

REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN AND OF THEIR ROLES IN THE WORLD OF THE ROMANIAN VILLAGE. PICTURE POSTCARDS FROM THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY AND THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.23740/TID22025>

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the visual discourse about women and their roles in the Romanian village, a discourse created by the picture postcards from the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. To reach this aim, we considered the following objectives: to realise a typology of the used research material, to identify the main representations of women, to analyse the relationship between the representations of women and the other represented elements (men, children, rural landscapes, households, tools, etc.), to discuss the main features of the visual discourse about the women from the rural area, for the respective period, based on the previous identification of the elements that became iconic through repeated representation. We used a critical visual methodology and discourse analysis to explore the picture postcards that represented women from the Romanian village, underlining the connection between their meanings and the cultural reality. Our findings are useful for similar research on gender and its visual construction from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th.

Keywords: gender, visual discourse, iconic elements, Romanian rural area

Cite this article as: Ilovan, O.-R., Ciupe, I.A., Muntean, A.-D. (2022). Representations of Women and of Their Roles in the World of the Romanian Village. Picture Postcards from the End of the 19th Century and the First Half of the 20th Century. *Territorial Identity and Development*, 6(1), 87-109. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.23740/TID22025>

INTRODUCTION

Gender, a cultural construct which is significant concerning its impact on personal and territorial development, influences how people interact in society and their access to the resources necessary both for their development and that of their communities (Miroiu, 2010; Potter et al., 2012; Voiculescu & Lelea, 2023). In the process of constructing gender, representations appear

in the form of written text and images. Both are being operationalised through a cognitive process and create hegemonic or subaltern discourses, more or less contested in a certain society. This article aims to explore the visual discourse about the Romanian peasant women as rendered by picture postcards from the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Its objectives consisted of realising a typology of the used research material, identifying the main representations of women, analysing the relationship between the representations of women and the other represented elements, and discussing the main features of the visual discourse about peasant, for the respective period, based on iconic elements.

The inferior temporal limit of our study is around the year 1870, when the first picture postcards were produced in the Central and Eastern European space (cf. Ilovan & Maroși, 2018). The superior limit we chose was around World War II, more exactly the year 1939. During this period, the analysed space was mainly rural, with most people working in agriculture and having only minimum education. The peasant communities were traditionally organised around agricultural and manual work (Miroiu, 2010, p. 575). In addition, there were certain dysfunctionalities (e.g., in the case of infrastructure and services) and there were a series of crisis periods when the identity landmarks were searched for in the rural area, perceived as an essence of the Romanian society (Ciupală, 2018). This was also a time when gender identity was under reconstruction, due to the multiple changes affecting the Romanian space and society (Samoilă, 2018, p. 860).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Reflecting the territorial identity features of an area, representations can be defined as “the social mediation of the real world through uninterrupted processes of meaning, between referents (geographic objects, facts and phenomena), their signifiers (narrations, discourses, images, etc.) and meanings” (Banini & Ilovan, 2021, pp. 1-2). Dubow also pointed out that a representation is “a symbol or image, or [...] the process of rendering something (an object, event, idea, or perception) intelligible and identifiable” (2009, p. 645). Therefore, representations are mental images of reality, constructed through cognitive processes. Among many types of representations, the visual ones are produced and circulated through various media. As a result, a visual discourse is created. This visual discourse, formed by recurrent and related visual representations, produces a certain visibility or habitual way of seeing, which is transmitted over generations and contributes to constructing people’s set of values (Ilovan & Merciu, 2021, p. 42).

In our research, we used picture postcards as representations. Postcards construct cultural identities (Conradie, 2009) and are “culturally produced texts” (Van Eeden, 2009, p. 119) or “products of everyday culture” (Van Eeden, 2011, p. 600). They generated discourses about societal development and culture (Ilovan, 2019, 2020, 2021; Ilovan & Maroși, 2018), and also more specific discourses such as the one about places as tourist destinations (Pongajarn, van der Duim, & Peters, 2014), being considered necessary for touristic consumption, educating visibility (Thiesse, 2000, p. 185). Picture postcards were often deemed as historical sources because by examining them researchers could reconstruct past events and experiences (Ginzburg, 2015; Ciupală, 2018; Negustor, 2020). In the case of late 19th century and beginning of the 20th Romanian space, the visual discourse about the Romanian nation was built using picture postcards, among other means, because such visual representations were no longer a communication tool for the elite, but entered mass production and were available to regular people, too (Thiesse, 2000; Ciupală, 2018). Considering this, in our present research, we point

out the visual construction of a gendered peasant culture, based on the tropes of tradition and authenticity.

