

Learned history- lived history: the national overtones of Coriolan Petranu's art historical discourse

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Having studied in Vienna under the supervision of Professor Josef Strzygowski during the last years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the art historian Coriolan Petranu (1893-1945) started at the University of Cluj after the union of Transylvania with Romania. Taking as a case study a segment of Coriolan Petranu's work, which refers to wooden churches, I intend to show how he built his national historiographical discourse by following the research models he had assimilated during his training in Vienna and by responding to the general political and historical context of the Romanians in Transylvania.

After 1918 Romania more than doubled the size of its territory and its population. In Transylvania, especially, this population was marked by ethnic and confessional diversity. Romania was a prevalently agrarian country, which prevented people of Romanian ethnicity from accessing positions of cultural importance at provincial level at the beginning of the interwar period.¹ In Transylvania, the province that is of interest to us, Romanians represented only 19.7% of the urban population in 1910, most of them living in small towns. This is indicative of Romanians' weak cultural impact in urban settings.² In this context, after 1918 both Romanians and the national minorities regarded culture as a 'battlefield of national politics'.³ Through its professors, the University of Cluj assumed the role of creating and promoting Romanian cultural identity.

Founded in 1872 with the aim of supporting the integration of Transylvania into Hungary after the establishment of the dual Austro-Hungarian regime and of cultivating the 'Hungarian spirit' in this province,⁴ the University of Cluj was nationalized, becoming, as of 1 October 1919, a Romanian university.⁵ In public debates on this issue, the capacity of the Romanian intellectuals in Transylvania to

¹ Irina Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism în România Mare*, trans. Vlad Russo, București: Humanitas, 1998, 17-28.

² Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism*, 164-65.

³ Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism*, 213.

⁴ At the turn of the century, approximately ten per cent of the university's students were Romanians. Most of them studied medicine or law, Rogers Brubaker, Margit Feischmidt, John Fox, Liana Grancea, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006, 92.

⁵ Having refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the King of Romania, the group of Hungarian professors left for Szeged. There they set up a new university, which they defined as the continuator of the University of Cluj.

support a higher education system was called into question.⁶ In 1920, for instance, the French Legation found that the newly created University of Cluj would seem, for a while, 'artificial in a town where, whatever some may claim, all that matters from an intellectual standpoint is still produced by Hungarians and Germans'.⁷ Therefore, its professors took into account these objections, whether voiced by Hungarian, Romanian or foreign intellectuals, when they set up the goals and mission of their university, called the University of Upper Dacia, a name that was suggestive of the Romanians' origins. They set out to demonstrate their creative potential and their place in the European scientific world, while also insisting on the patriotic, national goal of education. The archaeologist Vasile Pârvan, who started the art history courses at Cluj University, suggestively entitled his inaugural lecture delivered on 3 November 1919, the first in the Romanian language, *The Duty of Our Life*. In his opinion, the role of the university was to enlighten the nation through its critical spirit.⁸ Pârvan proposed the cultivation of Romanian specificity in a general European context: since the children of peasants were the main subjects of the Romanian school system, teaching staff had to take into account the liveliness and sharpness of their minds or, as he put it, 'the ethno-psychological reality of our national soul'.⁹ Still, Pârvan believed that the emphasis of the educational process should fall on cultivating their general human aspirations, in a broad cultural context, rather than merely on reinforcing their traditional outlook as members of the peasantry.¹⁰ The peasant world, in which Romanian intellectuals had their roots, had given them their 'spiritual qualities'; moreover, according to this historian, second- or third-generation peasants turned intellectuals had made possible 'not only our spiritual-creative equality with other nations that have older cultures, but our superiority over them'.¹¹ With the Hungarian and the Saxon intelligentsia in mind, Vasile Pârvan expressed the desirability of appreciating the Romanian intellectuals at their true value; he attempted to achieve that goal by reconsidering their prestige in the hierarchical terms that were used, more or less explicitly, by art historian Coriolan Petranu.

⁶ Historian Nicolae Iorga, for example, was sceptical about the timeliness of nationalizing the University of Cluj, stating that the national minorities deserved to have a university where the language of instruction was their mother tongue and there were not sufficient Romanian academics who could meet the need for professorial staff. He also believed that a Romanian university in Cluj would fuel a 'dangerous provincial particularism', Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism*, 264. With reference to regional particularism, Iorga identified one of the major problems facing the Romanian state during the period between the two world wars, namely the mobilization of a Romanian national sentiment capable of supporting territorial unification, Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995, 42–3.

⁷ Cited in Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism*, 220.

⁸ Vasile Pârvan, 'Datoria vieții noastre', in Vasile Pușcaș (ed.), *Idealul universității moderne*, Cluj-Napoca: Fundația Culturală Română, 1994, 60.

⁹ Pârvan, 'Datoria vieții noastre', 62–3.

