

Roxana MODREANU

University of Art and Design Cluj-Napoca, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

ROMANIAN ART HISTORY DURING THE 1950s AS A FORM OF SOCIAL HISTORY OF ART

Summary. The Romanian Workers' Party – the political party that led Romania from 1947 until 1965 – need for legitimisation led to the rewriting of history in a way that the history of Romania was presented as a linear progression finally leading to communism. In art history, art also became a linear phenomenon, progressively advancing towards Socialist Realism.

The tactics of constructing the new narrative in art history during the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s can be read as a form of the social history of art. Although the methodology could have led to remarkable results, ethical boundaries were violated: only some historical episodes and moments from artists' biographies were selected.

Within this context, this study investigates whether papers and monographs about Romanian painters active in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century can be read as a form of social history of art.

Keywords: Communism, social history of art, censorship, Romania, George Oprescu, monographs, biographies, communist ideology, totalitarianism.

INTRODUCTION

Societies in Eastern Europe suffered radical changes at the end of the 1940s. This was also the case in Romania. Along with the political life, the cultural life faced a radical change during a process of legitimisation of the new Communist rule, having the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – further on, USSR – as a model, especially during the Stalinist period. While the arts were the subject of implementing Socialist Realism, the humanities had to adapt to dialectical and historical materialism. Considering the fact that, by its nature, historical materialism functions by considering the social reality surrounding a certain historical event, one can think that history, and, therefore, art history, used the methods of social history, particularly in the social history of art. To add to this assumption, many papers and books (including landmark monographs) gave special attention to the biography of artists and, where possible, their involvement in certain political events. On the other hand, sociology had a rough existence during the first part of Communist rule in Romania. Between 1948 and 1964, its practice was forbidden and the

professional structures associated with it were dismantled. Under these circumstances, the questions that can be asked are: was it possible to have a historical methodology in the field of art history resembling that of the social history of art? And if the answer is positive, can it be seen as a particular model of the social history of art? How did it work?

In order to answer those questions, the paper will consider the apparition of the social history of art in Western Europe during the 1950s, looking at the characteristics of Arnold Hauser's *The Social History of Art* and the prescriptions of the Communist Party of the USSR for what dialectical materialism and historical materialism meant and how it should have been put to practice. Also, the status of sociology in Romania and the method in which all of the above were applied to art history will be considered. For verifying the model, the cases of Romanian painters Nicolae Grigorescu, Theodor Aman and Octav Băncilă will be considered. The analysis will also show a difference in the approaches of certain art historians. Because of the restrictive character of a scholarly paper, this text is not an exhaustive analysis, but a qualitative one, considering just

a few examples for verifying if part of the art historical narrative of the 1950s and the first part of the 1960s in Romania can be regarded as a form of social history of art.

The study follows the period of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's rule in Romania because of its restrictive character. It shows what consequences Stalinism had in the cultural field and how it shaped the methodology used for constructing the discourse in certain fields of the humanities.

From a cultural point of view, the proposed timeframe (1948–1965)¹ can be divided in two: the Stalinist era, between 1948 and 1953, the year of Stalin's death, but prolonged until 1955, and the time of a minor liberalisation, between 1956 and 1964, when Stalinist policies were still in use, but Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej used them for consolidating his own power, therefore rejecting Nikita Khrushchev's reformistic policy.² Furthermore, even the first period can be divided, as Dennis Deletant shows, between the time when Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej shared the party's leadership with Ana Pauker, Vasile Luca, and Teohari Georgescu, lasting between 1948–1952, and the period when Dej became the sole leader of the party (1952–1955)³. In this context, the death of Stalin did not bring the end of Stalinism in Romania. While the Thaw began in most Eastern European countries in 1956, after Khrushchev's secret speech, in Romania the Thaw began only in 1964. The liberalisation policies between 1956 and 1964 opened the path for a nationalistic advance but on Stalinist terms.

Considering the painters Nicolae Grigorescu, Theodor Aman, and Octav Băncilă, the paper brings to attention the monographs about those painters. Grigorescu's monograph is the only one published after 1960 (in 1961), although the volume was finished maybe as early as 1960 by Remus Niculescu. Because of some political issues and the detention of Niculescu, the volume was issued in 1961 and was signed by Oprescu⁴. Grigorescu and Aman are considered among the most important painters in Romanian art history, being part of the Romanian canon of painters since the beginning of art history

as a professional field in Romania. Their activity led to the modernisation of Romanian art during the 19th century, thus their high status in Romanian art history. Theodor Aman, together with the painter Gheorghe Tattarescu, founded the Beaux Art School in Bucharest, introducing the French system of the Academy and Academist painting. His paintings are among the first examples of historical paintings, narrating in a visual manner significant events for Romanian history. To this date, his historical paintings are among the best-known art works of this genre to the large public. At the same time, his paintings of social events such as ball scenes are appreciated for illustrating the high society of the day. When the fashion in painting changed, he was able to change his style and start painting rural scenes, in a manner that gave the impression that he wanted to imitate Nicolae Grigorescu. Not only that he laid the foundations of modern artistic life in Romania, but his work was a model for a whole generation of artists. Nicolae Grigorescu revolutionised Romanian painting by introducing the *plein-air* technique. He became very influential for the young generation of artists who tried to distance themselves from Academist art. His interest in rural life, landscapes, and portraits, common at that time in the rest of Europe, made him a revolutionary painter on the Romanian art scene. His new approach and the fact that his practice could, at the same time, be closely related to Western art, and seen as a contribution to constructing a Romanian identity, turned him into a model for the young generation. His example was followed by younger painters who started painting more and more rural scenes, landscapes, and still lifes. The canon is completed by the painters Ion Andreescu, Ștefan Luchian, and Nicolae Tonitza. In this context, during the Communist era, some art historians tried to introduce Octav Băncilă in this canon mostly for political reasons: he was a declared Marxist and he made a cycle of painting illustrating the Romanian Peasant's Revolt of 1907.

