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**The Role of the Romanian State in the Development of Local  
Artists (1856-1918)**

**Ph.D. Summary**

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The stage of artistic training has benefited from the sustained interest of art history researchers, in particular through the analysis of the visual discourse approached by the artist at the time of his debut. However, understood as the intentional action of acquiring specific academic knowledge, i.e. going through the necessary mechanisms, foreseen or arising as opportunities along this trajectory of becoming and asserting oneself as an artist, the formative phase presents a much more appealing research topic. Also, the approach of an investigative endeavor circumscribed to historiography is no longer limited to the factual aspect of history, reconstructed event by event, but, as recent scientific projects show, the interest is extended to the identification and examination of as many, if not all, of the elements that mark out the issue under scrutiny. Therefore, research into the stage of artistic education reveals not only essential biographical data, in order to restore, as complete as possible, the overview of an artist's career, with their framing in a school or current, the traceability of personal style and the work thus produced. Moreover, our focus is more specifically on artistic training as the triggering factor of a phenomenon which, especially for the Romanian area in the nineteenth century, is both signified and signifier of the modernization of Romanian society.

Another particularly important aspect is highlighted in the present work. In the first decades of the aforementioned century, the status of the artist was still precarious, as he was likened to that of a religious fresco painter and of an easel painter, respectively. The latter, who had been elevated to a higher hierarchical stratum than the former, took shape thanks to the influx of foreign painters who found in the Principality a dense elite eager to have their status and posterity preserved in perpetuity. As far as the artistic training of local painters was concerned, it was hardly in line with an appropriate academic path, first and foremost due to the absence of specialised institutions. The exogenous influence, echoed both by these ambassadors of Western painting and by the Romanian elite's travels in Europe, raised awareness of the need to address these shortcomings. Undeniably, the execution of church frescoes, as the main artistic production, corresponds to a particular professional category, but not in the sense reflected by the ideas imported from Europe, notably from France. In order for the painter to become, but above all to be perceived as professional artist, he is required to undergo a process enabled by modern tools and mechanisms of professionalisation. Artistic education, as a first stage, can no longer be equated with a mere apprenticeship, in the twilight

and under the brush of the more experienced icon-painter, but rather with a systematic acquisition of certain knowledge, acquired through institutional representatives, who are themselves professionalised for this precise purpose.

The mirror of the aspiring artist is the Romanian state. More precisely, the stretch of its trajectory between the phase prior to the unification of the two Principalities and the one after the historical moment, when, newly founded, it distinguishes itself as a new body in the process of forming, ensuring its functionality, its professionalisation through modern apparatus and mechanisms. Both entities, the young future artist and the emerging state, have to go through specific formative stages in order to develop and evolve. What emerges in this dyad is a symbiotic, albeit not always mutually beneficial, relationship that grows between the two. The first addresses the other as a *pater familias* whose guidance, support and even goodwill are indispensable. Conversely, a state that aims to be organised and functional sees in the prospective artist, first and foremost, a citizen who must actively participate in its construction, reflecting the ideals and values that have driven and crossed their paths. Moreover, the objective of uniting under the aegis of a single nation becomes the main driving force that sets in motion the ensemble of stances adopted by the two entities: on the one hand, the policies, reforms and legislative frameworks adopted reflect the opening towards a modern system of nationhood, a system not only aspired to but above all necessary, and on the other hand, the cohort of young people aggregated before and after 1859, who show their willingness to serve their country. As artists, or at least aspiring to that status, the proper means for them to do so is to paint the portrait of their nation, depicting it in images that glorify its past and elevate its present.

