

Traces of Old Visual Patterns in the Romanian Modern Painting

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Abstract: The contribution intends to stretch out the way certain visual sequences of old Romanian or Byzantine art are brought back to life in the Romanian modern age. Some study cases reveal specific ways of using and understanding the cultural tradition. In the first two decades of the 20th century the artistic research regarding the past is connected to the concept of national identity. One of the pioneers in this field was the theorist artist Apcar Baltazar, well-known for his attempts to construct a “national style” on the basis of Romanian folk elements and the post-Byzantine style. His viewpoint on a modern national style established upon past decorative patterns, indebted to Symbolism and the international style Art Nouveau, represents a start in developing spiritualized forms inspired from archaic arts. The discourse on history, in the manner of eclectic quotations from the painting of Baltazar, was exceeded by history itself. The First World War changed life and art, increasing the dramatism of image, the harsh simplicity of line, the flattening of color present in the entire production of the generation of artists grouped in 1920 around the association *Arta Română* (Romanian Art). Artists like Tonitza, Dimitrescu, Sion, Șirato reinterpreted and adapted the aesthetics of Romanian old mural painting and rustic elements to the modern artistic language. The Byzantine tradition, a long-lasting paradigm (in the situation in which artists accepted

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commands of the Christian Orthodox Church as a way of living), was lightly assimilated by strong personalities, but tangible in the propaganda discourse of the Neo-Orthodox movement.

Keywords: Art Nouveau; tradition; Romanian modernism; Apcar Baltazar; post-Byzantine style; portrait and still life in interwar painting.

In the second half of the 19th century, intellectuals and artists in Romania put into debate new concepts of art, and topics related generally to the cultural heritage, folk art, national art's character.

At the General Exhibition held in Bucharest in 1906, Romania was celebrating a triple anniversary: 25 years since the foundation of Romanian Kingdom, 40 years of Carol I's reign, but also 18 centuries since the Roman Empire's conquered the ancient territory of Dacia. The Exhibition was a tribune for the affirmation of the national identity by bringing altogether the past and the present, the historical Romania and the modern Romania, but its real purpose was to prefigure the aim of the future nation: the united Romania³.

Within the impressive display that followed the pattern of European universal exhibitions, they developed a range of architectural forms originated in the polemical discourse on the specific features of national art. The garnishment of various buildings elevated with that occasion combined a rich variety of historically derived elements of Romanian old architecture. At the same time, the general display included full scale copies of some monuments with historical resonance: so-called The Silver Knife Church / *Cuțitul de Argint*⁴, the church of Hurezi Monastery in Vâlcea, and the fortified house of Greceanu family in Vâlcea.

3. Carmen Popescu, *Le Style National Roumain. Construire une nation à travers l'architecture 1881-1945* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes / Simetria, 2004), 133–53.

4. A cover after the Moldavian Church St. Nicholas in Jassy, restored by the French architect A.E. Lecomte de Nouÿ; The Silver Knife Church was constructed by the architects Nicolae Ghika-Budești and Gerorge Sterian between 1906-1910, and decorated with frescoes by the painter Costin Petrescu.



Figure 1. The National Exhibition 1906, The Silver Knife Church, postcard.

The architecture and the decorative arts made steps forward than other branches of art in reconsidering the role of the past. In the last decade of the 19th century the architect Ion Mincu (1852-1912) had already introduced elements of Romanian traditional and religious architecture, especially suggestions from Brancovan monuments in some of his projects: Lahovary residence (1886), Școala Centrală de Fete (1890), Bufetul de la Șosea (1892), Nicolae Petrașcu residence (1900), etc.⁵

5. What distinguished Ion Mincu from other pioneers of the national style which followed eclectic and historicist principles was his manner of questioning the tradition and to create bridges between the national heritage and the present demandings of the architecture. See Popescu, *Le Style National Roumain. Construire une nation à travers l'architecture 1881-1945*, 62.

