

Romanian Folk Costume in Paintings: Take the Second Half of the 19th Century and the Early 20th Century

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ABSTRACT. *Since the beginning of the 19th century, especially after Romania participated in the Revolution of 1848, Romanian cultural elites have striven to find a representative and easily recognizable image of Romania as an independent European country. In this context, the rural world was rediscovered, and traditional folk costume which represents the product of the continuity, development and transformation of Romanian society, was reinterpreted and considered as the strongest visual support of national values. Meanwhile, after the Revolution of 1848, the connection between Western Europe and Romania has been increasingly closer, especially in terms of the art and cultural fields. Since Western Europe had already developed mature art schools by that time, it exerted the dominant influence on Romania and encouraged a small part of Romanian painters to focus on some themes that were not conventional in their country, such as the idyllic rural life and the exquisite folk costume worn in the village. Thus, the evolution of art in Romania had been affected by Western European until such influence was absorbed and organically integrated into the Romanian indigenous culture.*

KEYWORDS: *Romanian folk costume, National identity, Schools of painting, Art criticism*

1. Introduction

1.1 The Legacy of Romanian Costume and Its Continuity

It is known that the main pieces of traditional folk costume preserved to this day come from large-scale collections made in the early 20th century. However, the first conclusive testimonies of the appearance of the Romanian ancient costume, more precisely, of the Geto-Dacians - the ancestors of the Romanians, would be the reliefs on Trajan's Column and on the metopes of the Triumphal Monument from Adamclisi. "On the metopes of Adamclisi, women wear creased shirts with short sleeves, which were extended after the Christianity that took place in the first centuries

A.D. Christians considered human to be made up of an immortal spirit and a perishable body subject to temptation. That is why they should show their eyes, the

mirror of the soul, but cover their bodies with clothes.”^[1] So, if we say, from the very beginning, the major role of folk clothing was to isolate and protect the human body from weather and dangerous environment, then the coming and spread of Christianity brought it the religious meaning.

Starting from the middle of the 19th century, immediately after the Romanian Revolution of 1848, many Romanian intellectuals and schools tried to emphasize the originality of the Romanian cultural creation and to highlight the national values. As a natural consequence, the preoccupation to Romanian uniqueness led to a surge of the folk costume research, and for the first time the typical Romanian costume was regarded as a history testimony and endowed with the sense of national identity.

1.2 The Penetration of Folk Costume in Urban Areas

According to the Romania National Yearbook for 1903, there were four places where you could buy folk costume in the capital.^[2] The Romanian folk costume from the village became appreciated among the citizens at that time, one reason is that the strong influence of the exemplary role of the royal family. When the heirs of the royal family joined important social events, or they

were immortalized in a portrait, they occasionally dressed in folk costume, which can be one of the impulses for the spread of folk costume in cities. Another reason is that the gesture of approaching the folk costume worn principally by the peasantry is in fact an attestation of the closeness to the humble, although sometimes it may seem hypocritical and ostentatious.

2. Artistic Trends In Romanian Painting In The Second Half of The 19th Century and The Early 20th Century And Their Modality of Representing Romanian Costume

Before the 19th century, Romania was deeply influenced by Byzantine culture, except for the area of Transylvania where Western artistic air had already penetrated. In 1848, Romania took part in the European revolution of 1848, which determined a significant turning point in the direction of Romanian cultural and artistic development. In a proactive way, Romania tried to establish direct contact with France and Italy, offering the opportunity to many young Romanian artists to study and research abroad.

The development of Romanian painting in the second half of the 19th century was characterized by the quickening pace of transformation, the new interpenetrations of different art genres. Through decades of development, in the early twentieth century Romanian art reached its apogee. At that time, many Romanian painters returned to their homeland from France, Italy or Germany and brought the fresh ideas of modernism.

2.1 Academism

2.1.1 Constantin Daniel Rosenthal (1820-1851)

Constantin Daniel Rosenthal, a famous Romanian painter and revolutionary, was born in the capital of Hungary, Budapest. As a member of the famous group of revolutionary painters from 1848, Rosenthal was totally dedicated to the cause of Romania's freedom and sovereignty as an independent state. "Revolutionary Romania", as one of the most famous Romanian paintings, represents a rather symbolic image of a country fighting for its unity.

The woman in the painting is, in fact, the painter's wife, Maria, who was also a passionate supporter of Romanian independence despite her British nationality. In painting, a woman looks steadily and indignantly at something unknown, it may be something uncertain and dangerous. In the face of potential danger, she, representing a group of Romanian people with inferior social status, is trying to defend their faith, to protect the national flag.

In this work, the artist was not concerned with the compositional elements of this portrait. The ray was masterfully placed not only on the physiognomy of our model, on the forehead, on the aquiline line of the nose, which highlights the feminine delicacy of this facial contour, but also on the flag, on the decorations and on the exclusively Romanian folk outfit. The painter used clean and smooth lines and minute colors to depict the blouse, the exquisite embroideries on the shoulders, the transparent headscarf and traditional style necklace, all these make up a typical Romanian representation.

2.1.2 Theodor Aman (1831-1891)

Theodor Aman, one of the most important Romanian painters, after perfecting his painting techniques in Paris, brought a refreshing air of academism to his homeland and utilized it in his artworks.^[3]

"The union of Principalities", preserved in the Art Museum of Iași, is one of the most significant masterpieces of Aman. The union of Moldavia with Wallachia in 1859 was a landmark of the process of Romanian unification, which gave Theodor Aman the opportunity to create a work that could preserve the precious historical moment. The girl on the left wears a folk blouse with a white background and navy-blue embroidery. The embroidery is arranged from shoulders to sleeves. The polychrome belt tightened in the middle connects the "zadie" below, which is a kind of wool fabric in the folk costume from some regions, decorated with wide black stripes, alternating with red or orange ones. On her neck, she wears "salbă" which is a traditional necklace

made of gold or silver coins. The girl on the right wears a white folk blouse with ornamental red stitches, and from the waist down there is a full skirt of fiery red flaring out. She wears the beaded necklace named "partă" around her neck, also in vivid coral red.

