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*Romanian Art History in the 19th Century*

The proposed project will explore how a history of Romanian art was first conceived in the writings of both local authors and scholars from neighbouring regions of Transylvania and Bukovina in the second half of the 19th century. It will critically and comparatively analyse the main art historical periods used to describe art in Romania, such as ‘Brâncovenesc art’, ‘Stephen the Great art’, ‘Slavic Period’, and the main styles such as ‘Byzantine’, ‘Oriental’, ‘European’ or ‘Romanian’. The main questions asked are how and why these categories were first used, before becoming firmly established in the Romanian art historiography, or, on the contrary, before being disregarded by subsequent scholars.

While the project is a case-study on the beginnings of Romanian art history, it draws attention to the broader relation between art historical periods or categories in East-Central Europe and the dominant Western canon. It argues that an increasingly critical view of the modern history of the periods and concepts used in art histories of the region could pave the way for reconsidering their usage in a way that facilitates more regional comparisons and transnational studies.

Architectural monuments, as the most visible traces of the historical heritage on the territory of the new state of Romania, were the first to be the subject of art historical writings. The project looks at little known and studied writings that have never been examined comparatively. It begins with the earliest, the study about Curtea de Arges cathedral by the

Transylvanian scholar Ludwig Reissenberger, and its reception in and outside Romania. <sup>1</sup> It continues by discussing the implications of defining Romanian art as ‘Byzantine’, as seen in the restoration of key historical monuments and their display at 19th century Universal Exhibitions. At the same time, some local intellectuals rejected the very possibility of writing a Romanian art history, because they saw the local heritage inferior and incomparable with the Western one.<sup>2</sup>

Towards the end of the century, as a reaction to the vague and often negative definitions of Romanian art, several architects in Romania and one in Bukovina, proposed new art historical periods, new artistic connections, such as between Romania and Venice, or with other Balkan countries, and promoted new historical monuments as representative of ‘the nation’.<sup>3</sup> One of the newly proposed artistic periods, covering the reign of Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu (between 1688-1714) in Wallachia, was not only reevaluated in writings but also used as main source of inspiration for a new ‘national’ Romanian architectural style. The East-Central European art histories of the 19th century worked with the concepts and methods of the Western canon, including the idea itself of a chronological and national history of art. They have shaped periods and styles in order to connect with Western European art but were less open to regional dialogue. The project will argue that an increased attention to how and why these very basic concepts and assumptions were first used could pave the way for reconsidering their usefulness today. One proposed solution is to replace far-reaching concepts with smaller, more instrumental and object-driven periods or stylistic categories that can better stimulate the art historical dialogue in East-Central Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Reissenberger, “Die bischöfliche Klosterkirche bei Kurtea d’Argyisch in der Walachei”, Jahrbuch der Kaiserl. Königl. Central-Commission zur Erforschung und Erhaltung der Baudenkmale, Wien, IV (1860).

<sup>2</sup> Petru Verussi ‘Despre arta nationala’ [About National Art], Convorbiri literare, (1875) and republished in Analele, no 8, (1891), 144-152, 151. Nicolae Idieru, Istoria artelor frumoase : (Architectura, sculptura, pictura, musica, din toate timpurile și din toate țările, inclusiv România), [The History of Fine Arts. Architecture, Sculpture, Painting Music, from all the Times and from all the Countries, including Romania], (Bucharest, 1898).

<sup>3</sup> Nicolae Gabrielescu, Privire generala asupra arhitecturii din Romania, [A General Glance at Romanian architecture], (Bucharest, 1889). George Sterian, Despre restaurarea monumentelor istorice în străinătate și în România, [On the Restoration of Historical Monuments Abroad and in Romania], (Bucharest, 1889). Karl Romstorfer, “Die Kirchenbauten in der Bukowina,” Mittheilungen der K.K. Central-Commission zur Erforschung und Erhaltung der Kunst und Historischen Denkmale 20-22 (1894-1896).