Today's debate around the ethnical stream, that marked the architecture and decoration at the cusp of 19th century, are rather nostalgic and admiring, meanwhile for the contemporaries the subject used to be controversial. How could a work of art (whether building or a painting) encompass an ethnical meaning? What makes it recognizable as Romanian among similar products? Which are the visual sources to follow: the old religious monuments or elements taken over from the peasant's art and industry? How could the architects and artists create new art objects and buildings having a national character? This corpus of questions that have made the artists in Spain, Hungary, Finland, Russia etc., equally intrigued Romanian historians and artists. In the interwar period, in the context of modernist movements of the 1920s, it still remains one of the most ardent subjects.

Even prior to the year 1906, the scientific research of national patrimony had become a major objective, although the logistics, as well the financial support, were limited. The study of old monuments and restoration of a few ones, the inventory of ethnographical and archaeological materials were direct consequences of the importance given to the cultural past. The foundation of the *Commission of Monuments* (1892) and of the *Museum of Ethnography, National Art, Decorative and Industrial Art* established in 1906, were the leading institutions for the research of national patrimony.

The romantic revivals and the historicist taste in Europe at the end of the 19th century nourished the Romanian modern art. Besides, the artistic past was seen as indispensable source in re-shaping the Romanian art.

Apcar Baltazar (1880-1909), a passionate researcher and an inspired art critic, joined the small team of historians, archaeologists and architects of the *Commission of Monuments* where he had to investigate the iconographic display of mural painting in monuments belonging to the age of Constantin Brâncoveanu, time considered a climax for Romanian pre-modern civilization.



Figure 2. Apca Baltazar, *Selfportrait*.

In his studies⁶, Baltazar presented, at some didactical level, each section of decoration, and analyzed its formal sources with arguments reflecting the familiarity with the specific terminology and the biography of the subject. In this investigation, the artistic skills played a fundamental part: the copies Baltazar made after several iconographic sequences of the original helped him to understand better the character of the image and prepared the ground for some of his own compositions.

Close to the moment when the Austrian painter Gustav Klimt revisited the byzantine themes being inspired by the Venetian mosaics, Baltazar meditated on the post-byzantine paintings seen at Hurezi, Filipeștii de Pădure or in other similar monuments. At the same time, he paid attention to the various forms of peasant art and industry. Some compositions alluded to mural paintings of 17th century, but others are dominated by the synthetic forms and fluid lines of Art Nouveau.

6. Apca Baltazar, *Convorbiri artistice [Artistic Conversations]* (București: Editura Meridiane, 1974).

Baltazar was an unconventional artistic character, opened to innovation and experiments, qualities in frequent opposition with the conventional principles he acquired during his studies at the School of Fine Arts in Bucharest, where he studied between 1896-1902, with the academic painter G. D. Mirea⁷. This split between education and individual artistic profile can be observed throughout his creation.

At the end of his short life (dead at the age of 29), Baltazar left behind many works, sketches, decorated pottery and projects that compound a fragmented and, in a certain measure, a confusing assemble, corresponding with the uncertain metamorphosis of art around 1900 in Romania, as well as all over the Europe⁸. The stylistic diversity of his work demonstrates the fail in finding a solution for his major project: the creation of a “national style” in arts, having as starting point traditional forms. Baltazar’s ideas, expressed in a range of articles published in magazines as *Viața Românească*, *Voința Națională* or *Convorbiri literare*, were decisive in redefining the concept of *ornament* and in reconsidering the importance of decorative arts with reference to other domains considered “majors”. He was concerned mostly on motifs that could be applied in the arts of the present, being one of the first critics of Romanian art who conveyed an original vision of the artistic phenomenon regarded in its historical evolution⁹.