¹⁰ '...we must be interested not in the culture of a single nation, but in as many cultures as possible', Pârvan, 'Datoria vieții noastre', 65.

¹¹ Pârvan, 'Datoria vieții noastre', 63.

Another professor, Alexandru Lapedatu, drawing up a research program for the Romanian Transylvanian historians, considered in his first lecture on medieval history that, under the new political circumstances, it was important to study the history of Transylvania and the life of the Romanians in this province in relation to the history of Hungary and of the Romanian principalities, through an approach that he envisaged as fair and unbiased. The reconstruction of the history of the Romanians in Transylvania was, in his opinion, an act of justice that would rescue the history of the Romanian community from oblivion.¹²

History was re-envisioned, therefore, during those early years of the University of Cluj in a legitimizing and justifying sense: it was supposed to bring to light the contribution of the Transylvanian Romanians to the cultural and political life of the province and to legitimize the recent union in historical terms, by emphasizing the Transylvanians' relations with the Romanians across the Carpathians.¹³ Its professors considered that science and nation, critical method and patriotic spirit, regional and European history were to come harmoniously together in their approach to the past.

The young Coriolan Petranu began his activity at the University of Cluj in 1924, in this historiographical atmosphere. His studies had not been particularly different from those of other well-off young Romanians from Transylvania who attended universities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.¹⁴ He studied jurisprudence and art history in Budapest (1911-1912), Berlin (1912-1913) and in Vienna (1913-1916).¹⁵ The Viennese artistic higher education, which placed an emphasis on historical method, tried to offer students specialised practical skills and to train specialists who would then be active in state institutions (museums, archives, heritage conservation). Once they were integrated in the bureaucratic apparatus, they were to support transnational, monarchic patriotism.¹⁶ Petranu also worked, for one year (1917-1918), in the museum field, at Szepmüvészeti Muzeum in Budapest.

¹² 'However, there is one thing that we'll do with all the love and haste demanded by the need to repair a huge and glaring injustice: we will seek to rehabilitate, historically, the Romanian people in Transylvania and Hungary, highlighting the entire contribution it has made, in every way possible, for almost a thousand years, to ensuring the survival of the most blighted homeland a people could ever have...' , Alexandru Lapedatu, 'Nouă împrejurări de dezvoltare ale istoriografiei naționale', in Pușcaș (ed.), *Idealul universității moderne*, 89.

¹³ Pompiliu Teodor, *Incursiuni în istoriografia română a sec. XX*, Oradea: Fundația culturală 'Cele trei Crișuri', 1995, 27–33.

¹⁴ Cornel Sigmirean, *Istoria formării intelectualității românești din Transilvania și Banat în epoca modernă*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2000, passim.

¹⁵ Nicolae Sabău, 'Coriolan Petranu (1893-1945) Erforscher der Kunst Transylvaniens (Siebenbürgens)', in Robert Born, Alena Janatková, Adam S. Labuda (eds), *Die Kunsthistoriographien in Ostmitteleuropa und der nationale Diskurs*, Berlin: Gebuhr. Mann Verlag, 2004, 381-83; Vlad Țoca, 'Coriolan Petranu', in Nicolae Sabău (ed.), *Istoria artei la Universitatea din Cluj*, vol. I (1919-1987), Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2010, 330–32.

¹⁶ Ján Bakoš, 'From Universalism to Nationalism. Transformations of Vienna School Ideas in Central Europe', in Born, Janatková, Labuda, *Die Kunsthistoriographien in Ostmitteleuropa*, 80.

The Viennese art history environment was marked, at the turn of the twentieth century, by the ideological disputes that were sweeping across the empire. A controversy had arisen between the followers of monarchic cosmopolitanism (Franz Wickhoff, Alois Riegl) and the advocate of centrifugal particularisms, of nationalism, Josef Strzygowski.¹⁷ The latter, a critic of classical humanism – a position from which he then shifted towards supporting racism and Arian identity – was suspicious of his Viennese colleagues' Eurocentric attitudes. He was therefore also interested in cultures that had only partially been addressed by art historians: for instance, prehistoric and medieval Slavic art.¹⁸ He was the one who drew attention in the 1920s to the eastern part of Europe, stating: 'It is a remarkable fact that when we art historians think of Europe, we only ever have Western Europe in our sights, and believe we can completely ignore the East'.¹⁹

Having studied in Vienna under the supervision of Professor Josef Strzygowski, Coriolan Petranu remained, throughout his career, his admirer, (from the perspective of the marginal, I might add, of the East-European who was eager to show the Western world the artistic achievements of his country). He empathized with his professor, who considered that it was important to study the art history of that part of Europe from which he came. All this was happening in a context in which, after the fall of the monarchy, Petranu deemed it important, like many other historians from the countries of the former empire, to explore the relation between national and Central-European art.²⁰ He did that by paying attention to the internal historiographical context, to his responsibilities as a junior researcher and professor of art history at the University of Cluj. In a text that expressed his professional creed, from 1923, he placed this new academic and research field in relation to 'the needs that our time and nation impose and the duty that we have to fulfil'.²¹ The art historian's 'sacred duty to science and to the nation' was, he wrote, to study the art of his province and the art of the nation to which he belonged.²² Romanian art in Transylvania was, therefore, the main subject of study he proposed, in terms that were reminiscent of the language of Vasile Pârvan. By proposing to rescue Romanian art from oblivion through a scientific undertaking, Petranu's approach was integrated in the trend of general Romanian historiography in Transylvania.

