NUMBER 55

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August 1999

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NATIONAL IDENTITY AND CULTURAL SELF-DEFINITION: MODERN AND POST MODERN ROMANIAN ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

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With the fall of communism and the prospect of the rebirth of democracy in Eastern Europe, national culture plays an enormous role in how these nations define themselves in the context of the existing international order. Consequently, a fundamental understanding of what constitutes a nation's self-definition and identity, incorporating a combination of historical, cultural as well as social and political aspects, is vital for ensuring democracy's success in the region.

A national community's self-definition and identity are primarily products of its national and cultural heritage. This heritage may be defined as the collective memory of a community focusing on those people, events, cultural products (values, traditions) and symbols which are seen as formative of the nation and its place in the international order. A nation's artistic expression is a direct reflection and tangible representation of the community's cultural self-definition and national heritage. The more elements that are incorporated into this conscious perception of heritage, the more secure the sense of national identity and the stronger the nationalism of the group.

Focusing on Romania, this paper presents an examination of the development of nationalism and national identity as reflected in the visual arts. Comparing developments of the inter-war period with the post-communist era, this study will enhance and build upon the

already existing historical-political literature defining Romanianism in terms of language, ethnicity and Orthodoxism (i.e. Nicolae Iorga, Keith Hitchins, H. L. Roberts, R. W. Seton-Watson, Stephen Fischer-Galaţi) as well as recent socio-political works emphasizing civic national consciousness (i.e. Gail Kligman, Vladimir Tismaneanu, Katherine Verdery, Peter F. Sugar).

At the height of 19th century Eastern Europe's national awakening, Romanian self-definition was based on what the native poet and nationalist, Mihail Eminescu, called the "archaic spirit of the Romanian society" - the traditional Orthodox peasant prototype - and was inherently anti-Western. Simultaneously, from a socio-political standpoint, Romanian national consciousness took on a self-perception where ethnicity was defined in terms of nationality. Ethnicity in this context, became a social and cultural product which was historically contingent. This latter development took into account Western influences and allowed for the development of an elite intellectual class (writers, artists), forming the backbone of the later independent-of-government civic society described by transition theory analysts as the cornerstone of democracy. Drawing on these existing historical and social-political concepts of national identity and starting from the historical premise of nationality based on language, ethnicity and Orthodoxism, I propose to address the missing cultural component of artistic national identity.

A brief historical analysis of Romania's national awakening in the 19th century will provide the background for the in-depth examination of key features of the inter-war period of national independence. These include simultaneously developed, contrasting tendencies of *modern traditionalism* as expressed through an ultimate obsession with purism and peasant idealism and the ensuing ultra-nationalist artistic motifs (i.e. glorification of historic national figures; return to traditional, primal values of morality and Orthodox beliefs exemplified by the peasantry; re-emphasis of simple geometric patterns typical of rural folk decoration); as well as Western-leaning *avant-garde* synchronization movements; and "academism" examples based on upholding of the classical tenets of the fine arts. A comparison will be drawn with contemporary post-communist Romania and the current artistic products this period of renewed national independence has engendered.

The scope of this analysis is to discuss the extent of change of post-communist Romania's cultural society in its self-definition, with its reclaimed national independence and its greater exposure to Western ideas, as well as the extent to which it parallels inter-war national identity developments. Some of the issues addressed include the following: How have globalization and modernization affected Romanian artistic expression in the post-1989 period? To what extent is contemporary Romanian artistic expression using the language of modernity to perpetuate old symbols of national identity? Has Romania moved away from inter-war popular ideas of national definition through folkloric peasant motifs and Daco-Roman identity, as present in the works of Brancusi and Grigorescu, towards new, international symbols of identity? To what extent is modern artistic expression a combination of both nationalist and cross-cultural tendencies?

Varying Definitions of Nationalism: East Vs. West

Western nationalism was born out of the political liberal ideas of 17th century European Enlightenment, stressing individual liberty in the struggle against ecclesiastical and civil authority. Emphasizing individual rights, Western nationalism is based on the liberal-political principle of consent of the governed. Hence, it witnessed the development of a parliamentary government where the rights of the individual were protected by a Bill of Rights. In Western Europe therefore, nationalism and liberalism became inseparable and the result of a rational decision based on the human rights approach.

In Eastern Europe, national consciousness developed later, inspired by Western Europe, and was rooted in a romantic approach centered on language and culture. Sharing a history of imperial occupation [Austrian or Ottoman], nationalism in entities of Eastern Europe stressed the community rather than the rights of the individual. In this case, the frontiers of an existing state and rising nationality often did not coincide. Consequently, nationalism grew in protest to the existing state pattern but also as a response to the development of vernacular and cultural traditions with which a respective group of people identified. Nationalities became spiritually-endowed and stressed their uniqueness as a community vis-a-vis each other.

The Search for National Identity: Birth of a Nation

Against the background of these standard definitions of nationalism, Romania's search for national identity and self-definition can be better understood. The end of the 1880s with a new liberal-oriented constitution modeled on the 1831 Belgian model, and the achievement of independence in 1878, brought Romanian intellectualism face to face with the problem of national development. It was then that the 'liberal Europeanists' and 'conservative Traditionalists' coalesced and inaugurated a wide-ranging national debate on what constituted 'Romanianess,' which was to last until the Second World War.

The concern of the Romanian intellectuals centered on the massive intrusion of Western Europe into Romanian society. Throughout the incredibly fluid period of Romanian state formation [1860s to 1880s], a sharp criticism ensued of the extent of applicability of Western cultural and social values to Romania. Two general directions, evolved from early conceptions of Romanian nationalist awakening in the 1830s and 1840s, presented themselves. One, drawing upon the Western European experience, based in Wallachia, had as its radical scope the rapid industrialization and urbanization à la Western Europe (*Europeanists*), while the other, stationed in Moldavia, was grounded in Romania's agricultural past and emphasized a preservation of traditionalist social structures and a renewal of romantic folkloric and nationalist cultural values (*Traditionalists*).[1]

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[1]. For discussions of the main issues dividing traditionalists and Europeanists see: Keith Hitchins, "Historiography of the Countries of Eastern Europe: Romania," *American Historical Review* 97, 1071-79 (October-December 1992); Z. Ornea, Tradiţionalism şi modernitate în deceniul al treilea (Bucharest, 1980).