7. Vasile Florea, *Apcar Baltazar* (București: Editura Arc 2000, 2015), 121. The Decorative Art Department at the School of Fine Arts was created in 1906 by the architect George Sterian, the first professor of this section; Baltazar participated at the contest for the new speciality in 1908, along with Constantin Artachino and Costin Petrescu, the last one winning the cathedra, see the article “Concurserile pentru școlile de arte-frumoase,” *Arta Română*, no. 7–8 (1908): 128–29.

8. Theodor Enescu, “Luchian și primele manifestări de artă independentă în România. Eseu asupra gustului artistic la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea,” *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei*, no. 3–4 (1956): 185–208.

9. See also Irina Cărăbaș, “The Shadow of the Object. Modernity and Decoration in Romanian Art,” in *(Dis) Continuities, Fragments of Romanian Modernity in the First Half of the 20 Th Century*, ed. Carmen Popescu, Irina Cărăbaș, and Ruxandra Demetrescu (Bucharest: Editura Simetria, 2010), 101–41.



Figure 3. Apcar Baltazar, Project for the poster for the Exhibition of the Agrarian Society, 1906.

In the Romanian artistic milieu, the byzantine revival and its practice of symbolic and literary quotations, was mirroring the confluence between historicism and Art Nouveau, direction which reached its highs at the beginning of the 20th century and goes off with the outbreak of the First World War.

Although many painters affiliated to groups as *Tinerimea Artistică/Artistic Youth*, among them Kimon Loghi, Ipolit Strâmbu, Nicolae Vermont, shared secessionist conceptions and independent behaviors, they also continue to produce works of academic, impersonal character. This feature of vague frontiers, common to European change in taste, dominated the artistic life and art until the WW I.

Baltazar's contemporaries Ștefan Popescu and Nicolae Tonitza were also interested in theories regarding decorative arts, in their attempt to infuse vitality in all fields of art.

Ștefan Popescu (1872-1948) was admired by Apcar Baltazar for his various activity as a landscape painter, engraver, graphic designer who made sketches after religious or rustic architecture, projects of mural painting and furniture, some of them reminiscent of Ruskin's gothic details, most of them unfortunately lost today. Popescu emphasized the conception on decoration as an intellectual, selective approach, opposed to naturalistic imitation. He considered that the mural painting was able to give more substance to art and to improve its status in the society. The artist, considered by Tzigara-Samurçaș "an enthusiastic researcher and a connoisseur of the local art", believed that the mural painting is capable to give art a superior meaning and a status in the society, and emphasized the conception of decoration as ideas art, opposed to naturalistic imitation¹⁰.



Figure 4. Apcar Baltazar, *Project for a decorated pottery*.

10. Ioana Vlasu, "Réflexions sur les arts décoratifs et la décoration en Roumanie au début du XX siècle," *Studii și Cercetări de Istoria Artei* XLIV (2007): 49–54.

The painter Nicolae Tonitza (1886-1940), also gifted with various skills from religious frescos to satirical illustration in newspapers, strongly reacted against the mimetic and idyllic style, largely cultivated in the field of mural painting, starting with the middle of 19th century. At the beginning of his career, Tonitza was involved in the re-painting some old monuments before The Great War (in 1904 the church of Grozești, Bacău, in 1911 the church of Poeni, Vaslui, 1912, Scorțeni, Bacău, 1914, Netezești, Ilfov)¹¹, activity unfortunately less studied by art historians. Tonitza – labelled by his circle of artists-friends as “The Byzantinist” of the group - wrote articles that put into question various sides of the concept of “national style”. Some of his theoretical conclusions derived from the artistic practice. As a mural painter, Tonitza imposed to himself to avoid that he used to consider to be the “trivial mixture between Byzantine and Renaissance features”¹².



Figure 5. Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck, *Contemplative portraits, mural painting.*

11. Doina Păuleanu, *Grupul celor patru* (București: Editura Monitorul Oficial, 2012), 55; see also Barbu Brezianu, *Tonitza* (București: Institutul de Istoria Artei, Ed. Academiei Române, 1967).

