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Tradition and Universality in Romanian Modern and Contemporary Portraiture

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Abstract

In Romanian art, portraiture evolved throughout a significant period, starting the medieval times until the present, and went through numerous changes in vision and technique. In this article, we will refer to a series of aspects specific to the modern and contemporary era of Romanian art, which are periods of maximum blossom of portraiture, when many artistic personalities distinguished themselves.

We intend to analyse a series of remarkable works of art that have become true benchmarks of portraiture. We will refer to some of the most representative creators who stood out in this artistic genre, by evoking famous names of notable portraitists of the past two centuries.

Touched by influences of western art but keeping, at the same time, an important genuineness mark due to our national cultural specificity, the evolution of Romanian portraiture aligned with the broader European trend of the genre, being recognized due to an individualized approach of features as well as to a careful speculation of the psychological depths of the represented models. In the current context, all these aspects concur in a character of integration of these works in the much more complex universal artistic phenomenon of portraiture.

Keywords: *portrait, physiognomy, painting, sculpture.*

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1. Introduction

In the present paper, called *Tradition and Universality in Romanian Modern and Contemporary Portraiture*, we have in view the presentation of some aspects which are specific to portraiture in the history of universal art, and also some features of this artistic genre in the Romanian artistic creation from the last two centuries, focusing our attention on the most representative examples of artists which made themselves known through the art of portrait.

Regarding the artistic plan, the 19th century should be regarded as a phase of transformations and transition, the genre of portrait evolved from the academic realism which is specific to Neoclassicism to the representations which were no longer tied to the conventionalism met up to that moment. On the whole, the succession of movements and artistic trends which are specific to this period cannot be characterized by the unity of technique and style, like it happened before, in fact, it offered the proof of a vast research of a new form of artistic expression in all fields of creation, including portraiture. By the specific way of understanding the concept of portrait, the 19th century has been a starting point for the art of the centuries to come, for, after getting accustomed to a great diversity of styles and representation techniques, its peak would be represented by the works of postmodern art.

The genre of portraiture continued to be practiced fully respecting the evolution of the artistic fields that it served, though it happened more and more rarely and in more non-conventional formulas compared to the ones of the past, permanently referring to the sociocultural development of that period. Through it represents a particular field of artistic creation, the portraiture of the 20th century can be considered representative for the period when it was created, it managed to underline the entire succession of artistic orientations and aesthetic trends known up to that time, through its quality of visual expression, both through its forms and its conceptual background. These changes were directly reflected also on the representation of one's human image (of portrait, in particular), various artistic experiments put in light the result of political, social and cultural involvement of the creators of art.

If we refer to the field of portraiture, the art historian Shearer West underlined that, in the past, the portrait had to catch both the resemblance and the character, the status or the position of the model. On the contrary, in modern times, these aspects changed significantly compared to the vision

of the artists from the previous eras. The same historian suggested that the major changes that appeared in Modern Art became obvious through the invention of photography, the rejection of *mimesis* and last, but not least, through the refusal to associate portraiture, in general, with the traditional representations of the past (West, 2004, p. 187). Despite these changes, the portraiture has always had a representative place in the creations of the 20th century and those of the beginning of the 21st century, thus becoming consistent through a large conceptual and stylistic diversity. In this respect, it is a living proof itself the plurality of contemporary artistic tendencies (many of them are even divergent), some of the artists of this period preferred "abstract" portraits, while others continued the old practice and tradition of this artistic genre (West, 2004, p. 188).

2. The Romanian Artistic Nationalism

Similar to what happened in universal art, in Romanian art, portraiture has evolved during a significant period of time, starting with medieval ages and continuing up to nowadays, presenting various changes of vision and technique. In modern times and also contemporary for our Romanian art, various personalities, painters and sculptors made their name known, thus placing portraiture in a special place in the context of visual creation. We will refer to a few representative names of this genre and we will illustrate and provide details concerning works of art that have been considered landmarks in the history of art for their contemporaries and for the descendants of their creators.

When we refer to Romanian art, both in painting and sculpture, - and in general, in portraiture - we can feel the influence of Western art, very many autochthonous artists studied in important artistic centres in France, Italy and Germany. Thus, the influences of Western art have been remade especially in the works of autochthonous artists, they took over and adapted specific elements from the creation of great universal masters to their own artistic needs, at a thematic and technical level. In this respect, we can speak about a specific anchorage of Romanian art, modern and contemporary, in universal art, and the authenticity of the works created by Romanian artists who used elements with national specificity.