The outlines of this dichotomy of Romanian nationalism were already visible around mid-nineteenth century, and certainly after the 1848 revolt against Russian domination and the imposed Organic Statutes. During the 1830s and 1840s, Russia destroyed its positive image as the liberator of Orthodox Christians from Muslim rule through its heavy-handed interference in Romanian internal affairs. The russo-phobia which afterwards punctuated all Romanian foreign relations dates from this period and was paralleled by a definitive shift in foreign policy from the East toward the West, especially toward France. Culturally, this trend was exhibited by the Western education many Romanian intellectual and political elites were acquiring through travel to France and Germany.

A visible difference existed however, present in the extent and type of Westernization adopted in Wallachia and Moldavia. This difference was demonstrated through a readily observable inclination toward radical French revolutionary ideals in Wallachia, versus the much more cautious German evolutionism prevalent throughout Moldavia. Keeping to themselves, Moldavia's boyars preserved intact their sense of historical identity and displayed a strong sense of tradition. While the youths of Wallachia and future leaders of the liberal Europeanists studied in France, the sons of Moldavian boyars visited German universities, returning, swelling with pride in their nation's glorious past, extolling the pristine power of free peasant communities, and singing the praises of their traditions. The boyars of Wallachia, less secure of their position in the social hierarchy, gradually became urban bureaucrats, forming a middle class of the bourgeois. This isolated group had very little in common with the old indigenous boyar class. At the same time, they were less bound by tradition than their Moldavian peers, more flexible in responding to the challenges posed by capitalism from the 1830s on, and more receptive to Western, primarily French revolutionary ideals.[2]

The concept of unification and the "Dacian nation" as the historic foundation of Romania was shared by both principalities - where they differed is in terms of how this would be accomplished. Almost without exception, the Moldavian politicians, influenced as they were by German concepts of evolutionism and organic development, favored caution and gradualism, whereas their Wallachian counterparts, composed of urbanite boyars with a strong allure for French extremism, favored radical measures of revolutionary proportions.

Overall, emulation of the West was evident in political organization through the adoption of liberal theories of government which shaped the 1866 Constitution and the drafting of new law codes; in economy, through calls for a modern industry and a modern credit system; and in culture, in the whole-hearted embracing of the French culture with its Latinist roots implication.

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[2]. Eugen Lovinescu, Istoria civilizatiei romane moderne (Bucharest, 1972), pp. 133-7.

Europeanists vs. Traditionalists: National Cultural Reflections of the Inter-war Period

Europeanists and the Romanian Avant-Garde

"Nihilistic in attitude, rebellious in its stylistic language, avant-garde is destructive! It becomes an uninhibited reading of art, an unfolding of its own past - from an instrument of criticism of history from which it wished to be separated, avant-garde is now a tool of post-modernism."[3]

Despite variations among capitalist (E. Lovinescu, S. Zeletin) vs. socialist (Constantin Dobrogea-Gherea) tangents, the *Europeanists* all agreed that "Westernization" was a necessary historical process through which every country was destined to pass and had no doubt that external European forces rather than internal national ones had been the main catalyst for the development of modern Romania. Consequently, these elites undertook to close the enormous gap perceived between themselves and the West by adopting Western institutions, ethics, and practices in accordance with what Eugen Lovinescu called "synchronism." According to spokesmen like Lovinescu and Stefan Zeletin, the importation of European social, cultural and political values was not necessarily a direct transposal of foreign entities, but rather a positive integration system guaranteeing Romania's successful modernization which enriched rather than depleted the nation's cultural heritage. For this was a time believed to bring Europe closer together, aided in part by the expansion of modern means of communication, "where even the most diverse societies were becoming "homogenized" more rapidly than ever before - Romania could not help but become a part of this integral, cosmopolitan civilization."[4]

In this spirit, the movements coalesced together under the heading of "avant-garde" in Romania displayed a synchronism of competing European styles rather than the contrasting quality typical of the contemporary Western avant-garde tendencies. In Romania, due to specific historic-cultural traditions such as the outbreak of WWI, socio-political mobilization to realize the ideal of national unity and a literary tradition less influential than other European counterparts, avant-garde did not truly emerge in its full form until 1924 with the launching of the Cabaret Voltaire-type international avant-garde exhibit[5] and the magazines *Contimporanul* [I. Vinea & M. Janco: constructivism/utilitarianism] *(1922-32); Punct* [international constructivist art] *(1924); 75HP* [Ilarie Voronea & Victor Brauner: picto-poetry] *(1924);*

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[3]. Corolian Babeţi, "Horia Bernea's Studio: A Museum Banquet, in a Garden, with a Church Nearby," in Horia Bernea Catalog (1997).

[4]. Eugen Lovinescu, Istoria civilizatiei romane moderne, 3 vols., (Bucharest, 1924-26), Vol. 3, 43-51, 63-103, 187-91.

[5]. The 1924 international avant-garde exhibit organized by the Romanian artists in Sindicatului Artelor Frumoase included entries by: Jean Arp, Paul Klee, Brancusi, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Richters, Arthur Segal, Wiking Eggeling, Moholy-Nagy, Lajos Kassák, Militza Petraşcu, Marcel Janco, Victor Brauner, H. M. Maxy, H. Mattis-Teutsch and was experimentally stylized in exhibition after the German Cabaret Voltaire theater.

Integral [H. M. Maxy: synthesis of all avant-garde movements] *(1925-28);* and *Unu* [Victor Brauner: naturistic surrealism with baroque refinements] *(1928-32)*.