The modernisation of Romanian art during the 19th century is viewed by most as having crucial importance because it represented the starting point for making Romanian art part of the

Western world. Because of this reason, this paper is not concerned with earlier or later art, the context being very different and the type of analysis being considerably different. At the same time, this phenomenon is characteristic of the former Romanian provinces of Wallachia and Moldavia. During the 19th century, Transylvania was part of a different cultural tradition. Because of this, the art historians who were interested in the process of modernisation of Romanian art during the 19th century are mainly art historians from Bucharest. The Transylvanian art historians were concerned mainly with medieval art, aiming to prove the importance of the Romanian population in Transylvania during the Middle Ages.

Writing about 19th century art between 1948 and 1965 posed serious difficulties, considering the fact that the main topic was that of modernisation and appropriation of Western standards in art, at a time when the USSR propaganda depicted the capitalist West as the archenemy. At the same time, the phenomenon is even more interesting because this exact same timeframe, 1948–1965, corresponds with the consolidation of art history as a research field in Romania. Art history did not have a very long history in Romanian culture. During the Interwar period, some art historians were active in two cultural centres: Cluj, in former Transylvania, and Bucharest, in former Wallachia. As other authors already showed, art historians from Cluj, such as Coriolan Petranu and Virgil Vătăşianu, both educated in Vienna, employed the methodology of Josef Strzygowski while researching Romanian art forms in Transylvania⁵. Soon, an informal competition between the two could be seen. Art historians Virgil Vătăşianu and George Oprescu (with Oprescu being older than Vătăşianu) began their careers in the Interwar period. Tensions between the two centres started to emerge and continued in the Communist times. While the methodology of the Cluj School of Art History can be easily traced to the Vienna School of Art History⁶, not the same can be said about the Bucharest School of Art History. Previous research focused on the Interwar period without highlighting a coherent methodological development, even when looking at materials

written by precursors of Oprescu, such as Nicolae Iorga, Gheorghe Balş, Nicolae Ghika-Budeşti, or Ion D. Ştefănescu⁷. Few studies focusing on individual authors or art history during the Communist era are available, while no volumes signed by a single author were issued (only Corina Simon's book about Virgil Vătăşianu touches the subject). Various papers on the subject of art history written during the Communist times will be cited throughout this article. While unpacking the methodology of Bucharest art historians, this paper raises the question of the existence of a link between sociological approaches and art history, in a time when sociology itself was banned in Romania, a question not researched before. With this approach, investigating the juxtaposition of ideology, sociology, and art history, the paper does not look into conflicts between art historians in Bucharest (more precisely, between George Oprescu, Petru Comarnescu and Ionel Jianu, conflicts that can be traced into the Interwar period).

THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF ART IN THE 1950s

Even though the social history of art will come to the front stage of art historical writing with its methodology mainly during the 1980s⁸, experiments in this area were made earlier. Hungarian art historian Frederick Antal began publishing studies that can be seen as a form of social history of art at the end of the 1940s⁹. It is possible to see his activity closely linked to both Marxism and the Anali School. Arnold Hauser's *Social History of Art* was first published in 1951. Both authors were writing at the same time when changes in the field of humanities were taking place in Eastern Europe as a result of the pressure of the Communist regimes. This paper will rely on a comparison only between Hauser's work and the work of Romanian art historians. For the timeframe this paper uses, Hauser's work is of the utmost importance because it makes possible a comparison between a free choice of using Marxist thought in writing art history and the necessity of using it in Romania, together with the prescriptions of the Communist Party in the USSR of dialectical materialism and historical

materialism. Although Anne D'Alleva considers Hauser's contribution to the field to be an atypical one due to its generalisations and ambition to analyse all of art history, literature, music, and film¹⁰, Hauser's book proved to be influential and, at the same time, explicitly considers the role Marxist thought had in his analysis. He was also interested in what type of relations exists between the biography of the artist and his artistic oeuvre.

Considering Hauser's methodology, in the Introduction for the 2005 edition, Jonathan Harris mentions the Marxist principles that can be found in Hauser's writing: the privileged place class and class struggle have in his analysis, the social and cultural role various ideologies had in history and the influence the economical production models had over art¹¹. Even though those are common points with the work done in Romania, there are certain differences in approach. The most striking difference is that Hauser was critical towards Soviet society by ignoring Socialist Realism in his comprehensive history¹². At the end of the fourth volume, Hauser briefly mentions the state of culture in Soviet Russia but finds it difficult to evaluate the phenomenon because of its declared aim of exterminating the bourgeoisie aesthetics. At the same time, he is critical towards using art as propaganda, stating that this use of art diminishes its value. He takes other two issues with Socialist Realism: censorship and its declared role of speaking to the people. In Hauser's view, addressing the issue of the level of education of the proletariat only postpones finding a solution to the problem of education, because art should determine people to have a wider view of the subject.¹³

The difference between the status Socialist Realism had in Hauser's writings and the one it had in Romanian writings can also be sensed in the fact that, even if Hauser underlines the way development and progress in art are directly linked to a historical logic that can be found in all human societies starting with the Stone Age¹⁴, this progression does not end with Socialist Realism, as was the case of the writings of his peers in Romania and other countries under Communist rule. Looking at the

Romanian art historical works published in the 1950s and the 1960s, no such considerations about Socialist Realism were made. On the contrary: when considering the educational role art had, the officially sanctioned art movement was considered to be educating the people. What is certain is that for both Hauser and art historians active in Eastern Europe, when considering the role of art from a Marxist point of view, the educational role art could have, was central to the function art was considered to have.

