Beyond Centre and Periphery: The potential of an "histoire croisée" approach to art history in Romania

As the main stages and figures of the institutional history of art history in Romania have been clearly set out by others (e. g. Born 2008; Teacă 2012; Țoca 2011; Sabău et al. 2010), it is not my intention to summarise them here. Instead, this article has two aims. The first is to reflect on the ways we think about the writing of national art histories in the region imperfectly defined as Central and Eastern Europe in the period 1850–1950. The second is to share knowledge of an under-recognised figure in the emergence of Romanian art history, Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcaș (1872–1952), and, by discussing the role he played in institutionalising a particular narrative of Romanian national art, explore the value of *histoire croisée*.

ART HISTORY AND NATION-BUILDING

Despite commendable efforts to make writings and institutional frameworks more widely available (e. g. Malinowski 2012; Rampley et al. 2012), the art historiographies of Central and Eastern Europe are still under-researched. Those working in the field face a number of challenges, not least the very practical obstacles of language skills and difficulties of access to sources. There are also more complex methodological and political hurdles related to the way the production of these art histories has habitually been conceptualised. Emerging during the period of nation-building, from the mid-nineteenth century to the Second World War, art history inevitably became an ideological tool of national discourse. As a result, Central and East European art historiography has traditionally been studied in terms of separate national art histories. This in turn has led to a lack of critical self-reflexivity, particularly in analysis of the ways the discipline was used to nationalise the past by inventing historical continuity, mythicising certain periods and defining national specificity.

At the heart of these problems is the structural issue of centre and periphery. This is a paradigm which has, of course, been subject to critical scrutiny for some time. But it still dominates discourses in and about Central and Eastern Europe and was already embedded in the ways early art histories were constructed. It helps explain why the first art historians from the region often preferred to relate their local art to what they identified as the "centres", rather than regional contexts. Trained in Western ideas but operating within the "not-quite-Other" realm of emerging nation states (Piotrowski 2009, 52), they initially formulated their regions' artistic identities in response to Western narratives. In other words, the search for what was local was framed by knowledge of what was Western (Hajdu 2017, 412). It was an asymmetrical relationship which meant that local art historians frequently found themselves wrestling with their art's ambiguous correlation to Western concepts of periodisation, style and influence. Facing inevitable value judgements of temporal belatedness and stylistic derivation when synchronicity with the Western canon was not possible, art historians variously refined, ignored or hybridised its schemata.

The centre-periphery issue still impacts scholarship in the field. Even when studies of pre-socialist art historiography think outside the box of national narratives, the tendency is to prioritise relationships to the art histories produced in Western Europe rather than explore what was

going on in neighbouring states, especially when these had competing irredentist interests. The result is that when the art historiographies of, for instance, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary or Poland are discussed beyond their own countries, it is usually in terms of how they relate to the ideas of the Vienna School or other Western "centres" (e. g. Born 2008; Passini 2012; Bakoš 2013; Makuljević 2013).

"HISTOIRE CROISÉE" AND ITS POTENTIAL

Beyond simply marking relationships to established Western schools of thought, the possibility of a more nuanced kind of comparative transnational approach is offered by the concept of *histoire croisée* (Werner/Zimmermann 2006). Its value as a framework for Balkan or Southeast European regional studies has already been demonstrated by the four edited volumes of *Entangled Histories of the Balkans* published by Brill (2013–17). Diffusing the power dynamics of centre and periphery in favour of multiple viewpoints, it allows an examination of interdependencies between discourses produced regionally. For example, instead of researching the art historiographies produced in Romania and the Yugoslav Kingdom individually, or in connection to French, German or Austrian schools of art history, it considers how they relate to one another. The same can be done with intersections between the competing histories of a contested region like Transylvania (e. g. Mihail 2022) or with the various research narratives that emerged around Byzantine art in the Balkans (Adashinskaya 2022). This allows us to see how historical accounts – produced in different countries or even in the same region in different years – resonate with each other, proposing conflicting interpretations of the past or ignoring uncomfortable competing discourses. But *histoire croisée* has its own problems, not least the number of languages required to access primary sources. For example, in order to understand how the Byzantine style was conceptualised as the major tradition in the Balkan states, one needs to be able to read Serbian, Bulgarian, Modern Greek, Russian and Romanian, in addition to French, German, English and Italian. In Central and Eastern Europe, *histoire croisée* is an undertaking that lends itself to teams of multi-lingual (and ideally multi-disciplinary) specialists.

