic forms. That was why artists and theoreticians should attempt to ‘establish a coherent and functional rapport between innovation and tradition, in other words the conservation of the specific character of a national culture’.²⁸

The placement of discussion in European context was a little strange for 1986, year in which the article signed by Dan Grigorescu appeared in *Arta* review. The situation described had little if nothing in common with the reality of the Romanian society of that time. During the last years of communist dictatorship, the exchange of information with the Western world was minimal. There was no risk of massive contamination with disturbing artistic forms. The accent put on this tendency as being one of general amplitude was nothing more than an attempt to distract the attention from the similarities with the debates from the 1950s and to give the impression of normality and integration in a period when the reality was very much different.

Art experimentalism continued in spite of the indications given by the official line and art theoreticians had to struggle to accommodate the traditional art creation to the modernist, international trends. They had to find a manner of linking the abstract tendencies registered in the Romanian art of the late 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s to the traditional artistic heritage. Therefore, they saw in the abstract repertoire of forms and signs of the Romanian folk art the source of inspiration for these tendencies:

One of the central problems of our artistic creation is to express originally the Romanian artistic environment. The modern leaning toward the system of synthetic thinking and the

²⁶ Dan Grigorescu. Întelesuri ale tradiției/Meanings of Tradition (*Arta*, 5, 1986).

²⁷ Idem, 12.

²⁸ Idem.

concision of language can find a vast repertoire of solutions in the universe of forms of our folk art and of our cult art developed from the former.²⁹

To the suspicions of isolation and orientation towards past, critics responded giving the example of Brâncuși's works, that began to be interpreted massively through the influence of folk art. Through this unilateral process of reading his works, Brâncuși became the most important figure in a relatively long list of 19th and early 20th century artists, whose works of art were considered representative for the true depiction of the Romanian spirit. Consequently, an artistic pantheon, similar to that built up in the field of history, became available and ceaselessly circulated. This gave birth as well to another related topic, that of the original Romanian contribution to world art heritage, which only could be achieved through recourse to the traditional forms of art:

History is merciless with all empty forms, with all that do not bears the sign of profound authenticity. The way to authenticity, to universality goes naturally [...] through this pattern, through this inner form which is given by the national history and culture.³⁰

The process of linking the current artistic creation with the traditional forms of art had in fact several phases. In a first declamatory stage, the continuity between tradition and contemporary art seemed to need no demonstration. It was a widely accepted assumption that 'far from being opposed, tradition and contemporary visions of the world mix together and complete each other.'³¹ Later on, the mechanism of projecting contemporary concepts and ideas upon past artistic achievements was employed in order to prove the continuity between past and present. This undertaking had the best results within the field of history where the events of the past were re-written according to the Party ideology and needs of legitimization, but it proved to be efficient in the field of art history as well. Here is a passage that highlights this aleatory intermingling of past and current concepts:

We have today a better understanding of the perennial values of our multi-secular art, in which we recognise ideas of great vitality, such as optimism and confidence in the laws

²⁹ The RAU's National Committee Report, National Conference of the Romanian Artists' Union, April 18-21, 1968, State Archive, Fond 2239, RAU, File 14/1968, 59.

³⁰ Mircea Popescu. *In arta, calea spre universalitate trece prin matca spiritualitatii nationale/ In art, the way to universality goes through the national spiritual pattern (Scânteia/ The Spark, November 8, 1968).*

³¹ Dumitru Ghiata. *A reprezenta simtirea româneasca, vremurile noi/ Representing the Romanian Spirituality, the Contemporary Epoch (Scânteia/ The Spark, April 17, 1968).*

of the world, love for the deeds and faces of people, for nature, as well as the delicate leaning for moderation, beauty of forms, for freshness and expressiveness of color.³²

Whereas the ‘the love for nature’, ‘leaning for moderation’ or ‘[leaning for] freshness and expressiveness of color’ belong to the traditional way in which Romanian spirituality and art creation were defined, the attributes of ‘confidence in the laws of the world’ or ‘love for the deeds and faces of people’ are obviously new additions to an extended and mixed definition of Romanianness.