Among the autochthonous artists in whose creation, we can detect elements of nationalism and universality, we mention the painter from 1848 (Sava, 2010) Constantin Daniel Rosenthal (1820-1851), known as one of the first important Romanian portrait artists of the 19th century. He particularly

insisted on the artistic representation of the psychology of the model. The romantic side of his works can be noticed in portraits, in typical scenes and allegorical compositions.

One of the most famous paintings that he created in Paris, around the year 1850, was *The Revolutionary Romania*. For this work, the artist was inspired by the profile portrait, covered by a veil, of Maria Rosetti, represented in a traditional costume, holding a national flag on her shoulder and a dagger in the right hand, the entire ensemble symbolizes Romania in an allegorical way (Florea, 1982). Painted in France, the work was probably inspired by one of the most known romantic creations of Eugène Delacroix – *Liberty Leading the People* made in 1830. The similarities between the two paintings did not envisage compositional framing, but the created atmosphere and the symbolic image of the feminine allegorical character that was the embodiment of an entire nation's ideals. The romanticism of the image harmoniously connected to the realism of representing the portrait, the result being an original painting which reminded both of national specificity and the influences of French art.

In the spirit of romantic art, Rosenthal appealed to gestures and objects having a rich symbolic meaning. Among these, the look of the character – oriented towards the upper part of the image –, seems to open the compositions, bringing dynamism to the ensemble through the ascendant diagonal, thus suggesting hope for the Romanian people. Moreover, the imposing position of the left arm expresses an attitude of courage and protection of the national spiritual and material values which are represented through the necklace of royal golden coins (Ionescu, 2008) that the woman is wearing. The flag which is on the shoulder represents the patriotism of the Romanian people, while the dagger which is held tight in the right hand is a symbol of the desire to defend the people.

Unlike the work of the French artist who placed the action in a well-defined space, representing the silhouette of the Cathedral *Notre-Dame* de Paris in the right, while in the left, there is a group of revolutionary people, Rosenthal did not choose a similar way of spacial identification, the area lacking recognizable architectural details, though the atmosphere which was created evoked a specific episode from the historical fight from Dealul Spirii (Jianu & Frunzetti, 1953).

The method of representation of the character reminds us of the photographic image, the symbolic atmosphere of the work seems to be part of a terrible historical moment for the Romanians. Furthermore, the artist

used the intense chromatics to underline the expressive face of the character, the dark background underlines the face and the light clothes of the model, while the shades of red and yellow make the pictural ensemble vivid.

3. Gheorghe Tattarescu: National or Universal

Together with Rosenthal, another Romanian artist showed his preoccupation for allegorical painting, he also marked representative moments from the history of Romanians through his works, his name being Gheorghe Tattarescu (1820-1894).

As far as the work of this great artist is concerned, its conventional language (Florea, p. 72) was also preserved in the case of the work called *The Awakening of Romania*, which was inspired by the Revolution from 1848. Unlike Rosenthal, Tattarescu treated the subject in a very different manner, significantly getting closer to the type of representation which has a religious character, by taking over some features which are specific to the Italian academic art, that were adapted to the autochthonous specificity. Thus, the artist chose a "universal" approach, representing his character in a unitary way, influenced by the creations of Ancient Rome, by the humanist tradition which was opened by the Renaissance painting and Neoclassical art.

Regarding composition, the work was divided in two registers, the artist made the distinction between the "real" or mundane space, from the lower part of the image, and the "supernatural" one of the deity, situated in the superior area. As a connection between these two, intermediating the relationship between the human and the divine side, the artist painted an angel that awakens the feminine character which symbolizes Romania, reminding her of the presence of divinity and the support offered to the Romanian people.

The emotional charge of the image is augmented by speculating specific accents at a chromatic level. Thus, for representing the upper register, the artist appealed to a tempered chromatic gamut, using colours such as blue, coloured grey and white, meant to underline the idea of divine transcendence, while for the lower area, dominated by shades of brown, the painter used a refined series of contrasts while representing the clothes of the angel, respectively the flag that was in the right hand of the allegorical character.

4. Brâncuși the Father of Modern Sculpture

"*Being a Romanian artist of universal calibre*" (VlasIU, 2001), Constantin Brâncuși (1876-1957) remains in the history as one of the emblematic personalities regarding abstract art, preoccupied only by essential topics, such as the feminine and the masculine, birth and death, love and eternity, genesis and resurrection (Cârnelci, 2001).