Let me briefly explore the possibilities of such an approach when applied to a Romanian case study. The institutional foundations of art history in Romania were laid during the rapid Westernisation of the country in the second half of the nineteenth century, which saw the establishment of universities and Schools of Fine Art in Bucharest and Iași, as well as galleries, exhibitions and the Commission for Historical Monuments with its influential *Bulletin*. Most commentators agree, however, that Romanian art history as a discipline with international reach did not fully come into its own until the interwar period, following the political creation of Greater Romania. Two main centres emerged: Bucharest and the former Hungarian town of Cluj (Koloszvár) where a Chair of Art History was established in 1920. The influence of Western schools of art historical thought was very clear in both; indeed, the teaching of art history in Cluj is usually discussed in terms of its alignment with the principles of the Vienna School, particularly the methodologies of Josef Strzygowski and Hans Tietze (Born 2008; Sabău et al. 2010; Rampley 2013). In the interwar period, Romanian art historians made conscious efforts to curate a narrative of Romanian art history for foreign consumption, often in parallel with that other persuasive tool of cultural soft power: the travelling exhibition of "national" art. Thus, the first "stories" of Romanian art were published in French, German, English and even Swedish (e. g. Iorga/Balș 1922; Tzigara-Samurcaș 1925; Ștefănescu 1928; Oprescu 1935).

ALEXANDRU TZIGARA-SAMURCAŞ AND THE MUSEUM OF NATIONAL ART IN BUCHAREST

Less attention has been paid to the formative stages of national narratives in the early years of the century. In particular, the role of the Museum of National Art in institutionalising discourse around the place of folk culture in a national history of art merits further discussion (fig. 1). The complicated his-

Fig. 1 Nicolae Ghika-Budeşti, Museum of National Art (now Museum of the Romanian Peasant), Bucharest, 1912–c. 1941 (Photo: author)

tory of this museum (founded in 1906, its building was not completed until the 1940s; it later became the Museum of the Romanian Communist Party and today is the Museum of the Romanian Peasant) and the disciplinary demarcation between its current ethnographic remit and the various institutes of art history in Romania, mean that its contribution to the development of national art historical narratives is often overlooked. Added to this is the socialist erasure from historical memory of its founder, Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcaș, Romania's first university professor of art history. A dynamic but querulous figure, he engaged in several public disputes with colleagues; as a Germanophile and close friend of the royal family, he also fell foul of the communist regime. Stripped of his many positions, he died in poverty in 1952 and was forgotten to the extent that a researcher in the 1970s noted that "today almost nothing is spoken or written about him" (Leahu 1974, 173). Yet he played a significant role in the emergence of not only art history but also museology and art conservation in Romania. As well as founding the Museum of National Art, he held the chair of Art History in Bucharest and later Cernauți; he was also Director of the Carol I University Foundation and Aman Museum, Inspector-General of Museums and editor-in-chief of the cultural magazine *Convorbiri literare*, among other positions.

Fig. 2 Hurezi Monastery, founded by Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu in 1690. Detail of Dionisie Bălăcescu's foişor, 1752–53 (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Horezu_Monastery_2015_09.JPG)