In order to reach an adequate level of mastery and validation to match such a responsibility, these individuals need to go through this first step of artistic training, with the appropriate educational methodology and curricula. Prior to the founding of the first advanced art schools, they go to prestigious European art academies. As few of them were in a position to do so on their own or under private patronage, the majority appealed to the authorities in the hope that the state would provide the necessary financial support. Thus, a dialogue is initiated creating fertile ground for the emergence of the above-mentioned trend, which, in turn, will generate a succession of measures and legislative regulations designed to fill this gap in the professionalisation of future generations of young Romanians. However, in this continuous dialogue between the institution and the petitioner, the state and its citizen, a plethora of key points stand out that are particularly important in understanding the proposed topic. The manner in which this phenomenon arises, the pleadings of the applicants eager to study abroad, the rational and non-rational grounds they advance in their petitions, the transformation of the

foreign experience as a prerequisite for the development and accomplishment of an artist, the effects generated domestically by these experiences, the attitude of the decision-makers vested with state authority towards this group of citizens and towards art as a cultural product resulting from academic training are some of the facets identified and questioned in this paper.

The chronological coordinates chosen reflect two defining milestones in Romanian history. The year 1856 is the year in which the Congress of Paris takes place, an auspicious event that will pave the way for Romanians towards the ideal of union, through the establishment of Ad Hoc Assemblies and the freedom granted to these to decide how to organise themselves within the Romanian Principalities. The growing national movement also had a tremendous effect on all aspects of local art, from specialised institutional education to the visual discourse, with the subjects and genres tackled by the first generations of 'fully-fledged' artists. At the opposite angle, 1918 is the year of the end of the First World War and the birth of Greater Romania, both events concluding the modern era of Romanian history. Throughout this time, from their workshops and from the fronts of the battle for independence, Romanian artists captured images of the national identity commissioned by the state, which promotes and includes them as instruments of self-representation on the domestic and international political scene, thereby doubling and simultaneously giving a face to the national discourse.

### **Concepts, working methods, and main sources**

The second half of the nineteenth century corresponds to an "intermediate" time – a native *Sattelzeit*, in which public discourse undergoes terminological mutations. Concepts such as "nation," "unity," "national identity," "people," "homeland," and "independence" are increasingly used among the intellectual elite primarily educated in the melting pot of European civilization, penetrating and becoming rooted in the local vocabulary. In our research, we work with these concepts, paying equal attention to the meaning with which they are conveyed, the purpose for which they are used, and their transplantation into artistic language, depending on the transformations observed over the span of more than half a century. Thus, I have formulated a series of questions that structure this work, extrapolated from the one found in its title: How are the new concepts reflected in the petitioners' discourse? How are the processes and mechanisms for evaluating their requests created? What are the means through which the state legitimises artists and contributes to their recognition? How is this used in its self-creation of cultural products whose primary beneficiary is itself? At the same time, we also question how

the state and its artists evolve, whether independently or not from each other, within a volatile social, cultural, and political context that is maturing.

The interdisciplinary nature of the topic under discussion requires methodological rigor. Located at the intersection of the history of art, ideas and mentalities, as well as social and political history, this work is developed diachronically using multiple research methods. First of all, in the actual documentation, I identified a substantial corpus of primary historical sources as references. From the category of written documents, a distinct typology of standalone documents can be identified at the Central National Historical Archives and the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Then there are the memoirs, chronicles, and other texts from the period press, journals, and private correspondence, most of which have been published in the form of document collections and memoir literature. No less important are the unwritten historical sources found in the works of art that we exemplify and treat as visual documents.

The main method of working with these sources is critical study, both external and internal, with the appropriate importance given to the contextualisation of the documentary material. The focus is on the analysis of the document's content, particularly interested in the formulation of the discourse through the language used both by the sender – the young artist in the role of the petitioner, and later as a scholarship recipient – as well as by the state institutions in their response provided by their officials. By reviewing the archival material, I was able to notice the opportunity for the comparative method, suitable for analysing official documents with the aim of identifying similarities and differences in what constitutes sets of behaviors and attitudes towards these young people, not always regulated by official legislative mechanisms or by their fair enforcement.