Though in the first part of the career – during his short apprenticeship that started in 1907 (Stîrcea-Crăciun, 2006)-, he was influenced by the work of Rodin, Brâncuși succeeded in breaking away from him, creating his original style through the essentialization of the real and the introduction of elements of autochthonous inspiration. In this respect, the Romanian sculptor reduced the form to its most essentialized expression, increasing its force of suggestion and its capacity of ideational representation and transposition in the space of imagination (Bogdan, 2001). In the case of Brâncuși, these features reflect an attempt of reconstructing the intimate structure of the form, but also a permanent search for pure ideas in the field of artistic creation (Șușară, 2003).

The portraiture of Brâncuși is directed towards the realism influenced by Rodin, in the works *Stănescu*, *Dărăscu* or the *faces of children* towards an increasing type of abstractization of *Miss Pogany*. For the last topic, the muse of the artist was Margit Pogany, an artist who had been in Paris between 1912-1913 and she was a model for him in several situations. Despite the sensibility of the execution, the face of the woman served only as a landmark for a later more complex interpretation, reached by the artist after numberless studies and versions on the same topic. In this respect, we notice the fact that, up to the third decade of the 20th century, Brâncuși created approximately nineteen versions of studies dedicated to *Miss Pogany*, making the public interested and also the critics, due to the essentialized and stylized features of the face, respectively of the innovative way of treating the sculptural surface.

This manner of elaborating one's own creation reveals one of the features of the work of Brâncuși that will provide its universality character. Being inspired by the Romanian traditional fond – beliefs, myths, artistic forms -, and also by the Western works that the artist studied at the beginning of the 20th century, he has become a landmark of modern universal art.

5. Corneliu Baba, a Pioneer

Showing an increased interest for the “*inner world of the characters under its moral aspects*” (Florea, p. 272), another drawer and exceptional painter who became a reference point of the Romanian portraiture, was Corneliu Baba (1906-1999). Stylistically speaking, his works have always been at the limit between Realism and Expressionism, sometimes having a dramatic character, suggested by the contrasts between light and shadow, and also through the chromatics which is, in many cases, austere, these aspects underlined the psychological portrait of the characters.

The artist has made numerous portraits using a drawing of very good expressiveness (Goga, 2007) and a colour palette of great richness and subtlety, showing remarkable characters of the Romanian culture such as Mihail Sadoveanu, George Călinescu, Tudor Arghezi, George Enescu, Maria Tănase ș.a.

As far as selfportraits are concerned, we can notice in this case the honesty of this artist while painting his own features, experimenting, just like Rembrandt, different emotional phases which are encapsulated either by drawing, or in colour. The change of the physiognomical features of the artist, through the catching of the natural process of becoming older, reveals the deepening into age (Șușară, 2007), the artist created a series of selfportraits suggestively called *Eu jucându-mă de-a Baba* [I playing hide-and-seek], an amazing mixture with the pictural style of (Lăzărescu, 2006), in which the importance of expressiveness and simplicity of the drawing is especially valued. All these features prove the quality of this remarkable artist of being a fine observer of inner movements and a flabbergasting analyst of conscience processes, in the open manner of the great painters of the European Baroque.

Being an extremely long-lived artist whose work defines in particular the stylistic development of the Romanian from the 20th century, Dan Hatmanu (n. 1926), an apprentice – at the beginning of his carrer – of the master Corneliu Baba, it marks the idea of continuity of Romanian portraiture (Ciopraga, 2006). It had its separation point from the influence of *Baba's artistic movement*, forming a unique style, characterized by the expressionist notes and the humoristic elements especially introduced in his self-portraits. Just like his great master, Dan Hatmanu became remarked through an ample series of portraits, thus succeeding, given his ability of noticing the essential and his introspection skills regarding the human soul (Ilisei, 2011), to underline the diversity and depth of human typologies.

Beyond the obvious resemblance, in the known work *Selfportrait as a harlequin*, the artist is extremely suggestive while representing a complex of inner personal feelings, the amazed look, a little melancholic and sad, in contrast with the idea of humour and playfulness of transposing himself into a harlequin. The impression is strengthened by the general chromatics of the work, dominated by nuances of dark blue, black, grey and white, thus underlining the duality of the represented character through sharp contrasts: happy and sad, comic and tragic, realistic and also expressionist through the way of usage of forms.