Faithful to this goal, he launched a new research direction in historical writing about Romanian art, namely the study of wooden churches. His attention was thus focused on the world of Romanian villages, on the universe of the peasants who had created and preserved this architecture, a world that had been ignored or even looked down on in previous studies. The choice of this subject provided him with a twofold opportunity: to align himself with a European scientific trend, by

¹⁷ Ján Bakoš, 'From Universalism to Nationalism', 85-6.

¹⁸ Matthew Rampley, 'Art History and the Politics of Empire: Rethinking the Vienna School', in *Art Bulletin*, vol. XCI, no. 4, December 2009, 457.

¹⁹ Rampley, 'Art History and the Politics of Empire', 457.

²⁰ For an analysis of art historiography within the post-1918 political context in the countries of the former monarchy, see Bakoš, 'From Universalism to Nationalism', 86-92.

²¹ Coriolan Petranu, *Rolul istoricului de artă român în Transilvania*, București, 1924, 6.

²² Petranu, *Rolul istoricului de artă român*, 6-7.

illustrating one of the lines of interest of his professor, Josef Strzygowski,²³ and to reveal the originality and creativity of Romanian art, fulfilling thus his 'duty to the nation', as he stated.

His research in this direction resulted in two monographs, one about the wooden churches in Arad County (1927), his native area, which he must have approached with some unconfessed but explicit sense of local patriotism, and another about the adjoining county, Bihor (1932). Thematically and methodologically, his research was consonant with that of Professor Strzygowski. As Petranu claimed, Strzygowski had drawn the attention of the scientific world to the importance of wooden architecture in the study of art history and had proposed a program of research on this architecture. The Romanian art historian took over this program and applied it to the Romanian case, publishing information about the wooden churches and comparing different regions that had retained similar architecture.²⁴ Methodologically, besides this comparative perspective, he took over another one of the professor's ideas, namely that of placing monuments at the centre of research.²⁵ The first part of his monographs was therefore descriptive, based on the observation of the monuments in situ. In that about Arad, he described the architecture, the organization of interior space, the iconography, the wood sculptures and the objects that adorned churches (textiles, embroidery, wooden liturgical objects) as examples of 'folk art'. In his view, wooden churches were part of a rural, peasant artistic whole – what he called 'old peasant art' or 'old folk art'. His references to wooden objects, textiles and folk costumes are reminiscent of the folk-art movement from the end of the nineteenth century and suggest that he shared the idea that peasant culture had preserved historical traditions and practices that revealed an authentic national identity.²⁶

He placed churches in their natural environment, realizing the connection between such buildings and densely forested hilly or mountainous areas.²⁷ He also analysed what he called the 'psychic environment', that is the confessional context which he approached from an Orthodox perspective – which may be explained by the fact that his father was an Orthodox priest. He made a eulogy to the Orthodox priests of the eighteenth century, whom he saw – thanks to their simple training,

²³ Professor Henri Focillon remarked, in connection with Petranu's research on the wooden churches in Bihor, that his study 'complemented that of Professor Strzygowski, enriching it with very important variants', cited in Nicolae Sabău, 'Coriolan Petranu și începuturile istoriei artei la Universitatea din Cluj', in Sabău (ed.), *Istoria artei la Universitatea din Cluj*, 105.

²⁴ Coriolan Petranu, *Bisericile de lemn din Arad*, Sibiu: Tipografia și Institutul de arte grafice Ios. Drotleff, 1927, 29–30.

²⁵ Petranu, *Rolul istoricului de artă*, 9.

²⁶ According to Matthew Rampley, this idea was widely shared by the followers of this movement throughout Europe, Matthew Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History. Empire and the Politics of Scholarship, 1847-1918*, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013, 124.

²⁷ This idea, which is recurrent in his works, was also used by Professor Strzygowski, who nonetheless advanced it as a mere probability: 'We can only say that the existence of the forests of Russia and the Carpathians may be assumed to have produced a wood architecture, which is only possible where forests are in abundance', Josef Strzygowski, *Early Church Art in Northern Europe*, London: B.T. Batsford, 1928, 53.

uncontaminated by foreign influences – as followers of the artistic tradition of the church.²⁸ Thus, authenticity resided, in his vision, in simplicity and the lack of any outside influences. In fact, one of the recurring problems in his texts concerned the influences exerted on or received by Romanian church architecture.