On the other hand, this way of envisioning the succession of events in history and their influence over art is directly linked with dialectical materialism, to be analysed below. This is a common point in the art historical writings from Romania.

The comparison between Hauser's methodology and that of his Romanian peers can encompass the relevance the artists' biographies had in shaping art history. Looking at the monographs about Romanian artists Grigorescu, Aman, and Băncilă, one can notice the central place their biographies have in the process of evaluating their work. For Aman, his brief involvement with the revolution of 1848 plays a central role in demonstrating that the artist was on the good side of history, and, at the same time, that Academism can be considered in positive terms in certain cases¹⁵. For Grigorescu, his biography is highly modified in a time when Impressionism was seen as a decadent art movement and when the descent from a family that could even partly be considered bourgeoisie was undesirable. Because he is considered Romania's national painter thanks to the role he played in the development of art movements in the country and especially in disseminating the *plein-air* technique, his connection to the Barbizon School is highly emphasised – being a tool for proving he was a Realist painter – and he is presented as having peasant origin, based on a whole mythology created during the Interwar period about the artist, even though he was not quite so¹⁶. As for Băncilă, his case is quite different. First of all, he was not one of the painters who were part of the Romanian canon of painting. Second, he adhered, for certain, to Socialist values.

To make him part of the canon, Petru Comarnescu (using the pseudonym Anton Coman) writes only about those things and his ties with the Romanian Peasant Revolt from 1907, ignoring the latter part of the painter's activity, when he painted mainly landscapes and still lives.

All of the above practices suffer from one thing: they consider only those biographical episodes that help within the ideological context. At the same time, the biographical considerations occupy a consistent part of those monographs, which is one of the reasons why the methodology used can be seen as an example of the social history of art. Those biographical episodes lead to considering the historical events in which the artists were involved and creating a direct causal link between the events and the path culture took during those times. Hauser searches for the same causal link between political events and culture, but the place the artist's biographies occupy in his analysis is different. He explicitly states, when considering Jacques-Louis David's work, that while progressive political views can help in creating a good picture, not having them does not mean the opposite¹⁷. This view and, subsequently, the use of artists' biographies, helps Hauser's analysis by not ignoring artists because of their political views or based on the assumption that certain art movements should not be considered because they are not suitable for a certain social class. This proves that while having a type of methodology close to something that was starting to gain ground in Western art history, the work of Romanian scholars was deemed to not rise to the same standards because of the threat ideology and, most of all, censorship, posed to the scholarly practice – exactly the issue Hauser took with Socialist Realism when mentioning it at the end of his fourth volume.

There are other reasons for considering the Romanian scholars' work as being part of the social history of art. Apart from the consideration of artists' biographies, they pay special attention to the study scholarships the artists were granted in order to visit Western countries, the selling of artists' works (who bought their paintings, to what social class

the buyers belonged to, how much they paid for them), and the artists' travels in Romania or other countries. All of those were used for creating a comprehensive context that led to various changes in artists' work, apart from the intention of the artist himself.

THE FIELD OF SOCIOLOGY IN ROMANIA IN THE 1950s AND THE 1960s

Even though the similarities between Hauser's *Social History of Art* and writings by Romanian art historians can suggest that those writings from the 1950s and the 1960s can be considered under the umbrella of the social history of art, the term was not used as such in Romania. The reasons can be numerous and a direct cause is hard to establish especially without interviews – which are not possible, with those authors not being alive anymore – some data about the situation of the scholarly circles in Romania can be of great help. Sociology, as a scholarly field, was banned in Romania during the 1950s and the 1960s. Romania was not the only country in which sociology was banned. In the entire USSR's history, sociology had a similar fate. Beginning with the late 1920s, sociologists whose views were different from those of the regime began to be banished from the country or isolated and, in the end, sociology disappeared from the universities' curricula¹⁸.

Returning to the case of Romania, as Ramona Caramelea shows, the ban on sociology, dating from the late 1940s, had as a consequence the marginalisation of some of the leading intellectuals in the field, as was the case of Dimitrie Gusti, the leading sociologist in Bucharest, while others were reemployed by George Oprescu at the Institute of Art History in Bucharest, functioning under the auspices of the Academy of the Romanian People's Republic, and started working in the field of folk art¹⁹. Considering this fact, it is safe to assume that other art historians at the Institute were aware of the principles and methodology of sociology, even though they worked in different departments. In this context, the Institute is important because

most of the leading art historians mentioned in this paper worked at the Institute – with the notable exception of Comarnescu – Oprea even being the institution's director.

To find out the reasons which brought the ban on sociology, one should take a closer look at the communist ideology. Other scholars comprehensively analysed the situation of sociology in the 1950s and the 1960s. Zoltán Rostás notes that the ban on sociology appeared in 1948, being considered a bourgeois science²⁰. In his paper, he follows the path of the sociologists who were employed by the state, mentioning, among others, H. H. Stahl and his son, Paul H. Stahl²¹. The case of Paul Stahl is of particular interest because he was one of the three authors who wrote a highly ideologised paper about Realism in the Institute of Art History's scholarly journal, together with art historian Amelia Pavel and aesthetician Marcel Breazu. Each of them discussed their own topic of interest. Stahl's part speaks about folk art and how looking at it only by using the methods previously employed by art history (form and beauty) is not enough to understand the objects used by the peasant. The role of the object and the life of those who handled it were essential for properly admiring the objects. Moreover, he mentions the progress made lately by art history (not explicitly saying so, but it is self-understood that he speaks about the Communist times) in studying social life to create a context for art.²² This may be the most straightforward indication that art history written during the Communist was intentionally and consciously written as a form of social history of art. At least, it seems that this is how a sociologist understood it and tried to extend its methodology to studying folk art.

