

Art historians in Romania

Review of:

Vlad Țoca, *Art Historical Discourse in Romania, 1919-1947*. Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2011, 206 pages, paperback, ISBN 978-963-236-486-5, €10.00

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Romania remains one of least known and examined artistic territories. The occasional notable publications only reinforce this situation by virtue of their exceptional status.¹ The appearance of a study of art historical writing in interwar Romania is therefore a welcome event. While some Romanian art historians, such as George Oprescu, Virgil Vătășianu and Coriolan Petranu, achieved international recognition, most remain unfamiliar figures. This book thus performs a valuable service in providing an overview of the landscape of art historical scholarship in the new Romania that was created after the end of the First World War, up until the Communist coup of 1947.

This book considers how Romanian art historians treated broad themes: 'old' Romanian art (by which the author means art prior to the nineteenth century), 'modern and contemporary' Romanian art (in other words, art after 1800), Romanian folk art and European art.

A number of striking themes are apparent. As was the case with many of the emerging states of east central Europe, art history played an important role in the construction of ideas of national identity and self-definition. It is indicative of the political mission of the discipline that the most prominent author of art historical works was not a professional art historian at all, but rather the nationalist politician and prime minister Nicolae Iorga. In Romania the concern with self-definition was particularly fraught inasmuch as the state's location between the symbolic poles of East and West was a much debated and contested issue. The drive to modernisation of the late nineteenth century had led intellectuals to seek parallels with western Europe in order firmly to install Romania in the family of European nations. Equally, however, there was a strong indigenist reaction against 'foreign' influence that sought to stress the native roots of Romanian art and culture as well as exploring its complex relations to Byzantium and the Orthodox cultural world.

It is a commonplace that Bucharest was known as the Paris of the East and that its cultural elites looked towards the French capital as an artistic and cultural centre, but this book argues that it was Vienna, rather than Paris, towards which Romanian art historians were drawn. Above all this meant Josef Strzygowski, whose work was invoked both as a methodological model and also, in his advocacy

¹ See, for example, Shona Kallestrup, *Art and Design in Romania 1866-1927: Local and International Aspects of the Search for National Expression*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007 and Tom Sandqvist, *Dada East: The Romanians of Cabaret Voltaire*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.

of a revised art historical geography, as a source of legitimation of the value of Romanian art.

This debt to Strzygowski laid bare a contradictory attitude amongst Romanian art historians; strident nationalism was often coupled with a craven desire for international acknowledgement. Sympathetic external commentators were pulled into petty local disputes, as in the case of Coriolan Petranu, who disputed the Hungarian presence in Transylvanian art and culture on the basis of often trivial formal features.

As the product of a major European culture, Romanian art historical discourse deserves much more attention; while it gives an outline of the field, this study is a start. Much of the discussion is schematic. We are informed, for example, that different art historians wrote significant works, but it would be helpful to know why they were significant or how they contributed to the discipline in Romania. It would have been helpful to look at debates on individual works of art and architecture; given that the book touches on the process of canon formation in the early twentieth century, it needed much more analysis of this including, again, discussion in more precise ways of how the canon was formed, the values and concepts that underlay that, and any debates and differences there may have been over this. This book is written in English, presumably to reach as an audience as possible, but as such, it was important to take into account that most anglophone readers will have minimal knowledge of Romanian art, and that therefore much more needed to be spelled out against a general background of ignorance. The argument makes clear that many authors consciously modelled themselves on Strzygowski, and his most faithful follower, Petranu, laid out a methodological table that was almost an exact replica of the statement of method Strzygowski expounded in *Die Krisis der Geisteswissenschaften*.² What we do not learn, however, is whether this was a merely rhetorical ploy on Petranu's part. What did a Strzygowskian method mean for the interpretation of individual artworks and buildings? What difference did it make and what other models were being used by Romanian art historians?

It would have been helpful to have a less descriptive account, too. Țoca alludes to the ideological stakes of the art historical discourse (indeed use of the term 'discourse' suggests this, too) when he acknowledges Petranu's espousal of extremely nationalistic and, at times, anti-Semitic attitudes. But this is merely an instance of a much wider phenomenon. Interwar Romania was a troubled polity; disrupted by the messianic fascism of Corneliu Codreanu, and with extremely nationalist administrations that actively discriminated against Jewish, Hungarian and other minorities, the universities were caught up in the middle of its cultural politics. The University of Cluj, where Oprescu and Petranu both worked, was a flashpoint, in which Hungarians were excluded and the students voted for a ban on Jews, and the central government actively sponsored a process of Romanisation. But there is no mention of this troubled political context and its implications for art historians. To what extent did art historians contribute to this? Given that they were almost exclusively concerned with Romanian art, they were always already bound

² Josef Strzygowski, *Die Krisis der Geisteswissenschaften vorgeführt am Beispiele der Forschung über die bildende Kunst*, Vienna, Anton Schroll, 1923.

up with the nationalist project, even if only tacitly. Yet Țoca is clearly unwilling to be drawn into these issues, as if they still pose awkward and unwelcome questions today.

Some final observations. The division into the art history of Romanian art prior to and after 1800 may represent established practice in Romanian art history, but it is an arbitrary cut. It would be useful to know why this divide is operative, or why the author decided to organise the book in this way. The relegation of studies of European art into a separate chapter speaks volumes, too, about the nature of the field, and might have merited a discussion of its own. Also – the timeframe has a recognisable logic, but given that so much recent research is addressing the question of continuity and discontinuity in the case of dates that were previously treated as historical caesuras, it would have been helpful for the author to indicate why 1947, for example, was so significant; Romanian nationalism did not disappear when the Communists assumed power and art historians continued their trade as before.

In summary, therefore, this book constitutes a useful start to the discussion of an understudied subject. In conjunction with a number of other recent publications, it helps to open up a new field, but the deeper critical analysis remains to be done.³

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Recent publications include: *The Vienna School of Art History: Empire and the Politics of Scholarship, 1847-1918* (2013), *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe: Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks* (2012) and *Heritage, Ideology and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe. Contested Pasts, Contested Presents* (2012). He has just completed a critical study of the relation between art history and evolutionary theory and is the lead researcher of a Leverhulme Trust-funded project analysing museums of art and design in the cultural politics of the late Habsburg Empire.

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³ See, for example, Robert Born, 'The Historiography of Art in Transylvania and the Vienna School in the Interwar Period,' in *Centropa*, 9.3 (2009) pp. 185-96; Corina Teacă, 'In Search of National Traditions. Art History in Romania,' in Matthew Rampley et al (eds), *Art History and Visual Studies. Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, Leiden, Brill, 2012, 451-60, and Matthew Rampley, 'The Strzygowski School of Cluj. An Episode in the Interwar Cultural Politics of Romania,' in *Journal of Art Historiography*, 8 (2013).