The appeal to tradition had, as we have seen above, different phases. It embraces the re-defining/re-employment of the archaic, folkloric fond, as well as the invocation of the 19th century art, considered a continuation of the archaic one. The mediaeval-Byzantine segment was equally recuperated by the invocation of the painting of historical inspiration as well as through the emergence of the neo-Byzantine trend.

The art of historical inspiration was, undoubtedly, one of the best defined trends in the art of the 1970s and the 1980s. It supported and translated visually the official nationalist discourse. The realization of works that memorised past or contemporary events in a historical perspective played a double role. First of all, these works represented an easy to grasp visual stimulus which facilitated the remembering of a certain event or historical personage and gave the impression of national cohesion. They were, by the same token, a background against which the desired correlations between the past and the communist reality or between historical figures of the national pantheon and Ceausescu himself seemed smoother to be made. On the other hand, in the painting of historical inspiration, as it was being practiced in the 1970s and 1980s, there could be discerned obvious influences of the style/techniques considered to be characteristic for the traditional Romanian art. The art critics of that period remarked that aspect, considering that the best relation between tradition and innovation seemed to have been fulfilled in that very kind of art production: ‘the renewal of the Romanian art occurred especially in the last two decades, since our spiritual tradition, our national history, from its most ancient manifestations until the present days, has become the main subject of our works of art ...’³³

The mural art offered also inspiration in terms of technique, which allowed simplifications and stylizations of remarkable modernity: ‘The mural painting forces the artist to operate simplification of expression that meet with the most modern initiatives in painting [...] primitivist tendencies, *à-plat*, drawing that accentuates the counters, simplified shadows, luminosity of tones.’³⁴ The

³² Ibid.

³³ Dan Grigorescu. *Întelesuri ale tradiției/Meanings of Tradition (Arta, 5, 1986, 13).*

³⁴ Theodor Enescu. *Virgil Almasanu* (Bucuresti: Meridiane, 1979, 16). The above passage is encompassed in a commentary devoted to Almasanu’s work ‘Epilogue 1907’ displayed

painting of historical inspiration became a trend especially encouraged from the beginning of the 1970s. This tendency in the art of Ceausescu Era can be perceived by merely looking through the pages of *Arta* review. The selection of the reproductions that appeared in the review was most often than not made according to these criteria. Not only was the presentation of the reviews of the exhibitions, which was anyway supposed to consist of this kind of images, made in this way, but in the reviews of exhibitions having no specific topic, such as the regular salons, appeared precisely those images that represented a historical topic or a portrait of Ceausescu's.

Another important point on which ideologists and theoreticians focused was that of defining national art through the agency of style and/or national essence. Evidently it was more useful from a political point of view to subscribe to the definition of national art in terms of its national essence, because it allowed a definition of national art in vague terms and therefore more easily to control. Through the circumscription of the notion of 'national essence' with the wanted attributes of the Romanian nation, the concept of 'national art' was modeled indirectly, even more as these two tended to overlap frequently.³⁵ On the other hand, there was already available a long inter-war tradition in this sense that could be employed in order to sustain successfully this idea.³⁶ The art critics reiterated almost entirely the discussions on 'national specificity' which animated the inter-bellum intellectuals, maintaining themselves in a comfortable epigonic attitude. Some of them denounced the definition of the notion of 'national art' through the agency of 'national specificity' as too vague and outdated. They preferred instead to focus on the discussion of the notion of 'style' which they treated in such a way that it ended by encompassing the old concept of 'national specificity': 'I do not believe, for instance, that the national in art can be reduced to 'national specificity' [...] National specificity confers to art a 'local colour', a local tone. [...] By national art I understand a specific, original cultural form, and this can be defined by style, by a relative unity of forms and of the spirit that patrons them.'³⁷ A second direction in the process of defining the notion of 'national specificity' was through the delineation of a certain topic or a certain

at the commemorative exhibition '50 Years from 1907', where the influence of Byzantine painting is evident. The same influences are singled out when the works of historical inspiration that were supposed to decorate the facades of the National Theatre in Bucharest are discussed (project 1972, unrealised).