At its birth, avant-garde in economically prosperous inter-war Greater Romania was based on the premise that the nation was undergoing modern reconstruction politically, socially, economically and physically, and that art should be a representation of the activist industrial phase and hence utilitarian and functional in scope. Due to the legislative tax breaks, technological innovations of reinforced concrete and prosperous economic investment conditions, this spirit was best realized in contemporary inter-war architectural projects which sought to solve social, structural and habitation problems through adoption of new modern functional geometrical forms devoid of former preferences for French neo-classical and Baroque decoration. Romanian artists/architects like G. M. Cantacuzino, H. Creanga and M. Janco were keenly aware that the country could not exist in isolation from the world and fully embraced European modernist architectural tenets as participants in the integration of a universal system of values.[6] Reflecting this aesthetic spirit, in 1923, Theo van Doesburg would write in *Contimporanul*: "the art of future generations will be a collective expression geared toward a real unity through the organization and discipline of the plastic arts."[7]

Yet Romanian inter-war architecture did not experience a stage of the "vanguard movement proper" in terms of negativism, reflecting rather a preference for ideas of progress and synchronization with European civilization - a moderate renewal aspect. The vanguard architectural movement in Romania relied on principles which sprang from old aesthetic traditions long tested by popular folk architecture (elegance and comfort in simplicity of design and form) and hence reflected an idea of continuity with the past rather than the radical break implied by European true avant-gardist leftist tenets stressing minimum requirements for comfort. In the words of Cantacuzino, "modern Romanian architecture seeks its laws at the source of the useful, of the constructive and of the social idea. It does not run counter to the aspirations of our architecture, it only opens a wide array of possibilities."[8]

Romanian avant-garde painting, also true to its inherent spirit of synchronization, advocated a strictly non-figurative anti-conventional sense of representation combining European interests in urban industry and robotic imagery of the "engineer-poet," with cubist, constructivist, abstract, neo-expressionist, futurist, and surrealist elements within "the framework of a kind of personal poetics displaying particular keenness on "integralism" and a balanced "modern synthesis" rather than resorting to radical aesthetic formulas"[9] - all strangely

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[6]. G. M. Cantacuzino, Izvoare şi popasuri (Bucharest, 1934), 72.

[7]. Theo van Doesburg, "Contra artiştilor imitatori," *Contimporanul* II, 34 (1932).

[8]. Cantacuzino, Izvoare şi popasuri, 70-71.

[9]. Magda Cîrneci, "An Exhibition on the Romanian Avant-Garde," in Bucureşti anii 1920-1940: între avant-garde şi modernism, (Editura Simetria - Uniunea Arhitecţilor din Romania, 1994), 11-17; Interview with Magda Cîrneci on November 20, 1998, Bucharest

commingled loosely under an overarching banner of modernism. This same culturally imposed spirit of synchronization also explains why such stylistic tenets of avant-garde-like post-expressionism became popular and were adopted even by the *modern traditionalist* artists and poets Camil Ressu, Ion Theodorescu-Sion, Lucian Blaga and Adrian Maniu.

The avant-garde movement inside Romania was a loose rebirth of the 1908 anti-conventional/anti-academic movement, *Tinerimea Artistică*, coalesced around Constantin Brancusi and Iosif Iser among others, and the literary circles advocating a radical negation of cultural traditions embodied by the social aesthetic conventions and codes of behavior. These particular movements attempted to echo strong European tenets, resisting and refusing the increasingly sterile, classic academism of scholastic circles such as that led by H. M. Mirea and the ensuing anti-modern, officially sanctioned saloons of the bourgeoisie. Paradoxically, while refusing on one hand to abide by any official conventions, these groups affirmed the need to synchronize with the rhythm of the times. Advocating a return to purity of form/color and simplified non-figurative forms, the European as well as the Romanian tenets of avant-garde were left-leaning in their refusal of the bourgeoisie-sanctioned "classical arts" but utopic in believing that new innovations would not in turn bring new conventions and adopted codes of behavior.

The Romanian version accepted the leftist tenets of avant-gardism but stripped it of any revolutionarily destructive tendencies. Romanian avant-garde had no political ambition and did not rise out of acute social tensions like its Hungarian or Russian counterparts. Through the process of synchronization, Romanian artists transposed the radical, aesthetic, non-figurative, representational methods and stylistic tools of the avant-garde (i.e. thick brush strokes, vibrant chromatics, decomposition and simplification of form, abstractionism, etc.) without its more dangerous ideologically revolutionary tenets. Hence, radicalism in inter-war Romanian avant-garde remains almost exclusively cultural and its artistic successes championed by such as Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, Ion Vinea, H. Mattis-Teutsch, Victor Brauner, Ilarie Voronea, H. M. Maxy, T. Pallady etc. have an almost exclusively aesthetical motivation. Aptly summarized by Magda Cîrneci's poignant observations, Romanian avant-garde art involves a paradoxical mix of styles which blur their otherwise sharp edges to reflect the following:

> "its modest utopism aims at best at rapid modernization, *not* at a total transformation of the world; its messianism has therefore a pragmatic aspect, almost positive and functional; its nihilism is juvenile, its anarchism is regenerative and progressive; its anti-traditionalism excludes the extremes and its experimentalism proves malleable in aims and effects, adapting itself inevitably to the Romanian milieu by means of a 'necessary compromise'."[10]

Romania.

[10]. Ibid.

The originality of the Romanian avant-garde lies in the very attempt to convert the anarchical avant-garde impulse into a constructive assertion. Its weakness, correspondingly, would be its inherent theoretical mutability, the vacillation between different tendencies and the temptation to turn to something more moderate and classical.

Modern Traditionalism and Orthodoxism: Paradoxes of the Rightist Tendencies

The circle around the literary review, *Dacia Literara*, in the 1840s, and, later, the *Junimea* movement of the 1860s and 1870s and the turn of the century *Semănătorists* represented a reaction to the uncritical embrace of the West. All of these movements' founders shared a common education and assimilation of German post-revolutionary ideas. Constructed in accordance with the principles of organic social development, the *Junimist* and *Semănătorist* world views drew heavily upon historical theories of German romantic philosophy, emphasizing a slow, gradual, simultaneous development of social and theoretical structures true to respective ethnic national characteristics. Both perceived a sharp deviation in recent Romanian history from this principle of organic development which resulted in creating a 'paralyzing antinomy' between form and substance.[11] All of these movements, reminded fellow Romanians of their own unique national heritage and urged them to seek literary inspiration and social goals in their native experience. The *Junimists*, coalesced around the theories of Titu Maiorescu, argued that Romania had entered the European economic and cultural world too precipitously, borrowing and imitating without regard for indigenous customs and experience. The *Semănătorists*, through their principal spokesman Nicolae Iorga, echoed these concerns and further insisted that Romania had been diverted onto a "false path" in the early 19th century by the politicians and intellectuals who had broken with the country's agrarian past.