At first glance, although the garments worn by the girls share some similarities, there are many nuances that can imply that the two country girls come from different regions in Romania, whose economic status, rituals differ from each. But, regardless of these distinctions, it seems that they are very close, as intimate as sisters from a family, embodying the union between Moldova and Wallachia, whose solidarity can overcome any difficulties and interference of powerful countries.

2.2 Impressionism

Impressionism in the field of painting flourished between 1867 and 1886 which sparked many key ideas of modern art and marked the detachment of modern art from traditionalism and academism. The characteristics of impressionist painting are the mobility of the object or figure and the pursuit of real light. “They give life not only to the greatness of nature and creature, but also to the ordinary landscapes, which are present on the outskirts of cities, in the stations wreathed in mist, on the racetrack, in bars.”^[4]

2.2.1 Nicolae Grigorescu (1838-1907)

Known as the soul of Romania, Nicolae Grigorescu (1838-1907) wrote this way: “The feeling colors, not the brush. You can paint everything with just a piece of charcoal, but all the colors in the world will not give you the blue of a single flower if you do not have it in your soul.”^[5]

Grigorescu’s works reflect the ordinary and tranquility of village life. From the painting “The country woman with pails and child”, we can enjoy a delightful concert of light, shadow, wonderful soft tones and smooth strokes. The characters and landscapes are integrated in an ingenious way: the shadows of objects that make up the background carefully avoid the contour of the woman and child, that highlights the character in a natural way. “Grigorescu used a fast and energetic brushing in painting. He insisted on the use of color to delimit the plastic forms of spots, instead of line.”⁶

After 1875, Grigorescu began to paint rustic portraits, and it has gradually developed in a new genre of portrait. In the case of the painting “Country woman from Muscel”, created in 1874, the fine brush builds in a minute composition the look and the whole facial expression - the light, the color of the lips, the rosy cheeks or the carefully shaped forehead and bridge of nose that rise from under the headscarf. As for the clothing worn by the character, both the clothes and the ornaments around her neck, have typical features of the Muscel area. Married women in the Muscel region wear headscarves that are characterized for being silky and very fine, especially long and adorned on the whole surface with small embroidered stripes. In addition to the headband, the garment in the painting is extremely lavish. The details of this blouse are in accordance with the description of the folk blouse from Muscel by Dr. Maria Camelia, “... the predominant use of

gold and silver threads in embroideries, the fabric for making blouse is composed of wool and cotton woven with metallic threads and will be decorated with rigorous geometry of motifs. Small embroideries in diamond pattern are in the upper part of sleeves and collar where are in bright cherry-red.”⁷

2.2.2 Ștefan Luchian (1868-1916)

Ștefan Luchian (1868-1916), he brought a radical modernist atmosphere to Romania and accomplished the further development of Romanian painting which surpassed the Impressionism and moved toward post-Impressionism.

In “The country woman” this work, Lucian used short, thick strokes of paint belonging to the techniques of the impressionist style to capture instant impressions. Starting from his personal vision, Luchian strives to express the changing and transient aspect, using the contrast between light and dark and jumping brushes to make the portrait of a young and bright country woman unfolded on the canvas. Due to the fact that he removed all the small details from the garment, the

overall appearance is natural and simple in a very effortless manner. The color of the woman’s costume is warm, very soft, with an amazing harmony that emphasizes the beauty and femininity of her face. The round face of the young country woman and the seemingly unpretentious and lively personality are perfectly embodied, just as she enjoys the appreciative eyes of the painter and admirers.

2.3 Expressionism and Cubism

Joseph Iser (1881-1958), was an expressionist and cubist painter, with distinctive Parisian influence. Iser was also inspired by the world of the peasantry, being in contact with the country life in Dobrogea.

“The woman of Muscel” marks the gradual maturation of Iser’s style. Inspired by the expressionist school, the composition of the painting “The woman from Muscel” is very simple, omitting everything in the background, except shades of green, so that the painting can focus on the central character wearing the bright folk costume. From the perspective of the art manner used in the painting and the overall representation of the peasantry image, Iser tried to outline the figure of the woman and her clothing by sketching. The painter expressed the background and character with thick lines and sharp angles, focusing on the true expression of light, the predominant tone of earthy green and the careless gesture of the young country woman, so that viewers can feel the simple and unadorned rural atmosphere.

3. Conclusion

Clothing, for us, is enough to capture the soul of an era. In the past, instead of just a garment, the folk costume was a sign of a person's origin, and now it is a way to retain old traditions and a source for the sense of belonging to a nation.

In ancient times, the main fabrics used to make folk clothing were hemp, cotton and wool, which were made by hand in the household. Since then, clothes have been used to express the social status, class and profession of an individual. In the 19th century, after the Phanariot era and the return of secular monarchs, Romanian folk costume gained the symbolic value and was translated into civilized language. If we take a closer look at the paintings that show the costume of that period, we can see that the Romanian folk costume has been gradually influenced by the dress from the royal court and added French style elements.

In Romanian today, from individual to country, the need for a unique national identity is expressed at all levels, so as to distinguish itself from other European countries. This need urges today's society to take over the dialogue with the old traditions and to regain the representative values that incorporate Romanian creativity in all areas of national culture.

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