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Second Seminar (November 25 – December 3, 2019)

*Genre, Style, Quality, and Influence in the “Transylvanian Renaissance:”
The Case Study of Funerary Monuments*

The art history writing of multiethnic Transylvania evolved in parallel with the concept of modern ethnic nations in the nineteenth century, so one cannot talk about a single art history but rather of art histories almost from the very beginning of the discipline. German, Hungarian, and Romanian researchers of the nineteenth and twentieth century wrote art historical narratives of their own nations interpreting the same phenomena along different lines, in their own language, often arguing for their historical and cultural primacy. Concepts such as stylistic markers, stylistic development, origin, influence, and orientation as well as center and periphery played an important role in these narratives. The ultimate question was whether Transylvania was a region with an independent historical development testified also by a genuine, original art, or there are (art) historical arguments to connect it to any modern nation state.

The period between the mid-sixteenth century and the late eighteenth century is especially interesting in this respect, since this was the time when Transylvania was detached from the medieval Hungarian Kingdom and turned into an independent state formation, though in the sphere of influence – in a varying form and degree – of both the Ottoman and the Habsburg Empires. This was also the period when it was first politically connected, though for a very brief period, with the other two historical predecessors of modern Romania, Moldavia and Wallachia. However, the art history of this so-called Principality period does not have too much to build on: there are wonderful interiors and objects mentioned in written sources, but not too many of these have survived.

Most of the works bearing any stylistic traits are relatively simple architectural stone carvings and funerary monuments which have been categorized as sculpture by the scholars, while the specific function of these objects was not taken into consideration. Their creators were treated as

artists representing schools and stylistic trends. In those few cases where even a name has survived, artistic oeuvres were created around them as leading masters in the period. The methods and the framework of the analysis followed those of the research on Italian Renaissance focusing on stylistic influences and stylistic development, while the ambition and the artistic excellence of the carvers was very far from those of the Italian masters. The question where the stylistic influences came from was crucial for the researchers and their public, since it could support arguments on where Transylvania is genuinely and historically connected in cultural, and ultimately in geographical and political terms.

Though the methodology of Transylvanian art history has changed in recent decades, it has inherited the old framework of interpretation or at least its consequences. The questions posed by the scholars – be they from Hungary, Romania, Germany, or anywhere else in the world – and the methods are new, different, and according to the standards of modern international scholarship, but a broad layer of their audience still expects art history to support their understanding and beliefs about the genuine national belonging of Transylvania. This is primarily manifest in popular writings, media, and social media, but sometimes implicitly also in exhibitions and events organized by cultural institutions. This is why it is relevant and important to look at the roots of the inherited national frameworks of interpretation, the art history writing of Transylvania in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: to understand where these beliefs and needs come from and to answer them in a deliberate and proper manner, according to the norms of twenty-first-century scholarship. The paper will do this through the example of stone carving, funerary monuments from the time of the Transylvanian Principality. The analysis is based on a literature overview combined with the results of fieldwork conducted by the author, a catalog of more than 300 funerary monuments.