Consequently, this period of national awakening was particularly characterized by a reverential nostalgia about past glories, hero worship, and an idealization of the rustic, simple stock of the Romanian people - a return to folkloric traditions associated with the peasantry. Romania's smallness and rural character became symbolic virtues and guarantees of innocence while the Romanian peasant was portrayed as the sole preserver of the nation's cultural heritage and national identity. Simultaneously, emphasis was laid on the great heroes of Romanian myths and legends, voievods like Ştefan cel Mare, Vlad Ţepes, Mircea cel Bătrî n and Mihai Viteazu who have won glory for the nation by fiercely resisting and successfully safeguarding the nation's historic heritage against foreign occupation.

In the two decades after World War I, the traditionalists drew sustenance from general European currents opposed to rationalism and scientific positivism. They turned to guidance to Nietzsche and Spengler, but strikingly new in their own thought was an emphasis on Eastern Orthodox spirituality as the essential component of Romanian ethnic consciousness and the primary support of the organic way of life preserved in the Romanian village. This fusion of

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[11]. Keith Hitchins, Rumania, 1866-1947 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 61; "Historiography of the Countries of Eastern Europe: Romania," *American Historical Review* 97, 1072 (October - December 1992).

the Eastern Christianity, particularly Byzantium, and the folk tradition laid the foundations for Nichifor Crainic's brainchild, *Orthodoxism*, a characteristic expression of the Romanian identity in the inter-war period.[12] Borrowing extensively from Spengler, Crainic and enthusiastic supporters like Nae Ionescu and Mircea Eliade adopted the thesis that the West had entered a period of old age and decline through its embrace of internationalism, scientific rationalism and materialism. Berlin and New York typified this crisis of "the world city" where people lived deprived of creative senses, sterile and "without metaphysics." Emphasizing the sharp distinction between West (rational, sterile) and East (organic, spiritual), the *Orthodoxists* claimed that Romanian liberals had introduced the spirit of the modern city into the world of the patriarchal Romanian village and had imposed a polished civilization dominated by scientific positivism on a culture of "primitive youth," delicate and almost childlike in its feelings, whose means of expression was religion.[13] The only salvation for the Romanians was seen as a return to the "native genius" and the "autochthonous spirit," meaning a revitalization of spiritual life based on the Eastern tradition. The intimate relationship between Orthodoxy and the village was traced back to the coming of Christianity to ancient Dacia in the first century and Romanianess was measured by the yardstick of orthodoxy: "we are Orthodox because we are Romanian, and we are Romanian because we are Orthodox."[14]

As such, the inter-war period proved ripe for the necessary conditions for the rise of radical rightist nationalist parties for many of Europe's old and new state entities. Yet, Romania's version of fascism, typical of its other appropriated fashions, appears in quite a different guise from Western models. Not because the role was necessarily different but rather due to the organic conditions which young, underdeveloped nations like Romania, spawned. The absence of a true Romanian middle class; almost complete foreign domination of the economy; the country's inherent backwardness combined with a corrupt, ruling, liberal-democratic bureaucracy; the importation of democratic and bourgeois (French) values by the upper classes in a country overwhelmingly agrarian; the forced centralization both administratively and economically which further depleted already scarce peasant financial bases; as well as the precarious international position of the new Greater Romania state between a young, imposing Soviet empire and continuing irredentism of the now broken Austro-Hungarian monarchy - all contributed to the manifestation of Romanian nationalism as a native inferiority complex.[15] Consequently, "there were fewer entrenched, powerful interests with which to contend for power, and those which did exist were so obviously corrupt that

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[12]. For Orthodoxism see Dumitru Micu, "'*Gîndirea' şi gîndirismul"*(Bucharest, 1975).

[13]. Nichifor Crainic, "Parsifal," *Gîndirea* 3, 181-82 (January 20, 1924); Nae Ionescu, Roza vînturilor, 1926-33 (Bucharest, 1937), 421-44.

[14]. N. Ionescu, Roza vînturilor, 205.

[15]. Nicholas M. Nagy-Talavera, The Green Shirts and Others: A History of Fascism in Hungary and Romania (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1970), 247-8; Lucretiu Pătrascanu, Problemele de baza ale Romaniei, (Bucharest: Editura Socec, 1945).

radical revolutionaries were more compelling for the Romanian electorate, composed as it was of peasants and the small newly urban population."[16]

Due to the country's minuscule working class, Marxism, with its anti-peasant and anti-nationalist forum had little appeal. Additionally, most of Romania's relatively few Communists came from the hostile minorities - Jews, Hungarians and Ukrainians - who had an expressed interest in the realization of an un-Romanian platform of territorial redistribution.

The socialist current compatible with Romanian national interests was populism, concerning itself with the majority of the population - the peasantry. In its original content, the belief that the people were the original depositor of the profound realities of "românism" (Romanianness), "poporănismul" (populism) was strikingly similar to that in Russia. The movement's chief exporter was, not surprisingly, a Bessarabian-Romanian, Constantin Stere.

The anti-Semitism of Mihail Eminescu and the *Junimists* as well as attempts at populism however, did not answer the needs of the "new nationalism" of Greater Romania, whose Jewish population had been tripled at Versailles through the addition of the provinces of Transylvania, Bessarabia and Bukovina. And neither did A. Cuza's anti-Semitic League of National Christian Defense (LANC) political platform answer the impending economic problems of the expense of modernization or the effects the increase in population had on arable land. A more radical entity was necessary to mobilize and transcend politically opportunistic values, one able to unify, cut across and discipline the multiple facets of the social structure. It was born on June 24, 1927 under the auspices of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and the protective vision of Archangel Michael, out of the early 1920s student uprisings opposing the 1923 constitutional emancipation of the Jews, Stere's populism, the Legionary predecessor - Codreanu's 1924 highly mystical Brotherhoods of the Cross, and the split with A. Cuza's anti-Semitic LANC platform, its future rival. Based on Orthodox values which subdued individual will to the superior collective entity of the state, the church and the nation, the Legion's main impulse was this essence of collectivity and action. The poet Octavian Goga described it as a "great rebellion of youth" in search of "a new religion based on the organic truths of the race." It was the "first vanguard of the national consciousness," announcing a new ferment in moral life, "a purifying storm representing the fanatical and intransigent national religion, the most important foundation of
our state life."[17] Deeply mystical and rooted in the Romanian Orthodox Church, Codreanu's Legion of Archangel Michael, later adopting the title of "The Iron Guard," was deemed the realization of the Romanian state and Romanian nationalism.

