

## FIFTY YEARS OF ROMANIAN ARTS

**P**remises. The evolution of the Romanian arts in the past fifty years is marked, at its beginning especially, but also in the long run, until the mid '60s, by three aspects.

The first is represented by the echo of the artistic movement at the end of the '30s and the early '40s when, with the new generation of young artists, a moderate Neo-Modernist trend emerged as related to the avant-garde art of the '20s and '30s, yet innovative in the context of the classical modernism of the great consecrated artists: Pallady, G. Petrescu, Nicolae Tonitza, Francisc Sirato, C. Răssu, Iser, D. Ghiata, Henri Catargi in painting, and Ion Jalea, Ion Irimescu, Boris Caragea, C. Medrea, R. Ladea and others in sculpture. A few groups – The New Group (1939), The Feminine Group (1940), the Graphic Group (1940), a very active structure including also painters – paved the way for the assertion of young men like Ion Tuculescu, Eugen Dragutescu, Alexandru Tipoia, the last two settled abroad, in Italy and Switzerland, respectively. They were closer stylistically to Expressionism (Tuculescu) or Neo-Objectivism (Tipoia), while also preserving Post-Impressionist options in their repertory of motifs. They and others, with a more obvious proclivity for conception and idiom innovations, like graphic artist V. Kazar or J. Podlipny of Timisoara, kept up the flag during the difficult moments of the invasive doctrine and orientation of socialist realism in Romania throughout the '50s, as well as a quality standard that the compulsory shift of the topics could not basically alter in time.

A second aspect is related to the presence in exhibitions of the long-lived masters of interwar art, some still living in the first decade of the ideological assault, others even longer. These masters, as well as some of the great names of Russian painting – Gerasimov, Deineka and others – present, paradoxically, in the great 1922 Soviet exhibition of Russian avant-garde art in Berlin, played a complex role, both beneficial and evil. They did this by accepting topics, and sometimes an interpretation of a realist-socialist touch

in keeping with the ideological instructions, mingled with a first-rank craftsmanship. Note should be made that sculpture especially recorded such concessions at moments of definite propagandistic scope. These masters, most of them professors at the Academy of Beaux Arts, had as students the generation to become known in the '60s, while preserving, irrespective of the direction taken up, a solid professional training.

Another aspect of this evolution that, in different variants, became a fixture up to the end of the '80s, was the alternation between moments of ideological pressure and moments of relief – more or less genuine – and the innovating moments. The first important, yet relatively harmless ideological moment was the big 1948 exhibition "The Flame", with a massive participation of painters, sculptors, and graphic artists. The ideological pressure of this exhibition did not exceed the matter of the subject: as a rule, instances from the life of the workers and of the peasants were proposed, as well as industrial landscapes. In relation to the prevailing interwar topics – portraits, landscapes, still lifes – the change was actually only one of category. The characters and views simply had to be replaced by others. Naturally, there emerged very soon numerous not-so-good artists ready to overdo it; others found comfortable refuge in rural compositions and portraits of peasants, traditional for the Romanian painting. In this context that in the early '50s worsened in point of open, strict ideological control, with requirements obviously taken from Stalinist realism, painter Corneliu Baba made his debut, playing a saving role, perhaps insufficiently acknowledged at that time. In 1954, his painting "Peasants in the Field" of a dramatic and also above-the-times realism, with clear echoes of the 17th-century Spanish painting, enjoyed a considerable success, given also the special plaudit from Soviet experts. There followed a few memorable portraits of actors, poets, art lovers in as many guises of the vigorous, depersonalised and monumental man, far from any sort of realist-socialist vision. On the contrary, human frailty and insignificance appeared almost symptomatic in portraits that soured the mood first of all of the respective models. The evolution of Baba's vision, despite his repute as quasi-official painter, took the turn to an ever more overwhelming Expressionism, the scope and significance of which could be clearly grasped only in the amazing retrospect of 1997. In the same decade (the '50s) painters Constantin Piliuta and Traian Bradean also came to assert themselves in exhibitions opened between 1956 and 1957, and filled with works toeing the line, yet providing viable solutions in the interpretation of peasant subjects. At the end of the '50s extremely interesting was the attempt of some artists like Ion Bitzan and Gheorghe Almasan, and also Constantin Craciun, to use the patterns of Moldavian medieval church paintings – i.e. frescoes featuring saints – and use them in connection with groups of contemporary peasants. The artistic success was compelling, marking an important step in the escape from dogmatism, and being, of course, received with virulent ideological opposition. In the same period graphics gathered fantas-