Going beyond the borders of local recognition, Dan Hatmanu has become a well-known name also abroad, having exhibitions in the most important artistic centres of the world.

6. Figurative and Abstract in the Art of Adrian Ghenie

On the artistic esplanade of the last years, many names of autochthonous artists made their appearance, maybe one of the most sonorous is the one of the young painter from Baia Mare called Adrian Ghenie (n. 1977). From a stylistic point of view, he is at the vorder between figurative and abstract, with breathtaking incursions in both directions, through a visual formula which reminds us of the creation of Francis Bacon, Adrian Ghenie is, without any doubt, the most spectacular product of the contemporary autochthonous artistic creation. This fact is fully confirmed by the constant increase of the market rate of his painted art, this field seemed to have little to say in the troubled contemporary artistic context.

Being faithful to the idea that "*painting is the only environment which expressed the viscera side of this world*" (Vasiliu, 2015), Adrian Ghenie considers that "*the secret of every good work of art means the ability to handle failure*" (Vasiliu, 2015), the distruction of faces and anatomic details in general, by the (apparent) chaotic superposition of layers of colour, thus offering the portraits a new energy and an unexpected dynamic.

In portraiture, through the works that have caught people's attention up to this moment, the creation of Ghenie is an act of moral retaliation based on the artistic background of the political dictatorships of the past. His works create a continuous dialogue between the past and the present, inviting the public to participate at the sybolic and artistic peculation of some "guilty" personalities of the long-ago epochs: Darwin, Hitler, Goering, Dr. Mengele, Stalin, the family Ceaușescu s.a.

The satire of Ghenie is expressively incarnated through the irremediable deformation of the face, the represented characters tried, not in many cases, to get rid of the pictural pasty matter that literary covers the face (Uricariu, 2013). Thus, Ghenie proposes a perpetual punishment with an expected ending, in which the artist and the public, together, play the role of the spectator or of the ordinary human being, who is in most cases deprived of any opinion or reaction in front of dictatorship decisions. The critique is easily mixed with humoristic notes, titles such as "Pie Fight Study" or "Pie Fight Interior" simulating the whipped cream battle of the movie characters and demythologizing known personalities and images. As an artistic procedure, the disfigurement of faces made by Ghenie has the punishment connotations that we mentioned and also an important socio-historical component, bringing back into discussion this topic and inviting to meditation, from an artistic base, not lacking irony, faces, facts or events that have marked humanity. He uses the travesty of the sick characters of the past, putting them in the light of criticism and of the deconstruction of their image and personality, having atypically postmodern approach.

By borrowing images and topics of interest from different historical periods or cultural areas, including the autochthonous side, just like it is the case of the artistic approach of the portraits of the Ceaușescu in the moment of receiving the sentence to death, his attitude being also connected to the international visibility that he enjoys nowadays, Adrian Ghenie has passed beyond the border of autochthonous or "national" expression, becoming an artist with qualities, at least for the moment, universally recognized in the world of today's art.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, we can underline the fact that the art of Romanian portraiture is part of the bigger European tendency of the genre, the works of the Romanian artists from the modern and contemporary period are remarkable through an individualized treatment of the physiognomic features and through an attentive speculation of the psychological depths of the represented models (Stoleriu, 2015). Although it is briefly described in this context, their creation can be regarded as points of reference in this context, their creation is a landmark for the history of Romanian art and for portraiture in general, their value being recognised not in very few cases and at a world level. And, in order to synthesize this idea, given the powerful media that we benefit from, once again we remark the most significant

names – among the ones mentioned above-, they enjoy special attention both from art critics and from the collectors or the auction houses: Constantin Brâncuși and Adrian Ghenie. As we all know, the sculptures of Brâncuși (who became again the main focus of the public opinion in the context of the public acquisition of his work *Cumînțenia pământului* = *Sophrosine or the Wisdom of the Earth*) just like the paintings of Ghenie, that are sold for amazing amounts of money abroad, this thing being truly remarkable, especially in the case of the second artist who, though young, he enjoys a continuously growing market rate.

International recognition of these artists is not a haphazard thing, it is the emblem of the proved valued and built through the effort of many generations that followed one another, in the attempt of setting an artistic national Romanian specificity, also having deep roots in the universal artistic creation.

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