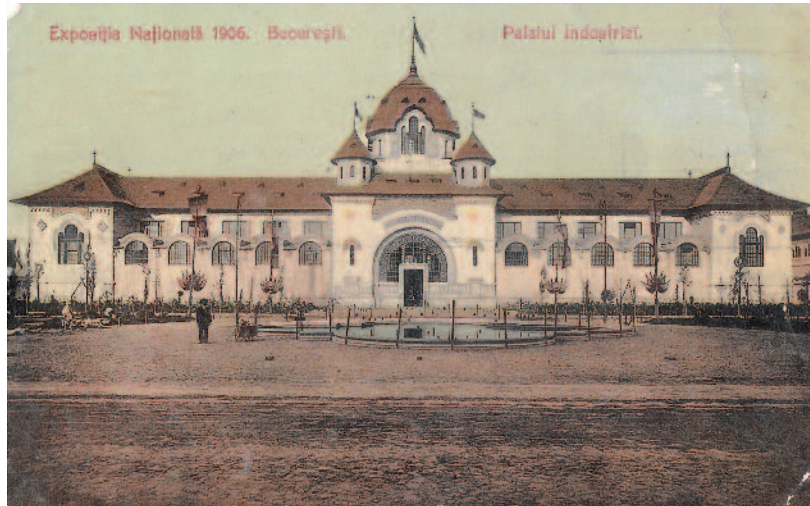

Fig. 3 Victor Ştefănescu/ Ştefan Burcuş, Industry Pavilion, 1906 Jubilee Exhibition, Bucharest, period postcard (Coll.: author)

He founded the Museum of Ethnography, National Art, Decorative and Industrial Art (from 1915, the Carol I Museum of National Art) in 1906, the year of national celebrations surrounding the Jubilee Exhibition in Bucharest. At this stage, discussion of Romania's artistic heritage was driven primarily by the architectural debates generated by the controversial restoration of historic churches, which had served to focus attention on the country's Byzantine and Oriental heritage, as well as highlight the difficulties of integrating it into the grand narratives of European art. Pushing back against the wholesale importation of Western forms, architects studied, in particular, the distinctive monuments created under Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu at the turn of the eighteenth century, reifying them as a repertoire of "national" artistic forms (fig. 2). As Cosmin Minea has demonstrated, nineteenth-century writings on Romanian architecture (by both Romanians and foreigners) established key concepts and periods for the study of Romanian art significantly before the establishment of an academic chair in art history (Minea 2022).

By the time of the Jubilee Exhibition, the idea of a national artistic heritage had been defined through a corpus of key historical monuments and translated into a modern Neo-Romanian language of architecture for the pavilions of the fair (fig. 3). Tzigara-Samurcaș's vision for the new museum conceptualised the idea of Romanian art rather differently. He founded the museum to remedy what he saw as the incoherent (and nationally embarrassing) arrangement of Bucharest's only other collection, the Museum of Antiquities. His idea was a bold one: to bring together all forms of "national art" – including church art, folk art, prehistoric art, Graeco-Roman sculpture and a modern picture gallery – in a display that would assert the artistic continuity of the nation from prehistory to the present. This set up a polylogue between archaeology, folk art, Byzantine art and fine art in a manner that broke with existing disciplinary boundaries and opened the door to a new appreciation of peasant art, in particular, as a repository of national values. This was the first time that Romania's rich tradition of folk art had been placed squarely and institutionally at the heart of the national narrative. Its promotion in the museum marked the beginning of a political line of thinking that became widespread in interwar Romanian art history: claiming the native artistic "spirit" of the peasant as a means of bridging the caesura brought by the arrival of Western art forms in the nineteenth century and linking the production of the past with the modern art of the present. To this end, Tzigara-Samurcaș proposed housing the School of Fine Arts in the same building as the museum, in order that the collections might inspire a new national language of modern art. As well as a place of creativity, it would be a hub of national education,

Fig. 4 Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcaş (curator), Ceramic section with central display of "prehistoric and contemporary pottery", Museum of National Art, Bucharest. Photographer and date unknown (Fr. Şirato, Muzeul de Artă Națională Carol I, in: Boabe de Grâu III, 3–4, 1932, 80)

with a library, study rooms and conference hall. Tzigara-Samurcaș's museographical vision and decades-long struggle to complete the new institution were articulated in a series of articles collected into a volume in 1936 (Tzigara-Samurcaș 1936). As Iulia Pohrib has observed, his written strategy of using formalist analysis to draw parallels between the decorative motifs of Neolithic artefacts and those of contemporary folk art was mirrored in his curatorial approach (Pohrib 2011, 322f.).