tic impetus in all the genres and techniques, standing out through the less conformist modern spirit of Geta Bratescu in the book illustrations for Bertolt Brecht, Ligia Macovei in her illustrations to poet Eminescu, Marcel Chirnoaga and Eva Cerbu with their expressionist touch, etc. Some exhibitions of foreign art opened in Bucharest also brought their contribution: to name only the print exhibitions of Edward Munch and a big exhibition of Mexican painting by Diego Rivera and Siquieros. They featured unknown, wild elements for the Romanian artistic milieu that could not help being incited. Strangely, most of them came from the graphic art and not from monumental painting as would have been normal, which was prone more than anything else to official guidelines.

The month of engraving held in 1962 in Venice enabled a few Romanian graphic artists to display their works, and also opened new horizons to the younger generation. The same year, important archaeological finds in Constanta – Roman mosaics and sculptures – drew the artists' attention to this type of subjects, first landscapes with archaeological images, and later on, up to the '80s, compositions with motifs interpreted in a surrealist vision or at the limit of abstract art. Anyway, the topic was fashionable and – something easy to explain patriotic-wise – much appreciated by the ideological forums. Consistent paintings on this topic of unquestionable pictorial value were achieved by Ion Stendl and G. Anghel, in particular. Both used dark, deep colour ranges, which did not belong to the chromatic palette agreed by the theorists of artistic optimism. Sculpture too dwelt on this topic, with interpretations that suggested the time distance through a subtly ironical or grotesque touch. That was the favourite procedure of Vasile Gorduz, Silvia Radu and Maria Cocea.

A special role in the escape from the monumentalism recommended by the ideologues was played by Art Deco, still obeying folk requirements, though sometimes happily resolved. After the great exhibition of 1965, the ornamental freedom of the techniques specific to Art Deco influenced and facilitated the emergence and development in painting of a geometric abstractionism of a certain decorative stamp. The ideological attack made on "decorativism" – in connection with many thematic works that attempted to solve the realist-socialist requirement through constructivism softened by physiognomies and some optimistic gestures – found a solution in innocent geometric structures, theorised as an expression of reason. The paintings after 1965 signed by Paul Gherasim, Stefan Sevastre, Radu Costinescu, and later on, Doru Bucur and the entire group "Sigma" of Timisoara headed by Constantin Flondor, Stefan Bertalan, and Roman Cotosman, with a consistent and well-specified constructivist programme, seemed to apply the theoretical recommendations put forth during the courses of political party education, given for a while at the Union of Fine Artists (UAP) by critic Titus Mocanu, who subsequently defected to Germany.



Gheorghe D. ANGHEL, *George Enescu*  
(1943)





