

## Moving times, moving spaces

Conference report on 'Questions of Periodisation in the Art Historiographies of Central and Eastern Europe'

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New Europe College – Institute for Advanced Study, Bucharest

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In the art history of central and eastern Europe, the dominant systems of periodisation developed by western art historians (such as Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque etc.) often appear asymmetric to local art historical developments. This has forced early art historians from the region to mediate between western models of periodisation and local specificities in order to emancipate the characteristics of local developments from judgements of 'belatedness' in comparison to the standards set in western schemes of periodisation. How this was achieved across the region has, however, rarely been compared or analysed in a systematic and critical manner. 'Questions of Periodisation in the Art Historiographies of Central and Eastern Europe', a conference organised within the ERC project *Art Historiographies in Central and Eastern Europe. An Inquiry from the Perspective of Entangled Histories* and hosted by New Europe College – Institute for Advanced Study in Bucharest, was conceived as a starting point to initiate such assessment.

Beginning with an introduction by Ada Hajdu, the Principal Investigator of the organising ERC Project, the main stakes of the conference and of the project were laid out. In questioning what the position of art historiography in central and eastern Europe is and what it should represent more broadly, Hajdu drew out three main points of focus, which shape the aims of her project as much as those of the conference: a focus on historiographies that constructed national heritage, ideas of regional interdependencies going beyond (contemporary) political borders, and the issue of 'belatedness' in central and eastern European art in reference to 'western' art historiography – and how to overcome such judgements in favour of more critical and nuanced approaches.

### **Nuance and subjective histories**

The first keynote, delivered by Matthew Rampley, addressed the issue of lateness and anticipation in reference to the symbolic meaning of 1918 in Austrian art. Analysing this year as a perceived period break, Rampley drew attention to the over-importance of subjective narratives, such as those of Stefan Zweig and his nostalgia for the fin-de-siècle, and showed that a relativization of their views could offer much more nuance in assessments of past developments. In relation to Austria 1918 as a period break in particular, Rampley emphasized both ruptures and continuities in art historical developments at the time. He pointed to the fact that elements of 'lateness' that had already existed around 1900 with the trend of 'Alt-

Wien' depictions, for example. Nor did 1918 signify a halt to all artistic development in the city, even though the strong political ruptures provoked by the collapse of the Habsburg Empire might lead one to such assumptions.

In light of concepts of *Nachträglichkeit* developed by Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch, encompassing an 'intellectual's counter-move against a homogenizing view of history', Rampley emphasised heterogenous time as a polyrhythmic and multi-spatial entity, which has the potential to unmask the period boundary of 1918 as an ideological project.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the framework provided by the introduction, this thesis set out another dimension for periodisation which, at least implicitly, featured in all the papers presented subsequently: rather than offering any kind of "natural" timeline, periodisation is always informed by an ideological framing of history, inadvertently linked to a struggle for socio-political and cultural power and hegemony.

Most evidently, the connection between periodisation and ideology surfaced in presentations that overtly addressed the functions of art historiography in conjunction with nationalism (Anita Paolicchi, Natalia Koziara), particularly evident in times of great political change since the second half of the nineteenth century (Fani Gargova, Nikolai Vukov). Thereby, the narratives of the dominant national powers in any given location surfaced as those which art historiographies focused on most closely. This also meant that when one power was succeeded by another – as in the case of Estonian national independence after the local hegemony of the Baltic Germans (Kristina Jõekalda) – art historical narratives were rewritten along new national lines. Thus, in addition to an orientation towards canonical narratives of art and architecture developed in 'western Europe', attempts to make these narratives compatible with the dominating nationalisms were significant (Timo Hagen). While this is perhaps a simple point, nuanced by the idiosyncrasies of each national history in the presented case studies, the comparative perspective precipitated by these different national narratives underlined the necessity for a wider critical assessment of art historiography in eastern and central Europe, which goes beyond the individual case study, and which the conference has inaugurated.

Not least, the papers also showed that an art historiography forged by an educated elite in dialogue with western models of periodisation hinged on the matter of outside representation (Magdalena Młodawska, Lucila Mallart-Romero). These models had a significant impact on presentations of art at grand fairs and exhibitions (Andrey Shabanov, Nikita Balagurov), as well as publications for an international audience, such as *The Studio* issue dedicated to Romanian art in 1929 (Shona Kallestrup).

## Canons of periodization

Emphasising different interpretations of a particular style at any given time, the malleability of periodisation through its own historization was shown in reference to the continuous dialogues between local and 'western' art historians, and the

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<sup>1</sup> David Kaufmann, 'Thanks for the Memory: Bloch, Benjamin, and the Philosophy of History', in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, ed. by Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan. London: Verso 1997, p.45.

common ground on which they assessed art and architectural heritage in the region. A particularly interesting aspect of this, which arose in the discussions, is the canon of art historians and monuments which the individual papers referred to (Mihnea Mihail, Magda Kunińska). Based not least on the national entanglements of the region – the mixed heritage of Transylvania served as a recurring point of reference in Mihnea Mihail's case – both the sources of inspiration from the 'West', the art and architectural works debated, and the local art historians referred to suggest a delimited 'pool' of references when it comes to the discussion of art historiography in central and eastern Europe, forging, in a sense, its own canons of periodisation.