PHILOSOPHICAL MATERIALISM

In the process of understanding the shape art historical discourse began to have in the Eastern European countries, and, at the same time, the basis for banning sociology, it is useful to remember how the Communist Party of the USSR defined dialectical materialism and historical materialism, because

both of them were the guiding principles used from writing history – and, consequently, art history – in Eastern Europe. Both are based on Marx's philosophy, but the instalment of communism in the countries in Eastern Europe and the history of the Communist party in each country occupies an important place in shaping those ideological notions.

Historical materialism shapes the historical discourse in communist countries because it is one of the ground principles of Marxism and, on the other hand, its definition explicitly states that historical materialism is the “[...] application of the principles of dialectical materialism to the phenomena of the life in society, to the study of society and its history.”²³ This definition shows that for understanding the status of both sociology and history – and, as a consequence, of something that could be called the social history of art – the understanding of dialectical materialism is one of the first steps to be taken. The same source gives a definition to dialectical materialism, dividing the process into studying and apprehending the natural phenomena, which is dialectical, and interpreting them – a process that is viewed as the theory – is materialistic: “It is called dialectical materialism because its approach to the phenomena of nature, its method of studying and apprehending them, is dialectical, while its interpretation of the phenomena of nature, its conception of these phenomena, its theory, is materialistic.”²⁴

There is another step that must be taken to have a complete image of the dogma that was beyond party orthodoxy in writing history and banning sociology. The definitions of dialectical materialism and historical materialism showed how all the phenomena in the world could be understood from a materialistic point of view and stated that this type of understanding can be – and should be – extended to the whole history. Therefore, materialism becomes the main philosophical view that sets the tone for understanding the world. In the same book about the history of the Communist Party, Materialism, mentioned as Philosophical Materialism, is presented by its three main features, that can be reduced to a phrase. The underlining of the key

phrase belongs to this author, as is the letter enumeration:

a) “[...] Marx’s philosophical materialism holds that the *world is by its very nature material*, that the multifold phenomena of the world constitute different forms of matter in motion, that interconnection and interdependence of phenomena, as established by the dialectical method, are a law of the development of moving matter, and that *the world develops in accordance with the laws of movement of matter and stands in no need of a «universal spirit»*”²⁵

b) “[...] the Marxist materialist philosophy holds that *matter, nature, being, is an objective reality existing outside and independent of our mind*; that matter is primary since it is the source of sensations, ideas, mind, and that mind is secondary, derivative since it is a reflection of matter, a reflection of being; that thought is a product of matter which in its development has reached a high degree of perfection, namely, of the brain, and the brain is the organ of thought; and that therefore one cannot separate thought from matter without committing a grave error.”²⁶

c) “[...] Marxist philosophical materialism holds that *the world and its laws are fully knowable*, that our knowledge of the laws of nature, tested by experiment and practice, is *authentic knowledge* having *the validity of objective truth*, and that there are no things in the world which are unknowable, but only things which are still not known, but which will be disclosed and made known by the efforts of science and practice.”²⁷

The first and last (a+c) characteristics of philosophical materialism were meant to address sociology, while the second (b) was meant to address history. The matter of objectivity, together with the fact that the party considers that the world should develop in a certain way (as one can read at point a) explains why there was a certain type of pressure upon historians to write history in such a way that could confirm this view. Bearing in mind that history should have meant that the evolution of society led to Communism shows why history started to have

a sociological undertone since the 1950s. Considering the fact that society should have developed in a certain way shows why this method had, in the best-case scenario, certain limits and, in the worst-case scenario, lead to falsifying certain historical events.

Those definitions and characteristics mentioned above were actively applied during the Communist era. In her paper, Ramona Caramelia mentions the impact an article in *Scînteia* (the official newspaper of the Communist Party in Romania) had²⁸. The *Scînteia* article uses the same type of language one could read above. It criticises the activity of the Cluj Institute of History of the RPR Academy. Among others, the author takes issue with the fact that the scientific production of the Institute is dominated by *factology* and that historians do not interpret the facts in the way they should, hiding the laws of social development and transforming history into a succession of random facts²⁹. As Caramelia shows, the article was discussed in a meeting at the Institute, a meeting that was used to prove that the members of the Institute were committed to the Communist Party³⁰. As this case shows, there was a real preoccupation with pleasing the authorities³¹.

APPLYING THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF ART: NICOLAE GRIGORESCU, THEODOR AMAN AND OCTAV BĂNCILĂ

In the following section, the case of three Romanian painters will be considered: Nicolae Grigorescu, Theodor Aman and Octav Băncilă. For each of them, besides a monograph, other studies were published in the proposed time frame. While the scholarly papers published about them are interesting in themselves, the monographs are more suitable for the proposed research question: can those writings be considered a form of the social history of art? The manner in which each of those artists is treated corresponds to a certain type of profile common to art historical writings of this time: the peasant, the revolutionary and the communist activist *avant la lettre*³².