³⁵ '... culture and nation are not two distinct realities, two limitroph concepts, but correlative and, after all, co-substantial', Anatol Mîndrescu. *Arta nationala si stil/ National Art and Style (Contemporanul*, 8 June 1968).

³⁶ For a detailed discussion on traditionalism, national specificity, autochthonism in the fine arts and art theory of the 1920s in Romania see Ioana Vlasiu. *Anii '20, traditia si pictura româneasca* (Bucuresti: Meridiane, 2000).

³⁷ Anatol Mîndrescu, *art. cit.*

manner of representation related with the artistic sensibility and spirituality specific for the Romanian people. Art critics, following the interwar tradition, opted for the definition of ‘national specificity’ in terms of local spirituality. Elena Costescu, for instance, defined ‘national specificity’ according to the classic definition of Wölfflin, seeing in it ‘an issue of interpretation rather than a thematic one’.³⁸ She points to the usually wrong and narrow evaluation of that notion during the interwar period³⁹, as being related exclusively to the topic represented. She cites as well those interwar artists and theoreticians who backed the idea of defining ‘national style’ in terms of Romanian spirituality (Sirato, Tonitza, Blaga)⁴⁰ In this context it is worth mentioning the identification of artists such as Grigorescu and Brâncuși as representative figures for the national art, although both of them produced, through their works, the most significant technical fractures in the development of Romanian art.⁴¹

A particularly interesting phenomenon appeared towards the end of the 1970s, whose presence can prove how deep the return to traditional mentalities and artistic structures was, as well as how, theoretically forbidden borrowings from religious art, were tolerated by those in power as long as they backed the official trend of ‘communist nationalism’. The neo-byzantinism – as it was later labeled – emerged in a period when the renewal of the Stalinist ideology and the pressure represented by the widely praised mass culture and amateurs’ movement, forced some of the professional artists to retreat to their studios and to cultivate interiorisation and individualism.⁴² Those who chose this form of confinement,

³⁸ Eleonora Costescu. National si universal în arta/National and Universal in Art (*Arta*, 5, 1968, 28).

³⁹ ‘...the so called ‘national specificity’, that for a few decades constituted a major preoccupation in our culture, has been more too often as a problem related dominantly, if not exclusively, with the ‘theme’’, Idem, 28.

⁴⁰ ‘Not the ‘topic’, in other words what one represents in a painting, gives the national specificity in art, but the manner in which one represents, depicts, presents, develops that topic, because the manner is the modality of expressing oneself, it is the style, the thought itself, the conception of a nation according to its temperament, culture, ethics, religion [...] It is the ethics’ mirror.’ Olga Greceanu. *Specificul national în pictura/National Specificity in Painting* (Bucuresti: Cartea Româneasca, f.a.).

⁴¹ ‘Paradoxically, Grigorescu whom we always identify with the ‘Romanian specificity’ is the one who, from a technical point of view, tore himself in the most un-equivocal way from the pattern of the local tradition. Within his own life span, he succeeded to make, in the benefice of the Romanian art, the enormous jump from Byzantine icon to the Barbizon’s plein-air, from academism to pre-impressionism.’, Andrei Plesu. *Idilism si uitare la Nicolae Grigorescu* (*Arta*, 1, 1985).

⁴² See for an in depth analysis of this phenomenon Magda Cârneli. *Art of the 1980s in Eastern Europe. Texts on Postmodernism* (Bucharest: Paralela 45, 1999, 93-109). For a more succinct account on this issue see as well her book *Artele plastice în România*

began to move towards the investigation of images imbued with archetypal or spiritual meaning. Their interest in unambiguously declared spiritual values led them to a different manner of rendering both representational and non-representational art. Regardless of using a figurative or a non-figurative repertoire, they employed various structures as a means of going beyond strictly formal categories. In the end, their spiritual impulse was evidently channeled towards archaic or Orthodox Christian traditions.