In the book dedicated to Arad, in the section that is called a 'comparative sketch', he compared the churches in Transylvania with those in Europe. He considered, for instance, that the ground plan of the churches in Alt Rosenberg, Pawlow and Kotschanowitz was related to those of the Romanian churches, but not identical.²⁹ With the clear intention to disclose the value of Romanian vernacular architecture, after reporting on similarities between the ground plans of those churches and the Gothic clad spire, he concluded that the Romanian wooden churches were superior to European churches in terms of their more uniform and better structured overall appearance, the many variations of the apse, and the Gothic and Baroque towers.³⁰ The wooden churches and their paintings were, in his opinion, national markers, 'a product of the Romanian genius'.³¹

He identified a more significant European influence in the churches from Bihor county, which is situated, like Arad, in the western part of Romania. More specifically, he detected influences of Western high art in the Gothic, Baroque and post-Baroque clad spires of the towers and in the painting of the iconostasis and the royal doors, and he showed the existence of influences of the Empire style in the decoration of wooden chandeliers.³² Interested mostly in the genesis of wooden church towers, he found that all their constituent elements (the gallery with arcades underneath the clad spire, the four turrets at the base of the tower) are also found in the West, both in religious and in defensive architecture. Accordingly, Petranu wrote, the tower of the wooden churches in Transylvania was imported from the West, through the Transylvanian Saxons who had established trade links with Flanders and Germany.³³ In this work, he gave more importance than anywhere else to highlighting the similarities between Romanian and European wooden architecture. In this approach, wooden churches were regarded as the outcome of an original synthesis that combined elements of European art from various cultural and artistic eras; they were influenced visually, aesthetically, both on the exterior and on the interior, by Western art.³⁴ The desire to emphasize the likeness between the particular features of Romanian architectural styles and European ones can be interpreted, as Vlad Țoca has shown, as a reflex of the Viennese school of art

²⁸ Petranu, *Bisericile de lemn din Arad*, 24–5.

²⁹ Petranu, *Bisericile de lemn din Arad*, 37.

³⁰ Petranu, *Bisericile de lemn din Arad*, 37.

³¹ Petranu, *Bisericile de lemn din Arad*, 40.

³² Coriolan Petranu, *Monumentele istorice ale județului Bihor. I. Bisericile de lemn*, Sibiu: Tiparul Tipografiei Kraft & Drotleff, 1931, 17–27.

³³ Petranu, *Monumentele istorice ale județului Bihor*, 43.

³⁴ Valentin Trifescu, 'Despre originile creării unui simbol regional al românilor din Transilvania. Coriolan Petranu și bisericile de lemn', in Valentin Trifescu, Vali Ilyeș (ed), *100 de ani de rememorare a Marii Uniri*, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Școala Ardeleană. Editura Mega, 2018, 92-3.

history.³⁵ Comparativism illustrated the desire of the professor from Cluj to place Romanian wooden churches and their related art within a Central-European context and thus to rescue them from oblivion, by drawing the attention of Western academics.

Petranu's scientific closeness to Professor Strzygowski was greater than ever before, as revealed, at the outset, by the two mottos he selected from the works *Altslawische Kunst* and *Der Norden in der bildenden Kunst Westeuropas*. Both referred to the need to study wooden architecture as an art that was on the verge of extinction, in order to establish its significance in art history and to make specialists aware of its worth.³⁶ Petranu saw in Sztrygowski a historian who had rebuilt the history of medieval art through his interest in the art of the north, the wooden churches from the Bieltz-Biala region and old Slavic art. As a scholar with a strong concern for wooden architecture, he cited the merits of his professor in this line of research:

Strzygowski restored the proper importance of wooden architecture. But not only that. No one had ever approached it from such a universal and multilateral point of view. No one had highlighted more the importance of wooden architecture for the general history of the arts, no one had managed to bring together all the material regarding the history of architecture. It is a pity that the monuments were not sufficiently published in all countries.³⁷

The outlining of a distinct direction in art history, a multifaceted approach, and the collection of material were therefore, in his opinion, the merits of Professor Sztrygowski. By referring to him, Petranu emphasized the importance of his own research.³⁸

He took two main ideas from the professor's work that would be useful for his own approach. One concerned the fact that Oriental Europe was not barbaric

³⁵ Vlad Țoca, *Art Historical Discourse in Romania, 1919-1947*, Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2011, 53.

³⁶ Petranu, *Monumentele istorice ale județului Bihor*, 5.

³⁷ Petranu, *Monumentele istorice ale județului Bihor*, 34.

