

ROMANIAN ART SOCIETY - A LANDMARK OF THE AUTOCHTHONOUS AESTHETICS IN 1918

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Abstract: *On March 9, 1918, the Romanian Art Society was founded in Bucharest. This was an organization that appeared as a form of protest at the proposal of an authorized artistic force of the time, the Artistic Youth Society, addressed to the artists who were mobilized by the Great General Headquarters of the Romanian Army in Iasi to participate in the great exhibition that they organized in April 1918. Revolted by the academic-romantic-idyllic spirit, reflected in the works of the representatives of the Artistic Youth Society, out at the issues of daily life, artists such as Ștefan Dimitrescu, Camil Ressu, Nicolae Tonitza, I. Ștefănescu, Ion Theodorescu-Sion, Nicolae Dărăscu, Alexis Macedonski, Ionescu Doru, Oscar Han and Traian Cornescu wanted to create an artistic bastion that would provide them with a framework where their aspirations can be revealed and offer them the legitimacy to seek a line of expansion and deepening of the ways of expression specific to Romanian art. During the period 1918 - 1924, the Romanian Art Society became the main attraction of the ideals of the artists who were mobilized on the front of the First World War and who contributed to the realization of works of art, of a high artistic level, grounded in the surrounding reality. Thus, the Romanian art becoming in this period the carrier of a humanist message based on the promotion of national specificity, a real landmark of the aesthetics of the time.*

Keywords: *autochthonous aesthetics, artistic bastion, Romanian art, the Romanian Art Society*

1. INTRODUCTION

Beyond the rumble of social and political life, in the context of the actions of 1918, which will be crowned by the event of the Great Union, de facto concluded on December 1, 1918, the cultural scene in the Romanian space will know, through the specifics of the artistic manifestations, a series of transformations, based on an intensive process of revalorization. In this sense, we witness an artistic avant-garde promoted and supported by important artists of the time, including: Ștefan Dimitrescu, Camil Ressu, Nicolae Tonitza, I. Ștefănescu, Ion Theodorescu-Sion, Nicolae Dărăscu, Alexis Macedonski, Ionescu Doru, Oscar Han and Traian Cornescu. They have outlined a common framework of ideals and professional aspirations, which they have materialized in the creation of an association called *Romanian Art* and through its actions.

The origins of the *Romanian Art Society* are among the actions taken in the second part of the First World War when, in the refuge from Iasi, artists were allowed to practice the craft on the front and moreover they were given the opportunity to create an association in which they

would group and through which to express the avant-garde ideas they promoted and sustained. Thus, in circular order no. 9400 of June 23, 1917, of General Constantin Prezan, head of the General Staff of the Army, was intended to create *the National Military Museum*, which "would include, among other things, images representing "the moments of affliction, as well as the strain through which we hope to fulfill our national ideal" (Brezeanu, 1964:145).

In this context, a number of 35 plastic artists, painters and sculptors, were mobilized by the General Headquarters of the Romanian Army in Iasi, and they were provided with the necessary means to carry out this artistic mission. According to the circular order no. 9400 of June 23, 1917, of General Constantin Prezan, the ensuring of the necessary means to achieve the artistic mission of the 35 plastic artists concerned: "1. These artists will be part of the General Headquarters (Section 3 adjutant). Those who are not mobilized will be assimilated to the rank of lieutenant and will receive the salary and allowances due to this grade, and those mobilized, the rights of degree they have. 2. They will be allowed to go to the front and to the localities where they will be able to take

different sketches asking for the permission of the respective command or services. They will appreciate and decide on the requested permission, given the situation and local military circumstances. 3. For establish the identity of these artists, they will be issued personal permits from the Grand General Headquarters" (Brezeanu, 1964:148). As far as artists are concerned, they committed themselves that all the works of art that they would conceive and execute would be entrusted to the state property, giving up any kind of reward in connection with their realization.