The case of Nicolae Grigorescu shows even a shift in the way he was presented by art historians. George Oprescu, the one who would later sign the monograph about the artist, published a series of papers in the Institute's scholarly journal, turning his attention to the artist's biography. Oprescu portrays Grigorescu in 1955 as the son of a notary working at a boyar's court³³, in 1958 as not a true peasant, because he was the son of a notary³⁴, while in 1957 he sees him as close to the peasant in his ways of thinking³⁵ and, ultimately, in 1963 he presents him as having a peasant origin³⁶. There is much to be said about the correlations between biography and artistic practice various art historians make in the case of Nicolae Grigorescu. For the aim of the present paper, it suffices to say that George Oprescu and Petru Comarnescu define various creation periods by considering some personal life events that caused changes in his artistic approach. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on the childhood of the artist and the Campaign in Bulgaria in the Russian-Turkish war during 1877–1878. As already mentioned, Grigorescu turned slowly into a peasant. This is the way he was also presented in the first volume of the monograph³⁷. The authors use as an argument the painter's affirmation that he was a peasant and he was proud of it³⁸. The story of his childhood does not stop here: the monograph states that when he was still very young, about seven years of age, his father died and his mother moved, along with all of her children, to the outskirts of Bucharest, where they lived poorly and the young Grigorescu went to be an apprentice in Anton Chladek's painting studio³⁹. Therefore, Grigorescu is not just a peasant. Because of his childhood, he is even close to the proletariat. Presented as a peasant and as a young, poor orphan, his social origin is favourable to consider him one of the artists that could be relevant to Romanian art history. When considering if Grigorescu succeeded in being on the good part of history when thinking of bigger historical events, the Campaign in Bulgaria in the Russian-Turkish war during 1877–1878 is relevant for the life of the artist. The artist was a war correspondent. In the second volume of the monograph, Oprescu depicts him as the most dedicated artist from the battleground, going to such lengths

as to consider him an artist who identified himself with the ordinary soldiers, not with the officers⁴⁰. Grigorescu identifying with one or another is quite unnecessary because he was not fighting. As a correspondent, he mainly stayed behind the fighting lines and observed what soldiers had done in the quieter aspects of the war. But looking at Oprescu's consideration from another point of view, Grigorescu's identifying with the plain soldier does make sense in the logic of making him seem displeased with the bourgeoisie and aristocracy. During those times, the officers were aristocrats or bourgeoisie. To keep Grigorescu as a runner for the title of the most important Romanian artist, it was quite necessary for him to have no stain on his biography. Him taking part in the war was of great help, because it was a fight against the Ottoman Empire, a fight during which Wallachia was an ally of the Russian Empire while making him care about the most unfortunate ones in the war was even better.

Those two aspects of Grigorescu's biography alone are enough to show what the interpretation of facts could mean during the 1950s and 1960s: sometimes, stating the facts was not enough. Interpreting them in such a way as to correspond with the official ideology was what mattered the most. The art historians were willing to even alter some facts, as long as they could maintain the status of the artist, which was more important than some trivial facts about his childhood.

Theodor Aman is another case that can be interesting. Two things run against Aman being one of the most important Romanian painters: first, he was an academic painter, second, he had a bourgeois origin. Considering the ideological atmosphere, those two facts should have been enough to dismiss him at least from the canon of Romanian painting. Nevertheless, this did not happen. In the painter's monograph, Radu Bogdan did not hide any of those things. He mentions that the painter's father was a merchant active in Craiova, who later moved to Sibiu to protect his wealth during Tudor Vladimirescu's uprising⁴¹. The same facts are mentioned in Oprescu's synthesis of Romanian art history⁴². Two major historical events took place

during Aman's life: the Revolution of 1848 and the Campaign in Bulgaria in the Russian-Turkish War during 1877–1878. For the first one, Aman was still very young. Nevertheless, the fact that he was a member of the Revolutionary Club in Craiova does not escape Bogdan's attention. The author discusses this in no less than four pages, showing that the painter was on the side of the good cause⁴³. As for the second major historical event, Aman was not part of it in any way. His absence from that is extensively excused by Bogdan who tries to prove that his absence from the military conflict was not due to misplaced loyalties, but because of an illness the painter was suffering from⁴⁴. A controversial aspect was left out by Bogdan, but mentioned by Oprescu: Aman was made a boyar in his late years⁴⁵. This way of interpreting facts and even leaving some out corresponds to the attitude of the two art historians during the 1950s. At the time, Bogdan was still a convinced communist. His ideological beliefs dragged him into a polemic with Oprescu on the subject of Aman's painting. As previously shown, while Bogdan reads Aman's paintings with the upper classes as a criticism towards the bourgeoisie, Oprescu clearly states that such an interpretation is completely false, the painter being part of that class and painting his entourage⁴⁶. The major problem seems to be the painter's origin and his relationship with the class he was part of. While Radu Bogdan tries to partly hide it or to read something else into this relationship, Oprescu does not compromise in this respect. For the chief of the Institute, the role played by Aman in founding the Beaux Art School in Bucharest is reason enough for him to remain part of the Romanian artistic canon. Bogdan seems to be more cautious and does not plead the artist's cause solely using his contribution to the founding of the school⁴⁷. He tries to depict him as a revolutionary and as someone fighting for the ideals of the poor.

Looking at the differences appearing in dealing with this painter's biographical data, something about how materialism – mentioned above – worked in art history can be determined. It is obvious that both Oprescu's synthesis and Bogdan's monograph are not solely about the facts – therefore avoiding

the *factology* denounced in the *Scînteia* article. The interpretation of the facts plays a central role in the place the artist received in the new written art history: his place in society and, most importantly, his relationship with various groups of society are arguments for placing him in the canon, as was the case with Nicolae Grigorescu.