³⁸ In 1928, three years before the publication of Petranu's book about Bihor, Professor Strzygowski's book on wood architecture in Northern Europe had seen the light of day. It included ideas that were taken over by Petranu in his own discourse (even though he did not mention this particular book of his professor among his sources): First, pioneering studies on wood architecture ('I cannot too often repeat that we are at the beginning of our researches in this field; perhaps the discovery of this new province will produce results of the highest importance', Professor Strzygowski wrote); second, the link between the building technique, the *blockbau* system, and 'the Eastern sense of home'; third, wood architecture's specific type of monumentality, which does not necessarily entail from size, measurable in metres, but from aesthetic accomplishment, the shape being the result of the construction material used rather than of the technique; and Fourth, the origins of wood architecture lie in the dim and distant past ('I am convinced that those blockwork forms were not founded as late as the eighteenth century, but that they were already known in what are called the Dark Ages of European art, the pre Romanesque period'), Strzygowski, *Early Church Art*, 53, 59, 68-69, 71. Some of these ideas also appear, in adapted form, in Coriolan Petranu's historiographical discourse.

and inferior from an artistic point of view, or insignificant for the development of the fine arts. He applied it to the Romanian art in Transylvania, especially by showing that wood artwork was not devoid of importance or artistic value. The second idea he applied to the Romanian space was that according to which the wooden architecture of Eastern Europe had its own, native elements.³⁹ As a result, he showed that Romanian art, too, had its distinctive native elements. In fact, in the late 1930s he began to emphasize the autochthonism of Romanian wooden architecture in a historical discourse with ever stronger national overtones.

Petranu's insistence on the autochthonous quality of vernacular wood architecture should come as no surprise considering the cultural climate of interwar Romania. Many debates were held at that time concerning the definition of national identity and, implicitly, Romania's future development. The warring camps were the traditionalists/autochthonists versus the Europeanists/modernists.⁴⁰ The topic of the national features of art permeated Romanian art historiography after 1918, thus continuing, a debate that had been launched in the mid-nineteenth century, after the establishment of the national state. The union of Moldavia and Wallachia (1859) fostered discussion concerning the possibility of defining a national cultural identity and, implicitly, a national art. In the 1860s and 1870s Romanian cultural identity was not defined, as Corina Popa has shown, through contemporary art, but rather through Roman, medieval and popular art seen as expressions of the ideas of Latinity, Orthodoxy and folk culture.⁴¹ At the turn of the 20th century, the neo-Romanian style gained traction in architecture, taking over elements from old Romanian architecture and folk art, a style that is interpreted in historiography as a version of European historicism. After 1918 it was embraced in Transylvania as a symbol of the Romanian political governance of this province, while across the Carpathians it began to be criticized by art historians and to compete with

³⁹ Petranu, *Monumentele istorice ale județului Bihor*, 37. However, he questioned Strzygowsky's opinion according to which Eastern Europe had mediated between Western Europe and Mazdeistic Iran, showing that there was no proof attesting to the influence of Mazdeism on Romanian wooden churches; nevertheless, he did not entirely reject the idea: out of respect, probably, for his professor, he considered that this was a hypothesis that still needed to be confirmed.

⁴⁰ The debate was held in the literary/humanistic field, but it also envisaged Romania's possible pathways of economic and social evolution. A major champion of Europeanism was literary critic Eugen Lovinescu. He was backed by the writers grouped around the journal *Viața Românească*. The traditionalists revolved around the journal *Gândirea*. While the Europeanists argues that Romania had to look up to Western European values, with an emphasis on urbanization and industrialization, the traditionalists scoured Romania's past for viable models of development. Mihai Bărbulescu, Dennis Deletant, Keith Hitchins, Șerban Papacostea, Pompiliu Teodor, *Istoria României*, București: Editura Enciclopedică, 1998, 423–28. For the literary debates see Zigu Ornea, *Tradiționalism și modernitate în deceniul al treilea*, București: Editura Eminescu, 1980.

⁴¹ Corina Popa, 'Die «nationale Eigenart» und die Architekturgeschichte Rumäniens bis 1944', in Born, Janatková, Labuda, *Die Kunsthistoriographien in Ostmitteleuropa*, 216-17.

functional architecture, which became increasingly dominant.⁴² Between the two world wars, two competing trends asserted themselves in the art historiography from across the Carpathians (Wallachia): modernism and traditionalism (that is, folk art).⁴³

The new international political climate and the revival of political nationalism also contributed to accentuating the national overtones of Petranu's historical analysis. Given the national premises of his discourse, Coriolan Petranu was becoming aligned with a Romanian historiographical trend that had affirmed itself more strongly after 1933. For instance, in 1934 the journal *La Revue de Transylvanie* was founded. Aiming to inform readers in Western Europe about Transylvanian problems (ethnic, concerning the relations between the minority and the majority populations) the journal reflected the tensions in Romanian-Hungarian political relations in those years (and was intended to counter the ever more active propaganda of the Hungarian state).⁴⁴ The historians who contributed to this journal, and many others besides them, were clearly committed to making political propaganda.