Paralleled and avidly supported by the elite literary circles of Nichifor Crainic, Nae Ionescu and Lucian Blaga, the Iron Guard-type, radical, orthodox-based nationalism did ***not*** have a similar following in the visual arts circles. Much like the recognized "radical" avant-

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[16]. Eugen Weber, "The men of the Archangel," in G. L. Mosse, ed., International Fascism, (London, England, 1979), 321.

[17]. Octavian Goga, Mustul care fierbe, (Bucharest, 1927), 69.

gardists, the *modern traditionalist* painters, as they came to be labeled in the inter-war period, also evolved out of the struggle against officialdom and academism mired in the preferences of the empowered political bourgeoisie and H. M. Mirea's circle for old 19th century romantic idealism and French impressionism, as typified by N. Grigorescu's idyllic peasant scenes. The only real difference consisted of the additional aspect of drafting a "specifically Romanian," autochthonous artistic language advocated by the movement's promoters, S. Luchian, Camil Ressu, Jean Al. Steriadi and S. Şirato among others.[18] Echoing the *Junimist* and ensuing groups' criticism of borrowed Western bourgeois values, and strong believers in the romantic German national *weltgeist* spirit, S. Luchian, Camil Ressu, I. Theodorescu-Sion, Gheorghe Petraşcu, Sabin Pop, etc. were "traditionalists" only in the sense of reverting to the older theme of portrayal of the peasant as the typical prototype for Romanian national identity. The peasant in nature as subject now typified the new Romanian national identity but it took on a harsher, more realistic autochthonous element, becoming an indigenous product of the land it inhabited and stripped of its former idyllic 19th century romanticized nuances. Missing was the mystical tie to Romanian Orthodoxism present in more radical right of center, ultra-conservative literary circles.

Stylistically, these *modern traditionalists* were just as off-center and anti-conventional as the more "radical" avant-garde representatives in their use of modern, simplified, primitivist linearism, non-figuration and chromatics. Theoretically however, these artists believed the contemporary artistic revolution had estranged the entire nation through the importation and direct transposal of foreign tendencies on Romania's society.

> "We need to find a form that expresses and speaks of the specific Romanian spirit. By creating a form of art born out of the Romanian nation's folk art I do not understand that to mean to create naturalist or populist art. To paint shepherds, wagons with bulls, sheep, etc. does not mean to create art with a Romanian personality.
> By taking subjects from the countryside or the city, from the lower as well as from the upper classes, or by choosing a subject representative of our identity, we see through the conception's point of view which is the artistic conception of the people of which the artist is part and to whom he is responsible for his individuality."[19]

Advocating similar leftist tendencies and echoing socialist/populist concerns for the peasant problem expressed by contemporary realist writers like Mihail Sadoveanu, Tudor Arghezi and Ion Creangă, the early 1900s artists voiced opinions for peasant emancipation and resolution of the land problem by choosing the peasantry and "arta populară" (folk art) as the autochthonous prototype of the Romanian national identity.[20] Ressu's and Luchian's strong

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[18]. Much indebted to the discussions on this issue with Ioana Vlasiu at the Institute of Art History, Bucharest, Romania in October 1998.

[19].Camil Ressu in T. Enescu, Camil Ressu, (Academia Republicii Populare Romîne, Institutul de Istoria Artei, 1958).

[20]. Ibid.

linearism and searing colors, rooted in the European neo-realism and primitivism traditions, used modernist stylistic techniques to evoke a sense of the contemporary situation of the peasantry (i.e. the feeling of bitterness, pain, suffering and work in the sun-drenched fields- see Ressu's "Semănatorul," "Ţăranii din Vlaici" and Luchian's "Gathering of the Corn") and were meant both as sources of criticism of contemporary social lifestyle as well as defining pieces of an authentic, specifically Romanian art form. Ressu however, was also responsible for introducing in this carefully constructed Romanian art form the interest for the "object" - the synthetic expression of plasticity and form - which was to last and resurface in post-communist Romanian artistic expression.

This new definition of Romanianess prevailed both in literature, through the writings of Arghezi, Sadoveanu and Octavian Goga, as well as in art forms, through the launching of the first Romanian arts magazine, *Ileana*, bringing together under the banner of national identity the modernist pieces of Luchian, Ressu and Brancusi with a great collection of Romanian folk peasant village art. Another example is the foundation of the *Romanian Art* group in 1917 in Moldavia's Iasi, joining together N. Tonitza, S. Dimitrescu, C. Ressu, I. Theodorescu-Sion among others and promoting the development of national values throughout Romania.

Curiously, with the coming of the mid 1920s and the rise of the Legionary movement based on peasant purism and Orthodoxism, the *modern traditionalists* distanced themselves more and more from politics, becoming like their avant-garde counterparts, conveyors of aesthetic themes rather than social criticisms.

The graphic arts, by nature an outgrowth of painting and inclusive of the well known *modern traditionalist* as well as avant-garde painters such as Gheorghe Petraşcu, T. Pallady, Iosif Iser, Stefan Popescu, I. Theodorescu-Sion, N. Tonitza, C. Ressu, etc. exhibited similar tendencies for modernist stylism, obsession with linearity and echoes of neo-realism and "Romanianess" in their somber, severe pictoral landscapes or religious/folk themes. In contrast
to painting however, engravings and the graphic arts begin to incorporate political subjects destined for journals like *Gîndirea* only at the end of the 1920s, beginning of the 1930s.

Overall, the sharp differentiations witnessed in European avant-garde vs. *modern traditionalist* movements became blended and blurred in Romania after the 1920s, echoing once more the spirit of synchronization typifying this nation's inter-war period and serving as points of reference for an authentic "specific românesc" to which later artists will continuously find themselves returning in the post-communist period. By the late 1920s and into the 1930s, it ironically gained a cloak of "classicism" as the stylistical innovations born of former academic deviation became part of contemporary rudimentary art academy programs.