Photographs of the museum interior show how he would carefully arrange Neolithic vases next to peasant ceramics to stage networks of morphological correspondences that "proved" the artistic (and hence ethnic) continuity of the Romanian people (fig. 4). While, on the one hand, the museum's accordance of equal status to folk art, prehistoric art, religious art and modern art was an effective way of downplaying Romania's nonconformity with high art chronologies and emphasising the native "genius", on the other hand it fed into the powerful political rhetoric of interwar art history. Nicolae Iorga, for example, in *L'Art populaire en Roumanie* (1923) argued that the evidence of folk art proved the primacy of the Thracian civilisation that originated in the Danubian-Carpathian basin and radiated its influence across the Balkans, Greece, Transylvania and even Norway and Sweden. While Strzygowski's influence is evident here, so too was that of Herderian *Volksgeist*, used even more dogmatically by Tzigara-Samurcaș in *L'Art du peuple roumain* (1925) to justify Romania's acquisition of Transylvania after the First World War. Here he distinguished between the "art of Romania and the art of the Romanian people [i. e. folk art] which alone can be called our national art" (4). Not all interwar art historians adopted an ethnonationalist attitude to peasant art though. George Oprescu, in *Peasant Art in Romania*, published the year after he had helped his friend Henri Focillon organise the 1928 International Congress of Folk Arts and Folklore in Prague, celebrated Romanian folk art as "something universally human, common to all" (Oprescu 1929, 5).

Returning to the methodological issues with which I began this article, how should we think productively through this moment in Romanian art historiography? It would be very easy to frame it in terms of the undeniable "influence" of Western ideas. Tzigara-Samurcaș, after all, trained in Germany, gaining his art history doctorate from Munich University in 1896 (where he studied with Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, Heinrich von Brunn and Adolf Furtwängler). He was also taught by Eugène Müntz, Camille Enlart and André Michel in Paris and worked in the collections of the Museum

Fig. 5 Anton Tornyov, Competition entry for the Museum of the Bulgarian National Revival, ca. 1900 (Visualizing Family, Gender Relations and the Body, University of Basel, https://gams.uni-graz.at/o:vase.152)

of Decorative Arts in Berlin under Wilhelm von Bode. His dissatisfaction with the lack of a clear national narrative in the Museum of Antiquities was likely due to his awareness of German museums: Pohrib has argued that the selection criteria of the Museum of National Art were similar to those of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, designed to articulate the cultural unity of German-speaking areas (Pohrib 2011, 320). And Tzigara-Samurcaș clearly had sympathy for the ideas of Strzygowski, as well as a broader awareness of the Vienna School. But to make this the main focus of analysis would be once again to look at Romania from the position of the "centre" and to see developments there as secondary, derivative or peripheral.

THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS IN BULGARIA

More interesting, perhaps, is to extend the net of *croisements* and consider parallel developments in Romania's neighbour Bulgaria, where very similar debates were taking place around the role of museums in formulating a national narrative. This does not mean to dismiss Western influences, but to embed them within a wider multi-national network of discourses. Reading Tzigara-Samurcaș's writings on his museum, it becomes clear that its genesis was as much driven by competition with Bulgarian developments as by any aspiration to imitate German models. In an article comparing the National Museum in Sofia with the Museum of Antiquities in Bucharest, Tzigara-Samurcaș concluded (in justification of the need for his new museum), "There is no doubt: the Bulgarians have overtaken us!" (Tzigara-Samurcaș 1906, 23). Both countries witnessed vigorous architectural debates concerning the most appropriate national style for the new museums. In Sofia, intense discussion around definitions of "Bulgarian-Byzantine" versus the architectural vernacular that had emerged under Ottoman rule drove the architectural competition for the Museum of the Bulgarian National Revival (*Vazrazhdane*) in 1900–01 (fig. 5) and informed the theoretical writings of the architect Anton Tornyov, among others (Hajdu/Adashinskaya 2022). Similar debates determined the choice of the leading national style architect and theorist Nicolae Ghika-Budești for Tzigara-Samurcaș's new museum. In fact, the role of museums in the development of both Romanian and Bulgarian historiographical concepts of "national" style were part of broader debates at this time around the shared Byzantine identity of the Balkans, whose representation by French architects in the pavilions of Serbia (fig. 6), Bulgaria, Romania (fig. 7) and Greece (fig. 8) at the Paris 1900 Exhibition had triggered much architectural soul-searching (Hajdu 2015).