As the conference brought to light, when narrowing down the broad distinction between 'east' and 'west', a relatively small group of actors came to the fore, who shaped national narratives at any given time (Ruxandra Demetrescu). For example, Ludwig Reissenberger (1819-1895), an early Saxon art historian born in Sibiu, featured in several presentations (most notably by Robert Born), reinforcing his presence in the historiography of Romanian art during Habsburg rule. At the same time, the canonical art historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also followed specific actors within 'western' art history: Henri Focillon (1881-1943), for example, represented a dominant point of reference for many architectural historians in early twentieth-century Romania, while Michel Charles Diehl (1859-1944) and Gabriel Millet (1867-1953) played a significant role in revaluations of the Byzantine in the work of Serbian, Russian and Greek art historians (Anna Adashinskaya).

### **'Hybrids' and national monuments**

Adopting examples set by German or French art historians, such as the Hagia Sophia, as stylistic ideals for the 'Orient' and mediating them with references to ideals of western architecture, the resulting interpretation of 'local' monuments was led by the search for something that could fit into broader narratives yet remained sufficiently 'authentic' to represent the national style. The 'discovery' of Curtea de Argeş monastery as a masterpiece of Romanian architecture stands as a case in point here (Cosmin Minea), reinvented in line with the drive to forge a national art and architecture as part of the process of national emancipation.

Apart from monuments that lined up 'neatly' within the aspirations of one national group, however, many architectural forms could only be understood as 'hybrid' (Dubravka Botica), particularly in multi-ethnic regions. They not only became synonymous with the particular geographic position of central and eastern Europe between the 'east' and the 'west', but could also be claimed by various national groups simultaneously. While differences could be mediated more easily in the context of multi-national empires, the nation states coming to prominence in the first half of the twentieth century enforced a more rigid approach to definitions of what was 'authentic' to one nation and not the other. The issues arising from such narrowed-down definitions were not least visible in the complicated position of Transylvania: claimed by Hungarians and Romanians alike, the fact that it was ceded to Romania in 1919 signified for nationalising Hungarian art historians that

one of the most eponymous Hungarian areas was now located in the 'wrong' country (Dóra Mérai).

While the majority of the presentations focused on art historiography from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the final two papers took a chronological leap forward with case studies that considered approaches after 1945. Though focusing on the very different political context of the communist takeover of east-central Europe, the idea of ridding oneself of unwelcome 'styles' to hail a new era (in the case of Irina Carabaş's presentation, socialist realism) continued to mark period breaks in art historiography, even though artists who were formed and successful in the previous era continued to practise.

An extraordinary case was presented by the final paper which focused on the Turkish Cypriot community (Esra Plumer-Bardak): since the division of Cyprus in 1974, the lack of systematic art historical scholarship in the Turkish north of the country has opened up a void of appropriate art historiography for this particular location that would mediate the strong reliance on western and Hellenistic predecessors, which present Turkish-Cypriot art as a perpetual game of catch-up to developments elsewhere.

Connecting to these final two papers, the closing keynote by Wojciech Bałus returned to the conceptual problem of periodisation with a focus on notions of crisis and turning points. Bałus underlined the importance of moving away from notions of periods as 'finished' structures, where one follows another after a turning point of crisis. Rather, he suggested, art history should be considered as evolutionary and relative, corresponding with the fact that history can be re-written over and over again – as the presented papers have duly begun to do.

### **Entangling central and eastern European art historiographies**

Overall, by tackling conceptual issues of periodisation, in particular the question of how periodisation can be opened up to more nuanced approaches, the presented papers showed that, from the late nineteenth century onwards, the need to structure art history in central and eastern Europe in line with 'western' developments on the one hand and national ambitions on the other has led to an art history strongly shaped by struggles for power and hegemony. By bringing the papers together at the conference, it is evident that, rather than representing singular phenomena, these developments affected the whole region. Yet, given its ties to wider social and political history, art historiography dominantly lent its support to the creation of 'national' art histories. These approaches continued to be adopted in assessments into at least the late twentieth century. Consequently, the art historiographies of eastern and central Europe were forged dominantly in line with hegemonial nations, which changed over time and thus reinforced the narratives of rupture that allowed for the establishing of periods with set beginning and end points. In lieu, alternative art histories focusing on the struggles of minorities (such as Hungarians in Romania, Germans in Poland, and, above all, Jewish populations) would provide further nuance to art historiography in the region.

While the discussions during the event have already begun to link the presented case studies, a continuation of this approach will enable a closer

assessment of the broader implications of national entanglements: were there common strategies for approaching the positioning of east central Europe between eastern and western traditions? Could similar approaches also be found elsewhere? How were different definitions of terms such as 'eastern', 'western', 'style', 'influence', etc., used to inform debates? Drawing the present findings together to shape new ways of understanding art historiography in the region, the conference, in this sense, represented an excellent starting point for moving beyond national borders, marking the beginning of wider considerations about the implications of periodisation in the art historiography of the region.

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