If for Grigorescu and Aman the whole point of changing or exaggerating the interpretation of some facts in their biographies was to maintain their status in the Romanian artistic canon, the case of Octav Băcilă was quite different. He was one of the artists for whom an art historian tried to include him in the canon. The monograph about Băcilă was written by Petru Comarnescu during the time he was not allowed to sign any written material with his own name. Therefore, he used his pseudonym, Anton Coman. He narrates the artist's biography in such a way as to construct the portrait of a communist activist *avant la lettre*. To a certain extent, Băcilă's case bears some similarities with that of Aman: his parents were merchants, and the author tries to show he was not part of the bourgeoisie. He does that by showing that the artist's father died when he was very young, his mother had to work as a seamstress (until here, the story has much in common with that of Grigorescu) and he was raised by his sisters⁴⁸. The fact that he was raised by his sisters is also of help in constructing this type because one of his sisters was Sofia Nădejde (Nă-dej-de), a well-known Marxist and Feminist, member of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Romania. She was also the wife of Ion Nădejde. The ties between the Nădejde family and the proletarian movement in the country served the cause of presenting Băcilă as one of those artists who was raised in the spirit of Marxism. Sometimes, some ambiguities in the writing of Comarnescu suggest that the painter was always near the moment of the formation of the movement and the issuing of the first socialist newspapers⁴⁹. As in the two cases discussed above, there is a historical event to which the artist's practice is linked: the Romanian Peasant's Revolt in 1907. Most of the monograph is actually dedicated to the paintings in the cycle *1907*, even though most of them had already disappeared

when Comarnescu started writing the monograph and he never saw them. He even gives great space to the process of documenting the events in 1907 by the painter⁵⁰.

In this case, the facts are not mystified or overly interpreted, as happened with both the previous artists. Băncilă certainly was a Marxist, at least in his youth, and he did paint an entire cycle on the subject of the uprising of 1907, his main aim being to show the difficulties encountered by the peasants. But something is still missing from the monograph written by Comarnescu: the late paintings of Băncilă. In the second part of his life, the painter focused on landscapes and still lifes. But a revolutionary turned into a landscape painter could not make it into the new canon. Băncilă remains, in those years, the Realist, the revolutionary, the painter who seemed to announce Socialist Realism.

CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the three principles of materialism listed at the beginning of the paper, one can see what they actually meant for art history written during the 1950s and 1960s. The *objective truth* and the *laws of movement* implied that the facts art historians knew or discovered should have been, as shown in the *Scînteia* article, interpreted in such a way as to correspond to the *objective reality*, that was the narrative enforced by the Party. Those aspects alone were enough to generate false narratives, but another layer of intention is added to this equation: the art historian's intention to maintain someone in the canon (cases of writings about Grigorescu and Aman) or to introduce someone new into the canon (case of Băncilă), letting aside the personal drive of each art historian, that exceeds what can be the main purpose of this paper. For this reason, the mystifications are sometimes quite obvious and most certainly the art historians were aware of what they were writing.

Considering the unavoidability of mystification, here comes the big difference between Hauser's method of constructing a social history of art, and

that used by Romanian art historians. As shown above, although Hauser does take into consideration artists' biographies, he does not consider their political views or even the political side traditionally associated with an artistic movement as a supreme argument for concluding what place in history a certain artist could have. At the same time, his attitude towards Socialist Realism and art used as propaganda is radically different from that of Romanian art historians. Therefore, it can be noted that Hauser's analysis gave little space to mystifying certain facts. In the end, for him, the price is to see the theoretical frame of class struggle losing ground in the last volume. It is a compromise he seems willing to make, although it makes his entire work questionable.

On the other side, there are the Romanian art historians: for them, the compromise Hauser makes is not possible. Such an attitude could certainly mean imprisonment. Their writings are mostly dominated by the need to survive: the art historian should survive the regime and the art and canon should survive the regime. The compromises they make are, to some extent, unethical, but at least in some cases justifiable or understandable.

The main question that this paper tries to answer is whether those writings from Romania can be considered to be part of the social history of art. What stays against this consideration is the fact that, as shown above, sociology as a field was forbidden during those decades. Further on, there is no debate in the papers published during those years about the social history of art or about Hauser's work. On the other hand, this does not necessarily mean that art historians were not aware of the methods used by sociology or even of Hauser's books. As mentioned before, at the Institute of Art History sociologists started to work researching peasant art. The paper cosigned by Paul H. Stahl suggests that at least some people working at the Institute were aware of an interdisciplinary approach. As of Hauser's book, without any knowledge about what art historians had in their private libraries – data that is not currently available – no valid assumption can be made.

On behalf of calling this type of writing a form of social history of art, it is striking that they started to use a method more closely related to that of Hauser. Most of those writings are not filled with stylistic analysis and periodisation based on that. The artists' lives and the historical events rank equal in importance with the stylistic analysis. Sometimes, they seem to even have greater importance. The arguments that run against calling this work social history of art come, mainly, from ideological pressure that caused the absence of debate about the subject. However, the absence of the debate is not equivalent to the fact that those ideas did not exist. In fact, the proximity of the sociologists working at the Institute suggests the contrary.

Considering all of these, it can be summarised that there is enough proof to name what was written during the 1950s and 1960s in Romania about Romanian painters of the 19th century a form of social history of art. To a certain extent, looking at the methodology art historians used in their writings, the social history of art should be considered as a type of art history used at that time by art historians in Bucharest. The use of artists' biographies has as a purpose the refinement of understanding their artistic practice. It is not, of course, what this field will become at its peak. It is, of course, filled with some unethical methods of using the instruments that they discovered, but art historians most certainly start to link personal events, history, social relations and art in a way they haven't really done before. Nevertheless, this situation describes well the paradoxes with which life was filled during those decades: art historians, encouraged by the ideology, started to use new ways of constructing a narrative that was, on the other hand, officially banned because of the same ideology.