On the back of the page on which the circular was drawn, the names of the sculptors and painters involved in this artistic mission were written: sculptors - Lieutenant Jalea Ion, Medrea Corneliu, O. Han, D. Mățăoanu, Al. Călinescu, Al. Talpoșin (Severin), G. Stănescu and painters - Lieutenant Stoica D., Lieutenant Teodorescu Sion, Lieutenant Cornescu Traian, Lieutenant Crețoiu Alexandru, Second Lieutenant Em. Lăzărescu, Second Lieutenant Brăescu Tache, Second Lieutenant Al. Poitevin, Aurel Băieșiu, C. Petrescu Dragoș, Troteanu Remus P., Aurel Constantinescu, Șt. Dumitrescu, Toma Tomescu, Niculescu Andrei, Negoșanu Grigore, N. Mantu, Camille Ressu, Al. Macedonsky, N Dărăscu, Bulgăraș Petre, Ionescu G. (Doru), Hirlescu, Ion Mateescu, Briese O, Bacalu Constantin, Ignat Bednarik and were written in handwritten the names A. Chiciu and R. Hette (Brezeanu, 1964:148 - 149).

The first result of this initiative was the organization of an exhibition containing 38 paintings and 23 sculptures by 20 painters and 12 sculptors, including the names of artists other than those initially involved in the great artistic mission. It was opened in January 1918 at the School of Belle-arts in Iasi, with the name: "Painting and sculpture exhibition of artists mobilized by M.C.G" (Brezeanu, 1964:145).

2. GROUP ON THE FRONT, ROMANIAN ART AND REPRESENTATION OF THE IDEAL OF NATIONAL REUNIFICATION

As a result of the harsh, poor and miserable living conditions that the artists mobilized by the Grand General Headquarters in Iasi faced during the First World War, they outlined a common framework of ideals and professional aspirations, which laid the foundation for what was called the *Romanian Art Society*. At the foundation of this association was the desire of artists to achieve a different kind of art than the one promoted at the time, namely: an art that is anchored in reality and

illustrates the autochthonous specificity: "The spirit of sacrifice and abnegation of our people, who endured the horrors of the war, to which the artists themselves often participated as combatants on the front, inspired most of them the desire to create an art anchored in reality, traversed by humanity and dwelt on an autochthonous specificity" (Oprea, 1969:74). In this respect, in the house of the painter Șt. Dimitrescu from Iasi, part of the mobilized artists, signed the twinning document of the *Romanian Art* group, and on March 9, 1918 in Bucharest, the *Romanian Art Society*, whose president was Ion Theodorescu-Sion, was founded. The founding artists - Ștefan Dimitrescu, Camil Ressu, Nicolae Tonitza, I. Ștefănescu, Ion Theodorescu-Sion, Nicolae Dărăscu, Alexis Macedonski, Ionescu Doru, Oscar Han and Traian Cornescu - expressed their desire to make art through humanity and placed themselves in a position of adversity against the *Artistic Youth Society*, an important forum for launching and affirmation of artists of the time, which, according to the artists involved in the organization of the *Society Romanian Art* had become the bastion of an academic-romantic-idyllic art, which was ruined by the surrounding reality:

In the nineteenth year this is the seventeenth artistic exhibition of the "Youth"; years of war "Youth" is meant to mean in the history of society with two vine leaves... (Șirato, 1967:161)

or

indifference and passivity are in today's situation, sins that need to be removed by awakening the social sense. Nothing more damaging to the phase of a culture than ambiguity, nothing more disturbing than eternal compromises (Cisek, 1967:194-195).

According to its statute, published in *Luceafărul* magazine from 1919, the founders of the *Romanian Art Society* wanted to support and develop the contemporary painting and especially the popularization of the artistic works inspired by the history of the Romanian people. Because of the respect they enjoyed for the cult of national art, the statute set out as a goal:

a) developing, spreading and encouraging beautiful arts; b) organizing annual exhibitions; c) research of the Romanian national sources: painting, sculpture, architecture, iconography, fabrics, bark, wood sculpture, pottery and everything related to national rustic decorative art, bringing them to the general

knowledge through exhibitions, publications, conferences, original works or reproductions of any kind. The exhibitions will take place all over of the country, especially in Transylvania ... to make known our plastic arts and the richness of our national art; d) creating a library and an art gallery; e) protection of all artistic monuments; f) encouragement of any national art work; g) supporting the members who form it and any other comrades even not part of the society (Oprea, 1969:75).