Constantin BRÂNCUȘI, *The Kiss*

The year 1965 marked a considerable turn for anyone thumbing through the official magazine *Arta Plastica* of the UAP. The tone of the criticism is less imperative and instructive, and the judgments are more nuanced even if the vocabulary wields notions quite rigidly. The Union of Fine Artists organized group exhibitions first to the socialist countries and then to Greece and Italy. In Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia there already existed museums of modern art, at Lodz, Belgrade and Prague, where the interwar European avant-garde trends were featured. Towards the end of the '60s, artists and art critics could order from the West books of art and the theory of art through the Union. This apparently small detail had a considerable influence. Some of the less radical trends started to emerge, although quite diluted. Among them, highly successful with the artists yet striking a poor echo with the public, was at the time (and up to the early '70s) the informal, lyrical abstractionism deemed to also express a form of reality, namely the intimacy of the matter on one hand, and inroads into the cosmic substance on the other. Those were the very years of the first space flights. An orientation of a certain success with the public and indulgently accepted by the ideological forums was Surrealism. That meant a figurative variant sometimes dotted with elements of folk resonance, other times descending from the vision of Victor Brauner, a Romanian by origin, some of whose works are displayed in Romanian museums. A representative of this trend, at first successful, was Sabin Balasa, especially thanks to his mixture of imaginary and idyllic, to the liking of the political top siders. With Sever Frentiu and Semproniu Iclozan, Surrealism perseveringly continued its career thanks to many young artists, emigrated to France, Switzerland, Germany. Subtle links to Surrealism can also be found in the highly refined painting of Octav Grigorescu, and years later, in some of the students of Corneliu Baba's, first of all Stefan Caltia and Sorin Ilfoveanu. The former dealt, at a first stage, with grotesque and tragic accents, close to Expressionism, also thanks to the symbolist-philosophical repertory. At the same time the tradition of the realist landscape continued in new forms focusing again on the rural image. Part of the adepts of this genre were students of Alexandru Ciucurencu, a painter of merit who became known at the end of the war, a remarkable master of colors bearing a strong Matisse imprint. He entered the front line of Romanian painting after the war thanks to the historical portrait of Ana Ipatescu, and other portraits, and then to thematic landscapes and still lifes of sharp, almost brutal colors. As a professor and founder of a school, he conveyed to his students vivid colours, and a style easy to recognize. Among his appreciated descendants – Marius Cilievici, more refined in colors than his master, Aurel Nedei and Lazar Iacob. Other innovating landscape trends, freed from the still powerful influence of Romanian interwar landscapism, were represented first by Horia Bernea, with his memorable series of "Hills". Although figurative, these landscapes painted after the authentic model of Transylvanian hills evince a grave simplicity of forms, tending to abstractization. Similar tendencies can

nite turn in the young Romanian sculpture. George Apostu, first of all, Paul Neagu (both defecting later, the former to France, the latter to the United Kingdom), G. Iliescu-Calinesti, Paul Vasilescu, Ion Vlad, Mircea Spataru, Mihai Buculei, Vasile Gorduz, Napoleon Tiron, Petru Yecza of Timisoara, Ingo Glass of Galati (now in Munich), they all started several valuable trends. The first, striking a huge echo to this day in the sculpture of the young generation of the '80s and the '90s was and still is represented by wood sculpture. It was George Apostu who revived spectacularly this technique of ancient tradition in Romanian peasant art. Part figurative, yet with a strong abstract touch, his sculptures come in series: with an archaic wisdom like in "Father and Son", with a naturist tone in "The Butterflies". The robust yet refined treatment of the wood expresses a complex approach that the artist's drawings expressively reveal. With G. Iliescu-Calinesti the abstract touch is achieved not in the direction of refinement but of an archaic monumentalism or a rapprochement of sculpture to the object-tool. Also concerned with the wooden "object", Napoleon Tiron soon renounced such exercises and passed, all of a sudden, to huge emblematic representations of man as a robot-symbol. Related procedures yet in other variants we have with Doru Covrig and his signaling symbols. Figurative sculpture in wood will develop with the young artists after 1980, mostly Aurel Vlad and Mircea Roman, towards a reactualization of the dramatic sculpted image, of its capacity to denounce, or as the case may be, to reveal ignored human situations. Stone, plaster and metal have their adepts. After "classics" like Ion Vlad (settled in France) and Ion Vlasiu, there came the younger Mircea Spataru, Vasile Gorduz, Mihai Buculei and Darie Dup, who matched the dramatic and the grotesque, endowing them with a status of legitimacy, seldom met until then in Romanian sculpture. Kindred tendencies emerge also with Ion Iancut, and in tonalities that remind of Gothic sculpture with Nicolae Padurariu. Abstract decorative metal sculpture finds a representative in Ingo Glass, while Petru Yecza resumes stone and marble techniques in commemorative and religious works destined to new Roman-Catholic edifices of Banat.

One of the specific phenomena in the evolution of the Romanian fine arts in the '70s and early '80s was a new type of group exhibitions, organized on topics, and centering on a concept, not a subject. Thus the Galeria Noua of Bucharest opened in 1974 the exhibitions "Art and Energy", "Art and the City", "From Document to Work" (1975), "Art and Nature (1976); in 1980 the Institute of Architecture featured "The Writing"; the Village Museum had "Place, Deed and Metaphor" (1983), "Studio I and II" opened in Timisoara (1981), and others. "Workshop 35" of the young artists set out from the investigation of new forms of alternative art, while in Sibiu, Timisoara and Oradea there appeared combinations of open-air art with movies, video art, etc. The prevailing element in the movement to join the trans-avant-garde and Post-Modernism, manifest in the late '70s and early '80, was Neo-Expressionism, especially in painting and the graphic arts, within the limits