Coriolan Petranu gave a patriotic dimension to his writings from the beginning, in keeping with the duty he had assumed, namely to promote Transylvanian Romanian art. He often engaged in comparisons with Hungarian and Saxon art, in a hierarchical frame meant to evince the superiority of Romanian vernacular architecture. Almost two decades after the publication of his first monograph, he stated:

The issue of the wooden churches in Transylvania and Maramureş also has a national side. Since 1927 I have been fighting against Hungarian authors in my publications ... These Hungarians attribute the creation of this art of wooden churches, regarded by foreigners as the most original artistic contribution of Transylvania, to the genius of the Hungarian people. I have shown that it is Romanian and only in the tower have I admitted an influence of the Saxons.⁴⁵

⁴² Popa, 'Die «nationale Eigenart» und die Architekturgeschichte', 221-25. One example of the way in which functional architecture was promoted was the Romanian Pavilion, built in this style, at the 1937 Paris Exhibition.

⁴³ In the early 1920s the interest in folk art led to the publication of two syntheses: one was authored by the art critic George Oprescu (*Arta țărănească la români*, 1922) and the other by the historian Nicolae Iorga (*L'art populaire en Roumanie*, 1923), Popa, 'Die «nationale Eigenart» und die Architekturgeschichte', 227.

⁴⁴ The Hungarian State reported the Romanian state's policy towards minorities to international courts. See Maria Ghitta, 'Silviu Dragomir și chestiunea minorităților în *Revue de Transylvanie*', in Liviu Maior, Ioan Aurel Pop, Ioan Bolovan (eds), *Asociaționism și naționalism cultural în secolele XIX-XX*, Cluj-Napoca: Academia Română. Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2011, 285-93. One of the major themes of Hungarian propaganda was that after 1918 Transylvania went through a process of involution because of the inferiority of Romanian civilization, Radu Mârza, *Romanian Historians and Propaganda (1914-1946). The Case of Transylvania*, Bratislava: AE Press, 2014, 70-1, 76, 79.

⁴⁵ Coriolan Petranu, *Biserica reformată din Sighet și bisericile de lemn din Maramureş*, Sibiu: Tipografia 'Cartea Românească din Cluj', 1945, 8.

Wooden churches were therefore, in his opinion, examples of Romanian artistic originality. Originality, autochthonism, ancientness – these were the features of Romanian art that he disseminated at the international congresses in which he participated. At a congress on Byzantine studies held, for example, in Sofia, in 1934, he aimed to highlight the contribution of the Transylvanian Romanians to Byzantine art, showing that Romanian architecture differed from Hungarian and Saxon architecture through its Byzantine elements. This was his reply to ‘our enemies, who sought to show that we had allegedly adopted Hungarian art’; he considered that ‘what I have demonstrated in my presentation is in the service of science, but also of the national cause’.⁴⁶

In tune with the same idea of promoting the national spirit through art, at the International Exhibition in Paris in 1937 he intended to present an album that would capture the ‘past and present of Romanian art in Transylvania’; an album which he had designed, he wrote, as a specialist in the field and ‘as one who is in charge of the antirevisionist propaganda, with the help of art history’.⁴⁷ Through reference to the past, he aimed to show the ancientness and originality of Romanian art, and by reference to the present, to reveal contemporary creativity (‘Romanian achievements since 1918’).⁴⁸

The autochthonism of Romanian wooden architecture, its national character and its ancientness were the main features he wished to highlight in his propagandistic texts.

In supporting autochthonism, he began again from the ideas of Professor Strzygowski, ‘who is a great specialist on this matter’, as he wrote in 1934, and who had advanced ‘a very acceptable point of view’. According to this, the wooden architecture of Eastern Europe had its own, ‘indigenous’ elements, which were not introduced by German settlers.⁴⁹ Petranu translated this idea to the specific Romanian case, questioning the hypothesis of foreign influences on Transylvanian Romanian wooden architecture. Methodologically, he again utilised comparison, specifically with the wooden churches of Silesia, because, he wrote, they were better documented. Revealing the links (sometimes even the identities), similarities and differences between these architectural styles, at the end of his discussion he tipped the balance in favour of differences, concluding that the wooden churches from Transylvania and the ones from Silesia represented two distinct and independent national groups and types. The Transylvanian ones were superior from an artistic point of view (considering the diversity of the towers, the apses, the richer and more refined artistic decorations).⁵⁰ He rejected any foreign influence on Transylvanian wooden churches, except the Saxon one on the tower; and even the Saxon model had been adapted by the Romanians who were not, as he wrote, ‘mere imitators’.

⁴⁶ Report submitted to the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, cited in Sabău, ‘Coriolan Petranu și începuturile istoriei artei’, 167.