Universalism vs. Neo-Traditionalism/-Orthodoxism in Post-Communist Romania: A Case of Cyclical Historiography

"*Viewed from the outside, contemporary Romanian art is a strange natural reserve of living and working aesthetic fossils mesmerized by such out-dated and dusty principles of values as craftsmanship, religiosity and spirituality, moral rectitude and messiah-like visionary stances.*"[21]

The post-communist period in Romania shares a lot of similar transition-stage social, political and cultural characteristics with the inter-war period. In both cases, a newly-born independent Romania, freshly hatched out of history's recycled egg of foreign state domination and isolation, was faced with the challenging intellectual dilemma of redefining its national identity while opening its boundaries to global influences, transforming its political and economic system to reflect western capitalist democracies and incorporate new modern technologies destined to eliminate geographical distances, as well as restructuring its artistic and cultural life to reflect contemporary changes in ideology and social mindframes. After 45 years of communism and the imposed political and psychological isolation, Romania emerged in the post-1989 era, as in the inter-war period, eager and enthusiastic for Western models emulation. For the next 10 years, in culture as in politics, the country would once again experiment with extremes of direct, yet, synchronized importation of Western, particularly "Americana," values of globalization [*Universalism*]; and a hybrid commingling of diametrically opposing elements of rediscovery of national identity through a resurgence of a spiritual-based "purity of the past" [*Neo-Orthodoxism*] and a certain evolutionary academic classicism that attempts to emulate and synchronize past official movements [*Neo-Traditionalism*]. A question can be raised as to which of these extremes is "healthiest" for the self-definition of the still embryonic democratic Romanian society since all three can seriously handicap the creation of a vital democratic culture: *universalism*, through its inherent experimentalism-prone tangents and its consequent suspicion of all convention and dogma but also sharing qualities with the *neo-traditionalist* tendency to import and transpose foreign styles; *neo-traditionalism* and *neo-orthodoxism* through their inherent tendency to over-mythologize or render sacred any and all modern space on the basis of ethnicity and religion.

In art, *neo-traditionalism* should be understood to mean national self-definition through a return to a hybrid mix of 1) the inter-war obsession with the peasant/folk motif and "object" as "pure" national ideals along with 2) a type of evolutionary academic classicism that attempts to emulate and synchronize past art movements as represented by officially endorsed institutions like saloons and museums and 3) trans-avantgarde type stylistic methods. Hence a synchronization of all art history as "a never ending act of recuperation and renewal" commingled with traditional Romanian art forms such as church interiors, mysticism, iconography, etc., result in a hybrid universe where modernity crisscrosses tradition.

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[21]. *Art Hoc - Romanian Art Today*, (Museum of Contemporary Art, Ludwig Museum, Budapest, 1997).

Examples include the works of Horia Bernea and other former students of the movement's father figure, Corneliu Baba. Meanwhile, the *neo-Orthodoxist* tangent concentrates more on

the symbolic religious motif, also drawing from the inter-war period but this time accentuating the then missing artistic component of "Romanian as Orthodox," here labeling it, in yet another attempt at synchronization, Byzantine. Hence such repeated symbols of "cross," "fire," "nourishment," "sky," "word [of God]," church column, etc. in the sacralisation of aesthetic modern spatial-oriented pieces of Sorin Dumitrescu and Fundaţia Anastasia, and Marian and Victoria Zidaru, hereby representing the mystical identity of the Romanian nation.

Currently, Romania is undergoing a similar crisis of identity to its inter-war period of national development. Left outside of proper Europe and the West once again, through Europe's and America's refusal to incorporate it either in the European Community or NATO, with an overdose of imported Western cultural fads and value models, Romania remains isolated and in search of a true cultural national identity. The same sharp criticism arises as in the inter-war period, questioning the extent of applicability of Western cultural and social values to Romania and dividing the progressive, democratic intelligentsia. And much as in the inter-war period, the major distinguishable traits of *universalism* vs. *neo-traditionalism/orthodoxism* also run across established cultural boundaries, with Transylvania and the Banat regions as traditionally more Western due to the Austro-Hungarian influence and hence, overwhelmingly representative of the *universalist* trend while the old Regat provinces of Wallachia and Moldavia loosely grouped together and exhibiting a majority for the *neo-traditionalist/orthodoxist* trend with weak vestiges of the more global aspect of *universalism*.

Regional Differences and Similarities

Artistically, Banat (Timişoara)[22] demonstrates an artificially created balance and harmony when using the language and symbols of trans-avantgarde's abstractionism or even expressionism - here, colors are balanced between tones and shapes (Daniela Oraviţan Beloescu, Călin Beloescu, Viorel Cosor), sculpture and the graphic arts reflect sometimes the old symbols of the purity of raw and classic materials (wood, stone, bronze, chevalet engraving as in the works of Ştefan Călărăşan and Constantin Catargiu) and sometimes a mixture of the new experimentalist methods, the classic arts of engraving/painting/sculpture, and performance art but always in measured, planned proportions (Suzana Fîntenariu, Alexandru Patatics, Constantin Flondor, Sorin Vreme, *1993 Europe Zone East Performance Festival*, *1994 East-West* exhibit). Here art is very much a profession based on learned academic values and traditional techniques of painting/sculpting/engraving.[23]

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[22]. Impression based on visit and interviews in Timişoara November 20-23, 1998 with: Daniela Oraviţan Beloescu, Călin Beloescu, Ştefan Călărăşan, Viorel Cosor, Constantin Catargiu, Luigi Varga, Suzana Fîntenariu.

[23]. Ioan Iovan, "Lumina - Definitivul Luminii," in *Grafica* catalogue for Constantin Catargiu, (UAP Timişoara).

Ardeal or Transylvania, typified by its cultural capital Cluj-Napoca (Kolzsvár),[24] seems more fiery and energetic by comparison. Influenced less by the classical impetus for calm and order of the Austrians and more by the revolutionary flare of the Hungarians, Cluj, Oradea, and other cultural centers stretch expressionism and constructivist tendencies to their limit, opting for the more radical aspect of chromatic contrasts. The darker and more "muddied" contrasts and inter-war leftover "object" and folk obsession are reflective of the now institutionalized versions, and hence *neo-traditionalist* vestige, of the older generation (Teodor Botiş, Ioan Sbârciu, Nicu Mann),[25] while spontaneity, anti-conventialism and bright gyrating colors typify the younger '90s generation regardless of experiments with the "concreteness" of old Romanian church art (Theo Mureşan), a mystical obsession with the organics of nature (Florin Ştefan, Ioana Antoniu, Grup 6,) or mixed-media installation-type experimentalism (Ana Lupaş, László Újvárossy, Bartha Sándor, Alexander Antik) and experimental-in-form but traditional-in-material sculpture (Alexandru Păsat). Overall, Transylvania as represented by cultural centers like Oradea, Cluj and Baia Mare, seems more fluent and disorganized in the sense of asserting individuality, exhibiting an overall simultaneous pull in various directions. Adding to this fluency is the ethnical mix of the region, as the Hungarian minority artists seem to be more responsive to the pull towards Western technology in the form of photography, video and mixed media (see Gusztav Ütö and *St. Ana Lake Performance Festivals* among others), while the native Romanians stick to the more traditional symbols of "arta veche românească" (Romanian traditional art - i.e. murals from old churches, angels, icons, the philosophical obsession with absolute ideals of Beauty/Truth, etc.) as catalyst points. Even so and regardless of ethnic differences, the overall '90s Transylvanian generation is splitting off to define its own parameters and means of portrayal, more and more adopting the notions of *universalism* typified by its "art without borders" motto.