Regarding art as a primary visual document, viewed from a taxological perspective, the artistic compositions created between 1856 and 1918 can be classified into two typologies of interest for the topic. There is a distinction between categories of reproductions of great masterpieces housed in major European museums, with the purpose of creating these being twofold: on one hand, the establishment of a heritage of artworks for the endowment of the national museum, and on the other hand, as an obligation through which the scholarship recipient demonstrates that the financial support provided by the Romanian state is used for the intended purpose for which it was granted. The second category brings together thematic works created to meet and respond to the patronage of official entities: authorities, institutions, leaders, high dignitaries, members of the Royal House, who play a role not only through the financial support they provide to young artists but also through the influence they exert in the

iconographic discourse. Here, we find themes that illustrate, without completely excluding the personal aspect of the artist, rather a collective belief in the ideals and values emphasised in public discourse. Especially during the aforementioned "transition" period, the concepts of unity and nation are frequently illustrated on the canvases of visual artists, encompassing a series of symbols that visually anchor the national myth constructed around the founding of the modern Romanian state. The same function is performed by historical scenes and portraits of the rulers, whose effect is to enhance the traits and attributes that compliment the past and the heroism of the Romanian people. Following the unification of the Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, the thematic repertoire is enriched. First, the independence gained as a result of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 is highlighted in the compositions of the artists chosen by the Romanian state to visually document the event in their capacity as frontline painters. The gesture represents a high degree of legitimisation for the artists called to respond, directly from the trenches of the conflict, to the call to immortalise for the nation and posterity the struggle, sacrifice, and determination of Romanians in achieving state autonomy. The operating system and the entire spectrum of manifestations are replicated during Romania's participation in World War I, when artists are assigned a dual role and responsibility: fulfilling their duty as citizens by being mobilized to the front lines and as artists attached to the Great General Headquarters, tasked with documenting the war through works that would form the artistic foundation for the establishment of a military museum.

### **Structure of the paper**

The thesis is structured into four chapters, each corresponding to a research axis: the first chapter focuses on reconstructing the social, cultural, and political context of the era in which the first forms of Romanian artistic education emerged. The following three chapters, with multiple subsections, are dedicated to the establishment and evolution of the phenomenon of academic mobility triggered by the wave of young scholars funded by the Romanian state. An introduction and conclusions are added to these chapters, as well as a collection of illustrations and documentary appendices.

The first chapter captures the socio-political and cultural-artistic environment of the fourth and fifth decades of the 19th century, during which the first generations of artists trained in the European academic space emerged and acted as vectors for transmitting the main influential ideas that circulated in the Western environment, understood as a benchmark in the project of innovation and modernization of Romanian society. Their return to the country

marked a turning point and the beginning of transformations that would shape the entire trajectory of the two Principalities and, subsequently, the process of their unification into the new state formed. I have captured, thus, the establishment of the first drawing classes and their journey up to the founding of the first specialized institutions of artistic education. In keeping with the chronological sequence, I have also emphasised the beginnings and the process of setting up specialised schools for the local training of future Romanian artists, the challenges faced, and the openness of decision-making bodies to the needs raised by those who have taken on the difficult task of bridging the Romanian and European spaces through art and its creators, who consequently have to deal with the reconfiguration and re-establishment of the status of artists in the public consciousness and institutional mentality.

The massive volume of documentary archives has led to the selection of symptomatic cases for our subject of interest, with the second chapter being developed on the investigation and critical analysis of the requests that are increasingly addressed to the authorities, with the aim of obtaining financial support for higher education in other countries. Thus, we have identified a discursive pattern present among the petitioners and the type of response provided by the authorities, which are the premises for standardizing the scholarship awarding process. Thus, a first formal framework is established, with an initial competition organized for the selection of students who will study a variety of fields and who, in turn, will become the trainers of the first generations of specialists educated in the schools of the country. The field of art, although underrepresented, becomes the core of such a competition, with the candidates being two of the country's most renowned painters, each with fundamentally different trajectories and artistic expressions: Constantin Ioan Stăncescu and Nicolae Grigorescu. This episode has been extensively discussed in historiographical sources, but the critical discourse surrounding it has lost some of its relevance. In this chapter, we were particularly interested in the paradigm established with the founding of art schools and its impact on the process of a petition.