⁴⁷ Cited in Sabău, ‘Coriolan Petranu și începuturile istoriei artei’, 193.

⁴⁸ Sabău, ‘Coriolan Petranu și începuturile istoriei artei’, 193–94.

⁴⁹ Coriolan Petranu, *Bisericile de lemn ale românilor ardeleni*, Sibiu: Tiparul Krafft&Drotleff, 1934, 18.

⁵⁰ Petranu, *Bisericile de lemn ale românilor ardeleni*, 19.

This had been a creative adaptation, the Romanians giving the towers a purely artistic and not a defensive function: 'Compared to the cumbersome German and Hungarian towers, the Romanian ones introduced finesse, gracefulness, elegance, a mysterious-romantic character, and these qualities cannot be found in the Saxon and Hungarian churches'.⁵¹

The question of the originality of wooden architecture, and of the influences exerted on it, was also discussed in Hungarian and Ukrainian historiographies. Petranu engaged in this historiographic dispute, reacting to the fact that, as he wrote, after the Union of Transylvania with Romania, the Hungarians tended to 'detract the Romanian values'.⁵² The question of influences and that concerning which nation in Transylvania had learned to work in wood first were matters of national pride, at that time, for Romanians, Hungarians and Ukrainians alike. As a result, these nations accused one another of advancing politicized and, hence, exaggerated or unfounded interpretations.⁵³ Petranu persistently denied any influence exerted by Hungarian or Ukrainian architecture, considering that any historical opinion different from his own was an attack against the 'national character of this art'.⁵⁴ Here, once again, he invoked the opinion of Professor Strzygowski, expressed in one of the letters he had sent him, in support of his argument. 'It is naturally absurd to imagine that the Ukrainian wooden churches were a starting point for the Romanian ones', the professor had written to him in 1933.⁵⁵ He believed that the 'national character' of Romanian wooden churches was a matter of their specific style, which differed from the wooden architecture of the surrounding peoples (Ukrainians, Poles, Slovaks, or Russians), as well as the ethnicity of those who had commissioned or had executed the construction work (Romanian) and the natural environment (thick forests).⁵⁶ Advocating the notion of a national style, he insisted on proving the stylistic unity of the churches in Maramureş, Transylvania, Banat and Crişana, territories that were more exposed to foreign influences by virtue of their history and geographical position. He had therefore an additional incentive to demonstrate that these regions, with their particular histories, had developed a common style of vernacular architecture. He did not omit Wallachia and Moldova, stating on several occasions that the wooden architecture of the two countries had the same characteristic features as that in Transylvania (with the exception of the tower).⁵⁷ Thus, he suggested that

⁵¹ Petranu, *Biserica reformată din Sighet*, 10.

⁵² Petranu, *Bisericile de lemn ale românilor ardeleni*, 23.

⁵³ When Ottó Szőnyi, the Hungarian author of an album entitled *Régi magyar Templomok* (1933) showed that the Hungarians were skilled at woodwork and that the Romanians had learned from them how to build wooden churches, Petranu considered that in making this statement the author was following some 'patriotic directives', and that he represented an older generation 'who can't even conceive that the Hungarians might have learned anything from the former nationalities of Hungary', Coriolan Petranu, *Noui cercetări și aprecieri asupra arhitecturii în lemn din Ardeal*, Bucureşti: Imprimeria Națională, 1936, 8.

⁵⁴ Petranu, *Bisericile de lemn ale românilor ardeleni*, 22.

⁵⁵ Petranu, *Bisericile de lemn ale românilor ardeleni*, 24.

⁵⁶ Petranu, *Bisericile de lemn ale românilor ardeleni*, 24

⁵⁷ Petranu, *Bisericile de lemn ale românilor ardeleni*, 22; he showed that there was a 'striking' unity between the wooden churches in Transylvania and those in the Romanian

architectural unity had anticipated the political unity of all Romanians and that art had reflected their common political destiny.

In the same political key, he addressed the issue of the ancientness of wooden churches, another much disputed problem in the historiographies of this area. In fact, the older the wooden architecture, the more obvious was its 'autochthonism'. Petranu appealed again to the authority of Professor Strzygowski, who thought that the wooden architecture of Eastern Europe had preserved local traditions originating in prehistory.⁵⁸ The hypothesis that he put forth in the 1932 monograph was that the towers of the churches dated from the time of the Dacians and the Romans, thus supporting historiographic protochronism.⁵⁹ Resorting to various sources – monuments (Trajan's column, which reproduces a defence tower built of stone, with a square base and a gallery), literary documents (Caesar's *De bello gallico*), numismatic, the opinions of some architects such as Viollet le Duc who linked the four turrets of the Romanesque churches in France to the ancient tradition - he launched the hypothesis that the towers had already been standing during the time of the Dacians, the Romans, or the ancient migrating peoples. 'Did the Dacians, the Romans, the invading peoples have wooden towers?', he wondered, advancing the hypothesis of an architectural continuity from ancient Dacia to his own time.⁶⁰ By including the Romanians' ancestors, the Dacians and the Romans, in the discussion, he once more emphasised the uniqueness of the wooden architecture of this region. Ancientness meant, in his opinion, priority; it meant that Romanians could not be surpassed by others, by Hungarians, for example.⁶¹ The themes of ancientness and continuity in architecture were thus complementary to those from the general historiography, which discussed the origin of Romanians, the ancientness of their habitation and their continuity north of the Danube. Towards the end of the 1930s, these themes were more insistently addressed by historians in connection with the ascendancy of revisionism.⁶²