3. THE EXHIBITIONS OF THE ROMANIAN ART SOCIETY AND FORESHADOWING ITS NEW TRENDS

On April 18, 1918, the founding artists of the *Romanian Art Society*, joined by N. N. Tonitza and Dimitrie Paciurea, opened the first exhibition of the newly established society in four halls of a shop located on Lapusneanu street no. 18, from Iasi, where all the exhibitions were organized at that time. They exposed the painters Traian Cornescu, Nicolae Dărăscu, Ștefan Dimitrescu, Ionescu Doru, Alexis Macedonski, Camil Ressu, Ion Theodorescu-Sion, Nicolae Tonitza and the sculptor Oscar Han.

From the beginning there was a concern of artists directly involved in promoting their actions. Thus, on April 13, 1918, in the *Neamul românesc* magazine, appeared the article entitled "Painting and sculpture exhibition of artists mobilized in the Great General District", which brought to light the artists who exhibited and their art works. A similar article appeared in the same magazine on January 30, 1918 as a result of the organization of the first such exhibition (Brezeanu, 1964:150).

The organization of this exhibition takes place in the context in which the *Artistic Youth Society* invites the artists of the new avant-garde in Romania - the group on the front, concerned with the extension and deepening of the artistic expression of Romanian art, to participate in the exhibition organized in April 1918 to Bucharest. It is about an attitude that the new avant-garde take to distance themselves from *Artistic Youth* and to demonstrate divergences of opinions and artistic aspirations, especially in the context in which the representatives of the *Artistic Youth* to mask the refusal received have proposed to organize a retrospective Romanian art exhibition with works by missing or absent artists in the last 10 years, who were in state galleries or in private collections, including the names of artists associated with the front group such as Camil Ressu or Ion Theodorescu-Sion (Oprea, 1969:75).

Thus, although they did not have the time to perform outstanding artistic works, this aspect was less relevant, since the new artists wanted to present their new artistic vision they had proposed and which the context calls for:

... the short period of the previous exhibition of the Grand General Headquarters and, the unfavorable working conditions did not give them the opportunity to perform some special artistic works, but they made known their intentions to present the harsh reality of life " (Oprea, 1969:75-76).

Moreover, the representatives of the *Romanian Art Society* criticized other aspects related to the place that the *Artistic Youth* in the Romanian artistic culture occupies. It was criticized how judging the works that were selected to be part of the time exhibitions, as well as the impartiality of the judges:

You have not left us to live with you as equal, in the profession of our talent; you want us to grow in the shadow of your talents. And then why the quarantine exerted by any jury, in all its forms, towards us, before you came, and its absence from the members of the "Youth"? Not! We do not want it anymore, we're tired, we are not kids that need a nanny, we're just «well-known artists» now (Șirato, 1967:137 - 138).

Also, the representatives of *the front group* criticized the lack of depth and innovation, as well as the poor language of artistic representation promoted through the *Artistic Youth*:

Looking at their artistic manifestations, we find that "Youth" ages: because alas - the artistic is left with only the kind, and its sadness, today, is a bad old age. Some of her members are artistically - if they do not happen to be those who have never been sturdy and healthy - irremediably ankylosed; others, conscious, apply painting in the colors of youth, simulating the effect of the tumult of youthful blood effluvium. However, we admit it to their youth early it was a struggle that ended with a successful - above all - economic one. The "Youth" organization has always presented itself to the public in a tight phalanx and annual, ending by imposing an "artistic taste" on the public. That he did not know how to cultivate this artistic taste [...] is the great guilt of "Youth" and is the reason that the furrow cut by it in the field of Romanian art is much wider than deep (Șirato, 1967:161)

and

No artistic orientation, that is, the rallying at a new or old school, decides the quality of an artistic

genre, but the expression of an extract of potential sensibility (Șirato, 1967:162 - 163).

The mercantilist spirit is another feature associated with the *Artistic Youth Society*, criticized by artists representing the *Romanian Art Society*:

It was the moment when the artists found, pleasantly surprised, that art can be not only a vocation but also a "business" [...] Today we see the result: artistic cohabitation and purely material interests have established, with time, a physiognomy related technique between different members and a fragile artistic conception at the common level (Șirato, 1967:162).