The third and most extensive chapter examines the dynamics formed within the state-scholar duo, attempting to capture as many facets of it as possible. On one hand, the attitude of the authorities, the obligations imposed on scholarship holders, the way in which these are managed by both parties, and the way in which the scholarship recipients are managed overall, all contribute to the dysfunctional institutional operations that result in systematic delays in the distribution of subsidies. These delays are caused by counterintuitive bureaucratic procedures that take up time and human resources and are either outdated or updated too late in relation to current needs. A subsection on one of the related phenomena—recommendations, favours, interventions, and arbitrary decisions—that have characterized the relationship between the

state and the applicant/scholar is also included. These phenomena are combined under the headings of clientelism and breaking one's own rules as part of the general attitudes and practices exhibited by the authorities.

The last chapter revisits the system of investigations and analyses, but for the category of women artists, which is at least as significant as a phenomenon and important as crucial as a expression of Romanian artistic production. As the category of women artists is underrepresented compared to that of male artists, who have inherent rights to pursue an artistic career, the effort to illustrate the role of the Romanian state in the development of the women artists follows these proportions. However, in contrast, I have tried to convey the greater diversity of the nuances that define and reshape the formative and affirming trajectory of women artists.

### **Brief conclusions**

Academic mobility in Western higher education institutions has been one of Romania's most significant modernisation initiatives. The training of experts in a variety of fields who would teach in the local schools upon their return to the nation with the intention of educating future generations in the same spirit and adhering to a curriculum in line with the foreign university environment was the main anticipated outcome. For this purpose, the Romanian state provided financial resources for granting scholarships aimed at intellectually and socio-culturally integrating valuable young Romanians who are willing to make the sacrifice of serving their country. Even at a superficial glance at the archival funds, the statistics appear favorable for civil engineering, medicine, physics and chemistry, literature, agronomy, and law; however, the lists of stipendiaries also include painting, sculpture, and architecture. Though it is probable that the newly established state was more interested in more pragmatic goals, nationhood and the sense of national consciousness are abstract concepts that require appropriate translation in order to be cultivated in the collective mindset. In this regard, visual artists proved to be the necessary resources in the project of creating a dignified image for the Romanian nation, an argument that they themselves put forward in the petitions submitted.

The argument, found on both sides, lies in the imperative of creating an appropriate image for the united Romanian nation. Historical events and personalities become the foundation of national myths depicted on canvases or carved in marble and stone. However, for the success of this goal, the local educational offer is disproportionate, and the schools of fine arts in France, Italy, and Germany still provide the perspective of a superior training seen as



essential for the future artists. Consequently, the experience of living abroad remains desirable for an increasing number of young people. Authentic in their aspirations or drawn by the mirage of otherness, they submit their scholarship applications in the form of the most convincing pleas. The government does not always appear receptive or impartial, often treating requests with the formalism typical of the bureaucratic environment. At the same time, the students who have been admitted as state scholarship recipients are facing major financial difficulties due to the repeated delays in the disbursement of their scholarships. The complaints they periodically send are resolved with difficulty due to convoluted procedures and the excessive involvement of third parties. Despite the poor management of resources intended to support these students, the Romanian state projects onto them the urgency of bridging the gaps between the Romanian space and the Western one, even though they themselves carry the shortcomings caused by the precariousness of the domestic educational system. The intellectual integration of young people sent to study, their assimilation of Western culture, and the modernization of the Romanian state and society prove to be necessary ambitions, yet they are achieved with difficulty, partially, or not at all, as the regulatory framework created is not always compatible with educational and social needs or with the capabilities of the administrative apparatus, nor is it applied in a uniform, coherent, and non-discriminatory manner.