At the beginning of the 1980s, this tendency coagulated in a real aesthetic trend that moved towards the 'spiritualisation' of the experimental impulse.⁴³ The artists who embraced and gathered around this idea began to re-employ an abstract repertoire of forms and to investigate the mysterious Byzantine iconography as a way of appropriating the spirituality behind it. Their paintings focused usually on simple, elementary individual forms. In time their repertoire evolved:

Sometimes the forms preserved a figural appearance – such as a gate, a throne, an altar, a cross, a book, a vexillum, bread, a star – meant to embody specific Christian, particularly Orthodox symbols. Sometimes these forms took geometric, almost abstract aspects, intended to visualize wide-spread spiritual symbols such as the point, the crossing, the centre, the mandala.⁴⁴

What was sought was a focus on individual objects and their reinvestment with their primordial meaning. Artists' ultimate scope was that of re-establishing a sense of normality/spirituality in an ideologically corrupted space where the contours of objects became blurred and especially the relationships between them and people defective. Their choice for a prevalently religious inventory is not difficult to grasp, as they often stated in their articles, diaries, notes their intention of linking their undertaking as much as possible with what was considered the authentic Romanian spirituality and art creation.

The movement was often seen as an existential alternative to the totalitarian regime and the series of exhibitions of the neo-byzantine group was interpreted at that time as a form of taking, silently, a political attitude. Even though for an outsider's point of view this trend can seem rather obsolete, neo-traditionalist and excessively oriented towards the past, the younger generation regarded it as 'avant-garde' or 'revolutionary'.⁴⁵ It is not surprising therefore that a second generation of artists continued the spiritual search of the previous one by altering

1945-1989/Fine Arts in Romania 1945-1989 (Bucharest: Meridiane, 2000, 156-158). In the following pages, the account of the neo-byzantinist trend draws largely on these two studies.

⁴³ Magda Cârneli. *Art of the 1980s...*, 100.

⁴⁴ *Idem*, 101.

⁴⁵ *Idem*.

the former approaches in order to express more visibly the spiritual dimension of the images and objects represented. Just to prove the vigor of this movement, I should add that this trend has remained highly fashionable even after 1989, the artists involved – regardless of generation - grouping in a distinct team of artists, having their own exhibitions’ place with periodical exhibitions and most often generally positive reviews, being ultimately a palpable and individualised current within the current artistic movement. On the other hand, a certain degree of ‘politicising’ of the movement after 1989, in the sense of a participation in the ‘pro or anti European integration’ debate or ‘the Orthodox values against the Western corrupted culture’ dispute, proves, I think, the latent and not fully exploited political side of the movement in the communist period.

To conclude, the process of defining national art was strongly linked to the more general enterprise of re-defining terms such as ‘nation’, ‘national past’, ‘national history’. The large framework within which this process took place was that delimited by ideological and political creeds, but it encompassed also references to traditional ways of conceiving this issue. The notion of ‘national art’ was circumscribed by placing it in the vicinity of terms and concepts that belonged evidently to the political repertoire. On the other hand, the re-employment in connection with the concept of ‘national art’ of such notions as ‘militant art’, ‘art for art’s sake’, ‘experimentalism’, ‘avant-garde’, etc, led to the definition of the former in a very restrictive way. The accent put on the painting of historical inspiration - as the most representative direction for the national art of the 1970s and 1980s – marked a even greater limitation of the notion of ‘national art’. In addition, the classic scheme of dividing the Romanian culture in three intertwining layers - a folkloric-archaic one, a mediaeval-orthodox one and a modern one – was used and all of them were evoked and used within the process of defining ‘national art’. The folkloric-archaic layer – considered both the most neutral from an ideological point of view and the most easily to recuperate in terms of the modernist discourse – was the most widely invoked traditional constituent of the ‘national art’. It also served well the official trend of protochronism. The mediaeval-orthodox layer was employed practically by artists in order to elaborate the paintings of historical inspiration or those that depicted contemporary political events (elements that remind the art of icons or the votive portraits of the mediaeval leaders can be identified in the presidential couple’s portraits). The same Byzantine-Orthodox fond constituted the inspirational material for the ‘dissident’ artists, un-involved or little involved in the official production, but tolerated by those in power as long as they offered visual solutions that contributed to the defining/refining of the nationalist discourse. Finally, the modern layer offered a concrete and suitable style for the official production of those years and was largely commented in the 1970s and 1980s.

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