12. Păuleanu, *Grupul celor patru.*

This apparently irreducible discrepancy between the traditions of Western Renaissance and Eastern Orthodoxy was cleared up within the return to the classicism in the 20s avant-garde, embraced by Romanian artists bias their connections and affinities with French artists.

After the Great War, the painting, reflecting more or less the realities, transformed the modes of expression introducing formal simplification, color desaturation and discontinuity, reiterating expressionist and cubist traits. This turn to a sober experience of view reclaimed a redefinition of the image that rejected the naiveté of impression, or the peculiarity of the expression by revisiting the works of the three giant figures from the end of the 19th century: Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh. The triad provides a major lesson toward purification and spiritualizing of the form and expression in interwar painting. The shift of paradigm inspired the artists to find ideas and solutions outside or inside, not to *copy* or the to work in the manner of, *à la manière de*, but with the reference to its means and contents. Another model artist in interwar period was the symbolist painter Puvis de Chavannes. His work marked the artistic conscience of Romanian modern painters as Theodor Pallady, Sabin Popp, Ion Theodorescu-Sion or Camil Ressu, inspiring them in the sense of austerity and refinement derived from aesthetics of mural painting. Baltazar appreciated the French painter for "the nobless of his feeling and his originality, considered today by the cultivated class as one of the greatest painters"¹³.

A personality as Apcar Baltazar still needs to be analyzed in correlating his creation with early works of big artists from his generation. Although unfinished, his creation is plenty of potential research material, as well as his activity as an art critic and historian which had a great impact on Romanian artistic life.

One of the first female Romanian artists who was contributing at the shaping of the national Romanian style, a pioneer of the decorative art cathedra at the Fine Art School in Bucharest¹⁴, and multi-skilled artist, Cecilia Cutzesco-Storck (1879-1969) wrote in 1910:

13. Apud Florea, *Apcar Baltazar*, 120.

14. At the decorative arts department, organized by George Sterian in 1906, was created in 1916 a special class for women artists under the title "Principles of decorative art" ruled by professor Ceclia Cutzesco-Storck until 1941, see Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, Irina Cărăbaș, and Ada Hajdu, "Istoric Unarte / A Historical Overview," in *Universitatea Națională de Arte București/ The National University of Arts in Bucharest* (București: Editura UNArte, 2014), 9–101.

Modern artists in Paris are tired of technical art super productions – real acrobatics in painting – tired by the imposing subjects or parade painting, and officially, they are wishing a more simplicity and construction, and they are fulfilled with sincere enthusiasm for pristine epochs and their archaic works. They founded there an increased purity and force of expression.¹⁵

This flash back was driven by the excitement of primitivism, which was at that time a very generous but massive confuse concept.

In 1906, at the Romanian Athenée Hall in Bucharest, Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck opened her first exhibition where she presented a large range of subjects, from genre portraits to landscapes, works painted in Romania or abroad. In a small fragment in her book of memories¹⁶ she described the itineraries she followed in the years after her studies at Munich: Forges-les-Eaux and Trouville in Normandy, Ploumanac'h in Bretagne, Choisy-le-Roy near Paris, then Le Havre, Amsterdam and in the country: Rătești, Berca, Joseni, Plopeasa. In just several years, the style she acquired in Munich's art school was abandoned in favour of a decorative synthetism descending from Paul Gauguin's Tahitian painting. This stylistic model is obvious in the cycle of pastels *Salomé* (1910-1916), a substantial subject in fin-de siècle art and literature, in works as *The Rainmakers (Paparudele)*, *Whisper (În șoaptă)* (1911-1916), *Dynamic* (1911-1916), *Static* (1911-1916), *The Joy of Life (Bucuria vieții)* triptic, (1921). The *Salomé* cycle avoids the dancing girl *clichée* and limits the story to two tragic moments, both in reference to the episode of repentance: a general lament breathing, in a certain degree, a theatrical dimension generated by readings as Wilde's homonym play or the poem of Adrian Maniu; the other one, the episode of the kiss, was alluding to the largely-known motif in Wilde's play, *Je baise ta bouche Iokanaan, je baise ta bouche*. Despite of these references these works reevaluate the possibilities of iconic representation and reconsider the Christian background of the story as well.

15. Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck, "Răspuns La Unele Puncte Din Critica D-Lui Tzigara," *Viața Socială*, no. 4 (1910), apud Amelia Pavel, *Ideii estetice în Europa și arta românească la răscruce de veac* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia, 1972), 69.

16. Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck, *Fresca unei vieți* (București: Ed. Bucovina, I. E. Toronțiu, 1944).

In search of purity and spiritualized form, an artist like Olga Greceanu (1890-1978), also preoccupied with the study of the national past, reached to a neo-byzantinism which in the 30's was assimilated with the rhetoric propaganda instrument shaped during the King Carol II reign. The mural painting was a lifetime passion for Olga Greceanu. Frescoes decorating buildings in Bucharest and Măldărești breathe the spirit of time in their taste for history, heroic and monumental vision. In these works, she develops a hybrid, paradoxical style that combines pregnant volumetry of cubist origins with elements decanted from Byzantine tradition. Speaking about the specificity of the Romanian art¹⁷, Olga Greceanu claimed that the representations in the Romanian tradition are abstract, and she believed that the artist founded in figures and objects the genuine geometric archetype. It was her path to follow for her, her compositions, religious or not, being indebted to the spiritualized forms of the old art. A similar attempt to conciliate (apparently) incompatible manners of representation could be observed in Nadia Grossman-Bulighin's painting whose pictorial vision was ironically described as "academic cubism". In works as *Decorative composition with four women* (c. 1920-1925, Stamps and Drawings Cabinet, The National Art Museum of Romania, Bucharest) Olga Greceanu replaced the formal accent with a synthetism recalling certain compositions of Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck realized between 1910-1916.

Descendant from an old family of Polish nobles, a painter, writer, religious muralist with studies of art at Liège and Paris, founder of the first Association of Women Painters and Sculptors in Romania (1914), Olga Greceanu was overlooked and mystified under the communist domination from 1948 further on, recently rediscovered¹⁸.

17. Olga Greceanu, *Specificul național în pictură* (București: Tiparul Cartea Românească, 1939).

18. Adina Nanu, "Pictura monumentală realizată de Olga Greceanu," *Revista Monumentelor Istorice* LXIV, no. 1-2 (1995); Adina Nanu and Ștefania Iancu-Ciovărnache, *Olga Greceanu* (București: Ed. Centrul de Cultură Palatele Brâncovenești, Mogoșoaia, 2004).



Figure 6. Olga Greceanu, *Salomé*, oil on cardboard, 1927.

Nowadays the interest for the interwar painting animates largely the Romanian public, mainly from nationalistic and religious viewpoints. The study of the beginning of the organized artistic education in the field of decorative art was came in the forefront for the art historians in the last ten years, while modern religious mural painting remains an unexplored field of research. The relationship between art the tradition had a fluctuant evolution. Frequently quoted in the painting of 1920s, the interest in it slowed down in the 1940s when the coryphées of national style Francisc Şirato și Ion Theodorescu-Sion, changed their discourse.

The style of Francisc Şirato (1872-1953) in the 1920s paid tribute to modernist movements as the post-impressionism (Cézanne), constructivism and cubism. Works as *The carpet seller / Negustorul de scoarțe* known also as *Vânzătorul de covoare* (c. 1917-1923), *The Return from market / Întoarcere de la târg* (1923) put in evidence artist's interest in monumental forms. His creations of that period reacted to the impressionist sediments in the Romanian art.