Strongly supported by the officials for a long time, graphic art, relying, in Bucharest, on workshops well-equipped with lithographic presses and other apparatus, managed to lay the foundations of a genuine Romanian school. The cultivated Surrealism of Kazar's students, the grotesque, the expressionist variants, the collages, and figurative formulas, in general, prevailed in the exhibition of the Workshop. Corina Bein Angheluta, Clarette Wachtel, Ion Panaitescu, Teodor Hrib, Stefan Iacobescu, Ana Maria Smighelschi, Florin Stoiciu, Maria Boeriu and many other young people are experimenting with new techniques without abandoning the harsh methods of classical engraving – aqua fortis, aquatint, etc.

A complex role throughout these decades was also played by art criticism. In the late '30s and the early '40, each outstanding newspaper had an art column signed by a reputed critic, with a different vision. With the exception of George Oprescu, actually a professor of the history of art, and Ionel Jianu, the owner of a gallery, the other prestigious names were those of writers or literary chroniclers: Petru Comarnescu, Ion Frunzetti, Alex Busuioceanu, Miron Radu Paraschivescu, N. Argintescu-Amza. That gave color and a picturesque touch to art criticism, even if most analyses, according to the custom of the time, referred only to the means of the plastic idiom. After 1948, until 1965, art criticism was one of the fields most strictly connected to the ideological orientation of socialist realism and the strict control on behalf of the party forums. On the one side there was a specific monotonous terminology and on the other the compulsory character of the chronicles that often exceeded in conformism the works commented. Towards the end of the '50s, a strategy of ambiguity in interpretation enabled the critics to proceed to a more judicious selection of values. Critics with a more solid humanist culture acquired during the years prior to the establishment of the communist regime, to name only Eugen Schileru, Ion Frunzetti, Radu Bogdan, N. Argintescu-Amza, Dan Grigorescu, Mircea Popescu, and Amelia Pavel, managed, nonetheless, to gradually make the commentary more nuanced. They also supported, by organizing exhibitions and sitting on juries, by writing catalogues of presentation and giving addresses at exhibition openings, the need for quality creations. After 1965 new names emerged: Dan Haulica, Constantin Prut, Olga Busneag, Th. Enescu, Mircea Grozdea, Titus Mocanu, Anca Arghir, Mihai Driscu, Mihai Ispir, G. Vida, Ioana Vlasiu, C.R. Constantinescu, Ileana Pintilie, Magda Carneci. Together with the mature generation, they contributed articles to the magazine *Arta*, now under a new stewardship, and to the major cultural reviews (*Romania literara*, *Contemporanul*). Innovative exhibitions were organized at the new galleries Apollo and Galeria Noua, and opinions were put forth for the selection of Romanian art to go abroad. Interpretations shed their orientative-ideological character, and the commentary, based mostly on the analysis of the language of forms, included also ideatic substance, more and more significant in the '70s and the '80s. Subject to the rigors of the old mentalities remained only



certain country or county annual salons, featuring works of a different value, and judged by official judges, equally concessive and ideologically demanding. Towards the turn of the '70s Workshop 35, exclusively consecrated to artists up to 35 years – at first headed by Magda Carneci, then by Erwin Kessler – presented the new trends (starting with Neo-Expressionism, minimal art, installations, body art, mail art, etc.) in several exhibitions adequately commented both in catalogues and in the new series of the magazine *Arta*, managed by Calin Dan, artist and critic, the founder of the group Subreal. Around this movement young researchers gathered: Anca Oroveanu, Pavel Susara, Alexandra Titu, Adriana Babeti, Liviana Dan, Ruxandra Balaci. Without being able to speak of well-defined theoretical lines, supported consistently by an adequate philosophical culture, with a tendency to adapt on the go to the evolution of the artistic phenomenon in almost explosive expansion, there is, nonetheless, a tendency towards a critical exactness meant to clarify three major problems: a) the understanding of a certain identity detectable in various stages of modern Romanian art; b) the concern to assure professionalism in alternative artistic genres; c) the effort to preserve and consummate the values of the Greek-Jewish-Christian culture and civilization.

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**Ion BITZAN, *Books with Technical Plates*  
(1993)**