Returning to the role of folk art in emerging national narratives, we could widen the net further and highlight significant points of intersection with developments in Scandinavia. Tzigara-Samurcaș

Fig. 6 Milan Kapetanović and Milorad Ruvidić, modified by Ambroise Baudry, Serbian Pavilion, Paris 1900 Exhibition (https://www.pinterest.de/pin/363313894937122282/)

was keenly aware of initiatives to preserve and research folk art in the Nordic countries: in 1909 he visited Artur Hazelius' new Nordic Museum, as well as the open-air folk museums in Stockholm, Kristiania (Oslo) and Lyngby. Like several other theorists, he argued for connections between Romanian and Scandinavian peasant art and cited Swedish and Norwegian efforts to use "primary" and "authentic" sources to develop a modern language of decorative art (Tzigara-Samurcaș 1909).

We could go further and explore intersections with national art historiography in Serbia or Catalonia, or with institutionally formulated discourses on folk art in the Habsburg lands. What *histoire croisée* shows is that at this formative moment in the emergence of national narratives it is not just fruitful, but essential, to look beyond the simplifying and homogenising confines of separate art histories and acknowledge a plurality of positions and meaning-generating relations. Difficult as it may be to do in practice, examining how Central and Eastern European art histories related not just to core Western developments but also interacted, aligned or competed with each other, reveals rich and complex configurations in the construction of national narratives.

This article builds on the work of my late colleague Dr Ada Hajdu, whose death in 2020 prevented the completion of her ERC-funded project *Art Historiographies in Central and Eastern Europe: an inquiry from the perspective of entangled histories* (ArtHistCEE 802700).

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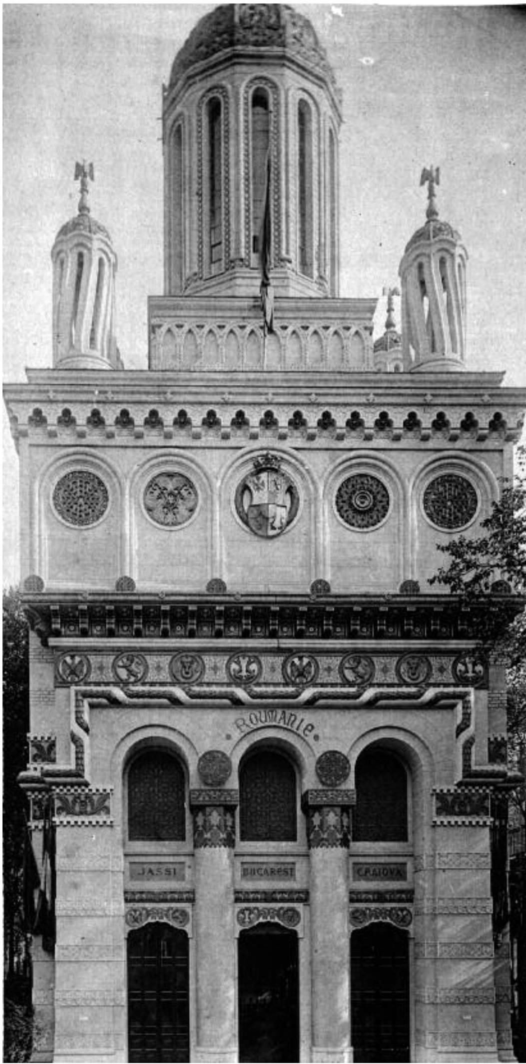

Fig. 7 Jean-Camille Formigé, Romanian Pavilion, Paris 1900 Exhibition (L'Architecture et la sculpture à l'Exposition universelle de 1900, Paris 1900)

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Fig. 8 Lucien Magne, Greek Pavilion, Paris 1900 Exhibition (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le_pavillon_de_la_Grèce_à_l'exposition_universelle_de_Paris_en_1900.jpg)

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