Principalities even though they had been separated by a frontier, Coriolan Petranu, *L'art Roumain de Transylvanie*, Bucarest, 1938, 26–7.

⁵⁸ Petranu, *L'art Roumain de Transylvanie*, 26.

⁵⁹ For a national and protochronist interpretation of belfry towers in the texts of Coriolan Petranu, see Valentin Trifescu, 'Etnicizarea simbolurilor artistice locale. Chestiunea turnurilor-clopotniță ale bisericilor de lemn din Transilvania și Partium în istoriografia românească din perioada interbelică', in Valentin Trifescu, Vali Illyes, François Bréda (eds), *Patrimoniu și identitate locală*, Iași: Editura Universității Al. Ioan Cuza, 2015, 131-48, here 143-44.

⁶⁰ Petranu, *Monumentele istorice ale județului Bihor*, 43–44.

⁶¹ In his review of Ilona Balogh's book, *Magyar Fatornyok* (1931), Petranu criticized the author's method of dating the churches according to the inscriptions on the bells or on the tin or iron flags, concluding that 'not even the Hungarians have wooden towers older than those of the Romanians', Petranu, *Noui cercetări*, 16–18.

⁶² See, for example, Gheorghe I. Brătianu's review of Professor Ferdinand Lot's book, converted into a monograph in 1937 and published in Romanian in 1940 with the title *O enigmă și un miracol istoric: poporul român*, Stelian Brezeanu, 'G. I. Brătianu și istoria medievală', in G. I. Brătianu, *O enigmă și un miracol istoric: poporul român*, București: Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1988, 32–3.

To conclude, by approaching wooden architecture in a national key, Petranu aligned his research with a prevailing historiographical direction in the provinces of the Empire at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the next. As Matthew Rampley has shown, art historians resorted to so-called objective methods to support their political ideas, and 'the "recovery" of national artistic traditions was an important part of the development of art history across Austria-Hungary'.⁶³ As seen above, Petranu always referred, in his writings, to Professor Josef Strzygowski, revealing his steadfast loyalty to him. He translated Strzygowski's ideas about the importance of East European art or the autochthonism of wood art in this region to Transylvanian Romanian vernacular architecture and adapted them to serve the purpose of his writings. Understanding historical writing as a patriotic duty, Coriolan Petranu also followed a line of research that was launched in Romanian Transylvanian historiography after 1918. Like his fellow historians, Petranu focused on the intra-Carpathian territory with the aim of highlighting the Romanians' contribution to the history of the province, a contribution that had been ignored or underestimated before, as Romanian historians suggest. As such, his discourse was also a reactive one, responding to the opinions of foreign historians, Hungarians in particular. In fact, art historiography with national goals had been practised in Hungary for decades: according to Matthew Rampley, art historians and archaeologists had focused their research on the architectural monuments of Hungary with a view to defining a 'Hungarian national style'.⁶⁴ It is not by chance that Petranu wanted to individualize Romanian Transylvanian architecture compared to that of Hungarian, to define a 'Romanian national style'.

He nuanced his historiographic discourse in terms of the goals he pursued and the time in which he wrote, oscillating between Europeanism and autochthonism. Wishing to integrate his research within the European line of study launched by his professor and, implicitly, to make the vernacular art from Transylvania known in the sphere of European art historiography, he showed the similarities between this architecture and that of Central-Europe; he looked to Central or Western Europe for comparisons, in an attempt to find similarities or influences. By accepting only one influence, the Saxon one, he expressed his attachment to the space in which he had developed as a scholar. He nonetheless often tilted the comparison in favour of Romanian vernacular architecture, out of a desire to validate its originality and artistic worth.

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⁶³ Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History*, 63, 73.

⁶⁴ Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History*, 58.

Uniates and the Orthodox from Dăbâca County). She is also interested in the national overtones of Transylvanian historiographical discourse during the interwar period ('Between Scientific Rigor and Patriotic Duty. The Historical Discourse of the Romanian Scholars from Cluj during the Interwar Period', in Vilmos Erős, Róbert Káli, László Dávid Törő, Máté Kavacsánszki (eds), *Approaches to Historiography*, Debrecen: MTA-DE, 2016, 93-104).

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