Beyond all the criticisms brought to the *Artistic Youth*, the representatives of the front group bring to attention the necessity of a new artistic current, which is also concerned with the education of the public, a "healthy artistic stream, which removes the taste of the big public from everything that triumphs through triviality and affection" (Șirato, 1967:138). But it must be independent in order to be successful and to impose a new space of art, in which honesty occupies a central role:

... the reason, apart from the intimate anguish of "Youth", is that we believed the time to come to build our home where we would be host and not guests, that this place would be the temple of art in which we will serve the Holy Mystery of Communion, or will it be the shop where we will make art trade? We will be priests or merchants, according to circumstances and talents. And we, the public, bow down with respect for sincerity in any form and ultimately moral, as an effect (Șirato, 1967:139).

In addition, it is considered that the "awakening of the social sense" and the formation of the young people in the spirit of the authentic artistic values are needed:

Romanian art will have to be a block from now on, a rock that will stop the penetration of so many mistakes and horrors in the mentality and in the spiritual image of the younger generations. Enough little things have been exalted to the rank of idol, many ridiculous and lying myths have been propagated by angry ignorant (Cisek, 1967:194).

From 1917 to 1924, we can talk about the most prosperous period of the *Romanian Art* movement. *The Romanian Art Society* organized eight high-level artistic exhibitions and gathered around the most representative Romanian artists. Through the

ideals that has promoted, it has gradually acquired the prestige enjoyed by *Artistic Youth*, the latter becoming for a period of time, after the first world conflagration, a movement that only benefited from the aura of prestige it has achieved with many years ago.

The second exhibition of the *Romanian Art Society* was organized in March 1919 in Bucharest, in the Arta Hall, on Franklin Street. In the minutes of March 10, 1919, concluded at the meeting of the members of the Romanian Art Society, it is specified that the opening of the exhibition will take place on March 22 at 11 a.m. (Brezeanu, 1964:150). Within this exhibition, new founding members co-opted to the group *members on the front*. Among the exhibitors were: Mișu Teișanu, Gabriel Popescu, Ion Theodorescu-Sion, Traian Cornescu, Alexis Macedonski, Nicolae Dărăscu, Camil Ressu, Oscar Han, Ștefan Dimitrescu, Cornel Medrea, S. T. Tomescu, Marius Bunescu, Ion Jalea, Nicolae Tonitza, Ionescu Doru and others.

The exhibition was organized together with the *Artistic Youth* and also in a space close to it (vis-a-vis), in order to create "the possibility of confronting the quality and the two tendencies promoted" (Oprea, 1969:76). The representatives of the *Romanian Art Society* consistently presented the real life of towns and villages and, in addition, showed a special qualitative exigency. From the same minutes concluded on March 10, 1919, we find out that the entrance to the exhibition was paid:

Entering exp. will be paid. On the opening day the entrance will be 10 lei for the people who do not have invitation and in the other days will be 2 lei. Monday will be free (Brezeanu, 1964:151).

and that there is a concern for the presence of one of the members of the society during the whole period of its opening: "It is decided that every day for the exhibition of the society to be present in the exhibition in turn one of the members of the society" (Brezeanu, 1964:151), as well as a concern to promote this action in the press:

The following members are charged with giving advertisements to the newspapers: Tonița, Ștefănescu I., Macedonsky, Ressu, T-scu Sion, Cornescu. Mr. Ștefănescu was charge to conceive the first poster" (Brezeanu, 1964:151).

The 1920s, 1921s and 1922s brought three more exhibitions organized by the *Romanian Art Society*, which managed to surpass all the artistic

manifestations that took place in the capital of Romania at that time. The difference between the artistic quality of the exhibits present at their own events and those present at the *Youth* events was net in favor of *Romanian Art*. Among the members of these exhibitions were: Octav Băncilă, Marius Bunescu, Traian Cornescu, Nicolae Dărăscu, Ștefan Dimitrescu, Ionescu Doru, Iosif Iser, Alexis Macedonski, Theodor Pallady, Camil Ressu, Francisc Șirato, Ion Theodorescu-Sion, S. T. Tomescu, Nicolae Tonitza, Constantin Brâncuși, Oscar Han, Ion Jalea, Cornel Medrea, Dimitrie Paciurea, Nina Arbore, S. Maur, Max Herman Maxy and others. The purpose of these artists was to fit the step "according to the aesthetic rhythm of the time" (Oprea, 1969:76) and to impose "a common artistic creed" (Șirato, 1967:141).