Meanwhile, the old Regat provinces of Moldavia and Wallachia are more reflective of the *neo-traditionalist/orthodoxist* vestiges. Iasi as the cultural center of Moldavia, is seen as more lyrical and returning to the use of folklore with occasional deviations in the *universalist* experiment tangent (Matei Bejenaru and the *Periferic Annual Performance Art Festivals*). The old capital city of Bucharest seems split between strong tenets of 1) *neo-orthodoxism/traditionalism* especially among the older generation artists (Sorin Dumitrescu, Marian and Victoria Zidaru, Horia Bernea, Sorin Ilfoveanu, Ştefan Cîlţea, Henri Mavrodin,

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[24]. Impression based on visit and interviews in Cluj January 11-15, February 13- 17,1999 with: Theo Mureşan, Florin Ştefan, Nicu Mann, Ion Aurel Mureşan, Ioan Sbîrciu, Ioana Antoniu, Radu Pulbere, Alexandru Păsat, Maria Rus Bojan, Andor Koműnes, Timotei Nădăşan, Mariana Bojan, Teodor Botiş.

[25]. An exception to this are the vivid reinterpretations of miniature painting of Ioan Aurel Mureşan: mixing primary-based chromatics with lyrical expressionistic depiction with a definite fairy-tale type surrealist resulting quality.

Marin and Paul Gherasim) as well as the younger students of the classical arts of painting, engraving and sculpture (Grupul Crinul); and 2) experimentalism and mixed-media as represented by a majority of the '80s generation artists (Dan and AmaLia Perjovschi, Teodor

Graur, Iosif Kiraly, Marilena Predac-Sânc, the SubREAL group, the Sigma group, the former Soros Center of Contemporary Art exhibitions *Ex Oriente Lux (1993)*, *0101010101…. (1994), Experiment (1996)*, the Sala Dallas October 8-18, 1998 Exhibit under Adrian Guţă). This second tenet of experimentalism was popularized and made-accessible to the younger generation with the recently established (1995) Photo-Video Department of the Bucharest Art Academy under the expert tutelage of Roxana Trestrioreanu.[26] This particular section of the Bucharest Art Academy, otherwise mired in an academic "classical education" and strong adherence to the prevalent *neo-traditionalist* artistic tangent, is responsible for the historic introduction of photography and video as an officially-endowed artform in Romania and is rapidly producing a new generation of media youths prone to *universalist* tenets of experimentalism and mixed media technology and more professionally ready to integrate in a Western-type society. The main criticism of this energetic particularly pro-West generational section is the simultaneous loss of a "specific Romanian identity" as the rapid synchronization and adoption of Western values confuses national self-definition and gives precedence to nontraditional values like simplicity and directness over philosophic detachment, speed over meditation, and the realist viewpoint of the necessity of "art for money" rather than "art for art's sake" or as an esoteric aristocratic profession.[27] In the process, Romanian identity becomes sacrificed to the ever present desire to be part of the "larger world."

Romanian Art Today: A Tin Can With No Indications of Content and No Instructions for Use

"Contemporary Romanian art is riding the crest of the wave between the sublime, the grotesque and mediocrity."[28]

As in the inter-war period, what is lacking in contemporary Romanian artistic expression is the political tangent that went hand in hand in the West with most trans-avantgarde movements. This missing link is partly explained by the continued spirit of synchronization leftover from the inter-war period. For even the most radical Romanian artists

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[26]. Much indebted to Adrian Guţă (interview October 20, 1998) and Magda Cîrneci (interview November 20, 1998) for discussion of the existing contemporary artistic trends in Bucharest, as well as the International Center for Contemporary Arts (former CSAC) for the wealth of materials and catalogues they've made accessible.

[27]. These untraditional modern values were expressed by the various students (Years I-IV) of the Photo-Video Section of the Bucharest Art Academy at a series of interviews throughout the month of November, 1998.

[28]. Interview with Ion Aurel Mureşan, Cluj, February 16, 1999.

tend to assimilate rather than rupture, hereby bringing together all manner of otherwise contradictory movements under the banner of modernity. Romania's long isolation under communism where the artist was traditionally kept apart from politics - his/her art becoming

more a reflection of inner mysticism and cultural reflection/philosophy - also aided in this separation of modern and post-modern stylistic expressions from the typical political agendas.

Weak attempts at social criticisms were, however, present in the immediate post-1989 aftermath and reflected contemporary artistic concerns for a lack of true civil society. Such criticism parodied Romania's obsession with materialism and ethnic networking, and explored the absence of an authentic image of the nation.[29] Examples include Dan Perjovschi's 1992 *Anthropoteque* installation consisting of 5,000 drawings of crudely but individualistically drawn human figures, casting doubt upon the old notion of nation as a collective mass sharing common ideology, ethnic background or religion; the 1991 *Alimentara* installation of the 3 founding members of the subREAL group: Călin Dan, Iosif Kiraly, Dan Mihălţianu, presenting a pyramid of stacked jars of preserved food and bottles carefully aligned and providing a direct mirror reflection of the national obsession with food, stockpiling and assembly-line consumerism left-over from the communist era; Ioana Bătrînu's 1992 and 1993 pieces "Art Belongs to Everybody," "Cock and Bull," Enclosed Gardens," "Our Pigs," parodying contradictory images of the national self presented by Romania's Westernizers, nationalists and Orthodoxists by offering a fantasy land with traces of past cultures as different as ancient Pompeii and 19th century France; and, similarly, the 1993 *Ex Oriente Lux,* subREAL group 3-part installation *Draculaland*, projecting a comment on Romania's clichéd identity as a border state between the civilized West and exotic East and investigating Romanian political and folkloric stereotypes perpetuated by the Western media through the use of a high-tech breakthrough.