Considered by the Romanian historiography as a doctrinary work, *The Meeting* was symptomatic for Şirato's interests at that time. In the 1930s he turned his back to geometrized forms and abandoned himself to a pictorial hedonism.¹⁹

The painting of Ion Theodorescu-Sion (1882-1939) express his exuberant, versatile character. In the first decade of the 20th century he experienced the energy of expressionism (see *Nevermore* and *Lux in tenebris luceť*), but some landscapes and allegorical compositions reveals, besides a great talent, his extraordinary adaptability in terms of technique. A decorative project for National Theatre's curtain whose subject based on Victor Eftimiu's play, *Înşir-te mărgărite*, Theodorescu-Sion augmented even more the area of his explorations, with suggestions extracted from byzantine mosaics and Art Nouveau compositional strategies.

In the 1920s, under the influence of the New Classicism, he focused on subjects taken from Romanian peasant's daily life. Likewise, Francisc Şirato, Theodorescu-Sion became a reference point for the national style concept.

Sabin Popp (1896-1928) had the revelation of the importance of old religious art in a particular context: Maruca Cantacuzino ordered him to paint some copies after the frescoes in Băleni and Sinaia, monuments built by her ancestors. These copies were destined to decorate the walls of his manor in Posada along with a large tapestry by Nora Steriadi.

Sabin Popp continued his investigation travelling across the country at Neamţ, Horaiţa, Bistriţa, likewise his colleagues Apcar Baltazar, Ştefan Popescu, Constantin Artachino, Ipolit Strâmbulescu. From these old frescoes Popp take over that hieratic pose with symbolic valence. A previous experience in Italy prepared him for this research. In Rome in 1919-1920, Sabin Popp took the contact not only with the Italian art from the museums but also with the Italian avant-garde whose artists expressed their ideas and visions in the pages of the magazine *Valori plastici*. The leading figures Giorgio de Chirico and Carlo Carrà, advocated the reconsideration of their tradition.

In Sabin Popp's painting the portrait and the self-portrait was studied keeping in mind the models seen inside the old monuments. Ştefan Neniţescu admired his works exhibited at the *Autumn Salon*, in 1922, describing them as a mixture between Tuscan and byzantine style²⁰.

19. See Ioana Valsiu, *Anii 20, Tradiţia şi pictura românească* (Bucureşti: Editura Meridiane, 2000).

20. Adina Nanu, *Sabin Popp* (Bucureşti: Editura Meridiane, 1968).

For Theodor Pallady (1871-1956) the Byzantine art is not a visual pattern but a significant subject of meditation that would lead him toward a formal synthesis: "To uncover the object from all its temporality - said the artist - to go beyond the object... that has to be only a starting point to express our subjectivity". The art critic Aurel Broșteanu discussed the bi-dimensional character of Pallady's art in this period in terms of an increasing spiritualization:

The presence of Byzance was felt in the bold outline, that bordered the form in mosaics and frescoes while the surface is the ideal place for its making. Minimalized, the form reflects the formal principle behind it. The stylistic construction by simplifying the form started under western influences reach, by severe aesthetic constraints of Byzantine art, the highest form of ascetism. Hence, the emaciated appearance of the human figure in line with the ataraxy of psychic stance.²¹

Pallady's thematic repertory reflects his secluded life. His still lifes and nudes in interior, even more than his landscapes, mirrors his own poetical vision, indebted to literary symbolism.

As in the cases of Apcar Balthazar, Olga Greceanu or Costin Petrescu, many interwar artists devoted to decorative arts, deriving their aesthetics from old visual patterns of the Romanian mural painting or book illustrations, close tight to religious, traditionalist or royalist subject matters, where underestimated or forbidden by the critics starting from late '50, artists which constitutes a large chapter in the history of Romanian art to be written from now on.

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21. Aurel Broșteanu, *Acest altceva... pictura* (București: Editura Meridiane, 1974), 57.

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