The 1923 and 1924 society exhibitions brought an extra prestige to the organization, which was imposed on the Bucharest market as the main artistic movement in Romania. The movement has co-opted new members, some coming from the movement *Artistic Youth*, such as: Jean Al. Steriadi, Mișu Teișani, Dumitru Ghiață, Petre Iorgulescu-Yor. Correctness, punctiliousness and probity were the essential features of the selection of artworks that were exposed. Thus, in 1923, 168 exhibits were presented, and in 1924 there were presented 88 works of art (Oprea, 1969:77).

4. THE ROMANIAN ART COMPANY FULFILLED ITS PURPOSE!

In 1924, N. Tonitza, Fr. Șirato, Șt. Dimitrescu and O. Han retreat from the *Romanian Art Movement* and will establish at the end of 1925 one of the most prestigious artistic associations formed in the interwar period in Romania, with the name "The Group of Four". This action, however, along with some animosities that had arisen among the members of society as a result of the fact that some of its members had begun to take up positions in the juries of the exhibitions and leadership positions to create their advantages, created a rupture within the *Romanian Art Society*, which led to its collapse. This was also contributed by the action of some members of the association who advocated the re-establishment of the Official Salon, hoping for a democratic opportunity to affirm all artistic talents (Oprea, 1969:77-78).

An ultimate attempt to resuscitate the *Romanian Art Society* was carried out in 1927 by Ion Theodorescu-Sion, who "tried, unsuccessfully, the resurrection of the old group" (Brezeanu, 1964:147). He

takes the initiative of the re-establishment of Romanian Art as, as he writes to Fr. Șirato, on December 8, its appearance is very necessary now that «the growing tide of dilettantism and the derision of public taste create real harm to art and artists in Romania» (Oprea, 1969:78).

Thus, at the beginning of 1928, part of the former members of the society, to which some young artists are added, rebuild the former *Romanian Art Society*. The re-emergence of society is positively welcomed by the press and by some of the art critics.

In the spring of 1928, the new members of the society - Catul Bogdan, Constantin Brâncuși, Leon Biju, Marius Bunescu, Nicolae Dărăscu, Henri Catargi, Ionescu Sion, Anastase Demian, Ion Jalea, Iosif Iser, Cornel Medrea, Aurel Kessler, Mihai Onofrei, Corneliu Mihăilescu, Theodor Pallady, Dimitrie Paciurea, Jean Alexandru Steriadi, Tache Papatriandafil, Tache Soroceanu and Ion Theodorescu-Sion organized an exhibition. However, art critics and the press do not receive enthusiastically many of the exhibits - 55 oils and 10 sculptures are criticized (Oprea, 1969:78).

This situation has reduced interest in the movement that had just been revived, for it was a sign that the ideals that led to the birth of the movement were overwhelmed, and that others had slowly taken their place. Thus, the cultural necessity of asserting the conscience of the Latinity of the Romanian people, a fundamental principle that the artists representing *the front group* had sustained and promoted with great success between 1917 and 1924, had gradually and naturally been replaced by the necessity of creating an arts without concessions, "able to withstand the increasing wave of dilettantism and mediocrity" (Mihăilescu, 1928). The aspirations of the "Battalion of Revolutionaries," as N. N. Tonitza had pencil them and synthesized "Their Ideal: Art. Their weapon: sincerity. Their tradition: nature. Their enemy: the rancid of artificiality" (Brezeanu, 1964: 148) had been replaced and a new way of referring to the creation and forms of artistic representation took its place.

4. CONCLUSION

The Romanian Art Society appeared in a context in which the political and social scene of the Romanian territory had events of great significance that would contribute to one of the most important national historical moments: the

Great Union, which led to the establishment of Great Romania. This was, in fact, the purpose for which Romania entered in the First World War on the Entente side. The role of the artists who formed *the front group* and who were involved in the war either as fighters or as true "war reporters", with the owl of rendering some of the history of the Romanian people in the images, to be testified over centuries, it was an overwhelming one. In this sense, the creation of the *Romanian Art Society* represented a moment of avant-garde manifestation that best responded to the artistic needs and ideals of the time.

The activity of *the Romanian Art Society* enjoyed, for a period of seven years, a great resonance as an artistic movement in Romania. It has become the main initiator of the ideals of artists who have been mobilized on the front of the First World War and has contributed to the realization of works of art, of a high level of plastic and anchored in the surrounding reality. Thus,

Romanian Art was the carrier of a humanist message, mainly supporting the national specificity.

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