These kinds of social critiques however, much in tandem with their inter-war counterparts, have progressively died down as the economic crisis continues and refocuses attention away from artistic and cultural self-definition to social realities of day-to-day life.
Due to its communist-imposed highly cultural reference and intellectualization (the turn to the mystical inner-self), Romanian contemporary art also lacks a real liaison with the public, making communication with a society already distracted by the very real and physical socio-economic distortions brought on by the transition to democracy almost impossible. Further complicating and detracting from a coherent contemporary Romanian national cultural identity is the unfortunate lack of real communication and collaboration between the major cultural centers of the nation's three main regions.

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[29]. Laura J. Hoptman, " Seeing is Believing" in Beyond Belief: Art from East and Central Europe, (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1995), 5, 7-9; Roxana Marcoci, "Romanian Democracy and its Discontents," in Beyond Belief, 15-23.

Cynicism seems to be the contemporary general condition. The continued search for the spiritual/mental/physical self, mutilated by the communist experience yet hybridly materialized in echoes of inter-war *modern traditionalist* fetishism of the "object" in contemporary *neo-Orthodoxist* pieces and trans-avantgarde *universalist* experimental modes of exhibit, is a reflection of the general sense of confused liminalism in a world too wrapped up in modernity,

socio-economic shortages and technology to notice the individual. Recent art appears unbalanced between fractured aesthetic and axiological landmarks that outline either an exasperating nationalism, a metaphysical traditionalism, an Orthodox religious exaltation, an introverted and contorted existentialism, or a cynical trans-avantgarde voyeuristic or critical detachment. Acknowledging the fractured psyche of today and contorted under the simultaneous pressure of "regressive innovation" and "progressive reactionism," contemporary Romanian art, consequently appears wavering and mired like in Umberto Eco's Island of The Day Before, between a deep-rooted powerful "traditionalism" and a versatile, though not yet established "modernism" - it cannot seem to make its way fully to the past but neither does it seem capable of reaching the future.

Culturally mirroring the schizoid shape of a deeply confused and inert social mentality and presiding over a deadlike, thoughtless body disputed between aggressive minority factions, each section defends and propagates some self-sufficient, parallel discourse that ignores or negates the other's means, principles and targets. *Neo-traditionalism/orthodoxism* warns against the oblivion of a profound but ethnically-tainted truth while trans-avantgardism or *universalism* stresses the danger that Romanian culture and civilization may disconnect itself from the technological and mass-cultural realities of this era. Art and culture thus become, in a true reflection of Romania's political system, a desperate game for power, this time not between the personalities of political parties but among those of the respective art academy institutions, the regional wings of the Union of Plastic Artists (UAP), fluctuating artistic groups and individual artists, generational representatives, as well as center vs. periphery tangents.

Through the confusion of synchronized trends and personal expressions, each separate tenet of Romania's artistic society staggers to find and define itself in the sea of new technologies and information. No longer reflecting or caring about a coherent and integrated "specific Romanian" identity, each group, individual or entity asserts its own version of self-definition in completely isolated, narcissistic fashion straining with concepts such as "self-expression," "ego," "structure," "object," "space," etc. In some aspects, one can trace the roots of past movements like expressionism, surrealism, abstractionism, etc. along with occasional successful attempts at reinterpretation in a particularly Romanian fashion (i.e. Horia Bernea); in others can be observed a complete refusal of all assimilated techniques and styles in favor of experimentalism and trans-historicism (i.e. the groups coalesced around the former Soros Center for Contemporary Arts (CSAC). Henceforth, we are presented with two opposing and non-communicating poles of the Romanian contemporary artist: the one evoking the over-mythologized self, preserving and enhancing the "classical" law of narrative unity of time and space, typical of the traditional arts of painting/sculpture, is counterpoised by the purposely obscured and minimized self, explored and exploited through an undefined, ever-

changing continuum of space and time as displayed by experimental installations. Paradoxically, both converge in the desired end result: the *neo-traditionalist/orthodoxist* tenet represented by the "classical arts" aims to surpass the mere visual by mythologizing the self and achieving spiritual transcendence while the *universalist* vestige, represented by the experimental arts, aims for a parallel transcendence, this time beyond history and the individual. In the process, identity evaporates leaving behind a much disjointed, Babelian tower of artistic

languages where innovation is constantly countered by regression and art, in the views of many local artists, has exhausted its resources and is open to simultaneous, contradictory interpretations.

I offer as a closing example one last piece by Aurel Vlad, displayed at the October 1998 Sala Dallas exhibit and in this writer's opinion poignantly reflective and indicative of Romania's contemporary crisis of identity: an installation of a group of standing plaster statues, well ordered in a rectangular perimeter in equal rows of about 5 persons per row. At first glance it would seem to comment on Romania's traditional clan-like societal tendency bringing to mind a herd of sheep imagery of following closely in a tight grouping. Upon closer inspection however, one notices that every single statue has a different expression and different gesture despite the overall group effect. Proudly marching under the banner of "we - the Romanians," is this a positive comment on Romania's attempt at individualism despite its communist-induced group mentality; or is it a cynical outlook on contemporary national social mentality and behavior; or perhaps a desperate cry for the loss of identity to the simultaneous pulls of *universalistic* modernity and the various artistic factions?

These are the types of questions all contemporary Romanian art leaves unanswered as globalization, modernity and independence raise once more the age-old debate in national identity. Parallel to the inter-war period of national development, Romania is again open to an influx of Western values and artistic trends, more complicated now by the spread of distance-breaking technologies and the overarching desire to be part of a larger, unified Europe while still keeping a sense of some form of national identity. Perfectly mirroring this state of flux, the vibrant creative energy of this nation remains for the moment disjointed and confused, exhibiting a paradoxical simultaneous desire for the "purity of the past" and innovation through equally conflicting stylistic languages of figurative and non-figurative traditionalism and modernity. Much as the nation's political, economic and social system, Romanian art as a direct reflection of national identity remains so far in a state of transition, the real question being "transition to what?"