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- ⁵ Vlad Țoca, *Art Historical Discourse in Romania 1919–1947* (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2011); Corina Simon, *Artă și identitate în opera lui Virgil Vătășianu* (Cluj-Napoca: Neremia Napocae, 2002); Corina Teacă, "In Search of National Traditions: Art History in Romania," in Matthew Rampley, Thierry Lenain, Hubert Locher, Andrea Pinotti, Charlotte Schoel Glass, Kitty Zijlmans, *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012), 451–460.
- ⁶ Vlad Țoca, *Art Historical Discourse in Romania 1919–1947*, 40–81.
- ⁷ Ibid., 18–40.
- ⁸ Anne D'Alleva mentions the writings of Michael Baxandall and Svetlana Alpers as central contributions to the field of social history of art, dating from the 1980s and the 1970s. Anne D'Alleva, *Methods and Theories of Art History* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd., 2005), 54–55.
- ⁹ Frederick Antal, *Florentine Painting and its Social Background: The Bourgeois Republic before Cosimo de' Medici's Advent to Power: XIV and Early XV Centuries* (London, 1948).
- ¹⁰ Anne D'Alleva, *Methods and Theories of Art History*, 54.
- ¹¹ Jonathan Harris, "General Introduction," in Hauser, *The Social History of Art with an Introduction by Jonathan Harris*, volume 1 (London, New York: Taylor & Francis e-library, 2005), xii.
- ¹² Ibid., xiv.
- ¹³ Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art with an Introduction by Jonathan Harris*, volume 4 (London, New York: Taylor & Francis e-library, 2005), 163–164.
- ¹⁴ Harris, "General Introduction," xvii.
- ¹⁵ More details about the status of Academism in Romanian art history during the 1950s and 1960s can be found in: Roxana Modreanu, "Art Historical Writing during Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's Regime. The Case of Academic Painting in the Romanian Academy's Scholarly Journal," *Brukenthal, Acta Musei* 2 15 (2020), 349–363. Essentially, Academism was associated with social classes considered to have caused suffering to the poor, having an aesthetic that cannot be understood by the masses. Because some of the Romanian painters who began to modernise Romanian art were Academists (Gheorghe Tattarescu and Theodor Aman), their biography has a special place in proving their allegiance to the oppressed.
- ¹⁶ For further reading on the topic of Realism and how it was used as a filter for interpreting other artistic movements, Roxana Modreanu, "The Path Towards Socialist Realism. Art historical discourse in Romania between 1954 and 1964," *Brukenthal, Acta Musei* 2 16 (2021), 583–599.
- ¹⁷ Hauser, *The Social History of Art with an Introduction by Jonathan Harris*, volume 3, 139.
- ¹⁸ Elizabeth A. Weinberg, *Sociology in the Soviet Union and Beyond*, Chapter 1, Historical background (London: Routledge, 2004).
- ¹⁹ Ramona Caramelea, "Perspective asupra cercetării de artă populară. Institutul de istoria artei din anii '50," in Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, Virginia Barbu and Ioana Apostol, *70 de ani de la fondarea Institutului de istoria artei "G. Oprescu"* (București: Editura Academiei Române, 2020), 393–405.

Notes

¹ The Communist period starts in the last day of 1947, after the forced abdication of king Michael I. For avoiding misinterpretation and for simplification, in this paper the period is considered to start in 1948.

² This chronology is agreed on by most historians who wrote about this part of the Communist regime. See Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism pentru eternitate* (București: Humanitas, 2014), translated by Cristina Petrescu, Dragoș Petrescu; Dennis Deletant, *Romania under Communist Rule* (Bucharest: Civic Academy Foundation, 2006). For a chronology from a cultural point of view, see: Cristian Vasile, *Politicile culturale comuniste în timpul regimului Gheorghiu-Dej* (București: Humanitas, 2011).

³ Deletant, *Romania under Communist Rule*, 122–130.

⁴ Ioana Apostol, G. Oprescu. *Studiu monografic. Istorie instituțională, istoriografia artei și povestea vieții*, PhD Dissertation, unpublished: 324–326.

²⁰ Zoltán Rostás, "O istorie nefardată a sociologiei românești," (2013), <http://www.cooperativag.ro/o-istorie-nefardata-reabilitarii-sociologiei-romanesti/>.

²¹ Rostás, "O istorie nefardată a sociologiei românești."

²² Paul H. Stahl, Amelia Pavel, Marcel Breazu, "O discuție cu privire la problemele realismului," *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei. Seria arta plastică*, year 11, no. 2 (1964), 198–199.

²³ Commission of the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U.(B.), *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, 105. There are two reasons for using this book for analyzing historical materialism and dialectical materialism. First, the book was published during Stalin's time in the USSR, while the timeframe considered in this paper corresponds to the Stalinist period in the Romanian history. At the same time, Vladimir Tismăneanu points to the fact the Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, the leader of the party and country of that time, did not have solid notions of Marxism, his knowledge being based on two Romanian translations of Russian books: *Problemele leninismului*, and *Cursul scurt de istorie a Patridului Communist (Bolșevic) al Uniunii Sovietice* (see Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism pentru eternitate*, 162). The second book is the Romanian translation of *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*. Even though Dej was not the ideologist of the Romanian Worker's Party, his approval for the propagandistic approach was vital, therefore it is relevant to know on what documents his ideological knowledge was based.

²⁴ Commission of the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U.(B.), *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, 105.

²⁵ Ibid., 111.

²⁶ Ibid., 112.

²⁷ Ibid., 113.

²⁸ Caramelea, "Perspective asupra cercetării de artă populară. Institutul de istoria artei în anii '50," 395–398.

²⁹ "Despre activitatea Institutului de Istorie de la Cluj al Academiei RPR," *Știința* 22 (1953), 2–3.

³⁰ Caramelea, "Perspective asupra cercetării de artă populară. Institutul de istoria artei în anii '50," 396.

³¹ There should be noted that conflicts with the authorities were present at the Institute. Over the time, some of the art historians working there were incarcerated for various official motives. There were other art historians who were not working there and experienced the same problems. The whole field of art history was under pressure. Therefore, compromises in the act of writing art history can be noticed in almost all the publications of the Communist times.

³² The screening of all the monographs and popularisation book series was done in the PhD thesis, Roxana Modreanu, *Istoriografia de artă în România între 1948 și 1964. Publicații privitoare la pictura românească din a doua jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea și începutul secolului XX*. Those three types mentioned were the most

often encountered. Of course, the types can be combined in some publications regarding certain artists. The three examples are those that I consider to be best suited for a short illustration of the classification.

³³ George Oprescu, "Date noi despre anii de formație a lui Nicolae Grigorescu," *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei*, iulie-decembrie, year 2, no. 3–4 (1955), Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Romine, 97–98.

³⁴ George Oprescu, "Grigorescu. Un profil," *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei*, year 5, no. 2 (1958), Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Romine, 83.

³⁵ George Oprescu, "50 de ani de la moartea lui Nicolae Grigorescu," *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei*, year 4, no. 3–4 (1957), Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Romine, 12.

³⁶ Oprescu, "Grigorescu și societatea vremii sale," *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei*, year 10, no. 1 (1963), Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Romine, 11; Oprescu, "Grigorescu și societatea vremii sale (II)," *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei*, year 10, no. 2 (1963), Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Romine, 302.

³⁷ George Oprescu [and Remus Niclescu], *N. Grigorescu*, vol. 1 (București: Editura Meridiane, 1961), 12. The mentioning in brackets of Niclescu happens because he had written the book with Oprescu, but he is not mentioned on the cover.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 12–15.

⁴⁰ George Oprescu, *N. Grigorescu*, vol. 2 (București: Editura Meridiane, 1961), 37.

⁴¹ Radu Bogdan, *Theodor Aman* (Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, 1955), 9.

⁴² George Oprescu, *Scurtă istorie a artelor în R.P.R. II. Secolul XIX* (Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Romine, 1958), 118.

⁴³ Radu Bogdan, *Theodor Aman*, 13–17. The same subject is present in Oprescu's synthesis, but it is treated in only one page: George Oprescu, *Scurtă istorie a artelor în R.P.R. II. Secolul XIX*, 119.

⁴⁴ Bogdan, *Theodor Aman*, 62.

⁴⁵ Oprescu, *Scurtă istorie a artelor în R.P.R. II. Secolul XIX*, 121.

⁴⁶ George Oprescu, "Locul lui Theodor Aman în cultura românească," *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei*, year 3, no. 3–4 (1956), Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Romine, 107–108.

⁴⁷ Both Radu Bogdan and George Oprescu attribute to Aman the initiative of founding a Beaux Art School in Bucharest, while Gheorghe Tattarescu biographer will attribute this to Tattarescu: Bogdan, *Theodor Aman*, 36; Oprescu, *Scurtă istorie a artelor în R.P.R. II. Secolul XIX*, 104; Jacques Wertheimer-Ghika, *Gheorghe M. Tattarescu. Un pictor român și veacul său* (Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, 1958) 160–161.

⁴⁸ Anton Coman, *Octav Băncilă* (Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, 1954), 11.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 12–13.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 37–40.

Roxana MODREANU

Klužo-Napokos meno ir dizaino universitetas, Klužas-Napoka, Rumunija

RUMUNIJOS MENO ISTORIJA XX AMŽIAUS ŠEŠTAJAME DEŠIMTMETYJE KAIP SOCIALINĖS MENO ISTORIJOS FORMA

Santrauka

Rumunijos darbininkų partija – politinė partija, kuri vadovavo Rumunijai nuo 1947 m. iki 1965 m. – įteisino poreikį-skatinimą istoriją perrašyti taip, kad Rumunijos istorija būtų pateikta kaip linijinė progresija, galiausiai atvedanti į komunizmą. Meno istorijoje menas taip pat tapo linijiniu reiškiniu, palaipsniui žengiančiu socialistinio realizmo link.

Naujojo naratyvo meno istorijoje konstravimo taktika šeštajame dešimtmetyje ir septintojo dešimtmečio pradžioje gali būti traktuojama kaip socialinė meno istorijos forma. Nors metodika galėjo duoti puikių rezultatų, etikos ribos buvo pažeistos: atrinkinėjami tik kai kurie istoriniai epizodai ir momentai iš menininkų biografijų. Šiame kontekste tirama, ar straipsniai ir monografijos apie rumunų tapytojus, dirbusius XIX a. antrojoje pusėje ir XX a. pradžioje, gali būti skaitomi kaip socialinė meno istorijos forma.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: komunizmas, socialinė meno istorija, cenzūra, Rumunija, George'as Oprescu, monografijos, biografijos, komunistinė ideologija, totalitarizmas.

Roxana MODREANU

She is PhD, Senior Lecturer in University of Art and Design Cluj-Napoca

Address: Cluj-Napoca, Matei Corvin street No. 6, Casa Matei Corvin, Cluj, Romania. Postal code: 400112.

E-mail: roxana.modreanu@uad.ro