Our article fits in the field of Gender Studies, an interdisciplinary one, currently approached by Cultural Geography and other sciences. In the theoretical context promoted by Cultural Geography, the concept of representation is significant because the analysis and interpretation of gender representations take place by enquiring into the geography and history of places, into the development and culture of the society in a certain period (Hall, 1977a, 1977b; Chartier, 1989, 1993; Ginzburg, 1991; Rose, 2014; Banini & Ilovan, 2021). One of the important aspects of visual representations consists of their creator's intentions. Considering how statements are structured in visual representations, these construct a visual discourse that influences the perceptions of the people who lived during a certain period (Rose, 2014).

In Romanian gender studies, significant contributions are based on exploring the various roles of women in different periods. However, previous research underlined also continuities, such as the patriarchy that characterised the Romanian peasant society (Miroiu, 2010, p. 575). Research so far also focused on the political, legal and social circumstances affecting women's lives in Romania at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, emphasising women's organisation and their actions to contest the patriarchal order and to raise awareness about women's rights (Văcărescu, 2014). This was in a context where women's education and social activism was considered a key factor in shaping the national imagery (Samoilă, 2018, p. 858).

METHODOLOGY

The research material of this study consists of 114 circulated or uncirculated photographic postcards where women are present, either in the foreground or in the background, or in the larger context of the rural landscape. We downloaded these picture postcards from online databases, most of them specialised ones (Hungaricana.hu; Akpool.co.uk; Darabanth.com; Biblioteca Centrală Universitară "Lucian Blaga" Cluj-Napoca, Romania – bcucluj.ro), or from websites such as Magazinul-colectionarilor.ro, anticariat-unu.ro, Ebay.com, and Okazii.ro.

From a methodological perspective, after systemising these data, we turned to a critical visual methodology (cf. Rose, 2014; Ciupală, 2018). We used visual analysis to deconstruct the messages of the collected visual imagery, of the corpus of the 114 photographic postcards that represented women from the Romanian village, underlining the connection between meanings and the cultural reality. At the same time, we used discourse analysis for the same visual imagery, as we considered these images as texts (Bal, 2017, p. 5). Discourse analysis was defined as research on the process of knowledge production, as well as on producing power relations, identities, and subjectivities (Mattisek, 2018). The method of discourse analysis enabled us to understand how a certain type of knowledge was produced, in this case a visual discourse about Romanian peasant women. Findings, by using this method, emphasise the subjectivity of social relations. This is because the way people understand the world and construct their values and customs is influenced by representations (i.e., in the form of image and language products) (Mattisek, 2018). In addition, we also took into account geographical and historical materials (listed in the References) useful in order to integrate the respective visual representations in the societal discourse of the period.

A TYPOLOGY OF THE USED RESEARCH MATERIAL

A first result of our research was a typology of the used research material. Considering the sources we accessed, mentioned in the methodology section, most of the collected picture postcards were representations of the Romanian southern area, followed by those of the Transylvanian one. These were published by Romanian and foreign publishing houses. Among the Romanian ones, Șaraga and Schwartz appears in 1914 and constitutes an association (bookstore, publishing house, stationery – en gross) which publishes picture postcards with Romanian places and traditions. In the second decade of the 20th century, this association was a leader in the picture postcards industry in Romania. It bought Socec, one of the biggest publishers, at the end of the 1930s. It also published in the interwar period.

Some of the analysed picture postcards were produced by publishing houses located in Berlin and Hamburg. These published images with “Romanian types” – peasants in front of their houses – standing to be photographed and taking care of daily business. NBC – Neue Bromsilber Convention is such a publishing house active in the first decades of the 1900s (Stahli, 2021, p. 141). Both Romanian and foreign publishing houses delivered photographic picture postcards, many of them focusing on traditional costumes, and were realised either in the studio and in the village world, outside or in the house (cf. Stahli, 2021).

When selecting the representations of Romanian women, we also identified (but did not used in this study) representations of women from the other ethnicities living in the Romanian space (Hungarians, Transylvanian Saxons, Ruthenians, Gypsies), for both the urban and the rural areas. For the selected picture postcards, we identified three types of images for the Romanian peasant woman (ethnic representations). These types were a result of our systematic study of the 114 photographic postcards: truthful representations (undesigned ones), designed representations (with an obvious scenography, but trying to maintain veracity), and romantic representations. Different discourses about the rural area and peasant women intersect through these three types of photographic postcards. Due to the existence of these three types of sources, a more nuanced identity of the Romanian peasant women is created, and this fact challenges the romantic representations of a beautiful and happy rural area. As a result, the visual culture to which picture postcards of the period contribute is richer and less stereotypical.

Truthful (undesigned) representations

The world of the village is represented in an authentic, unretouched manner. Women are photographed in the environment they are living in (Figures 1, 2, and 3). These representations of women in the Romanian rural area seem to be portrayals of rural Romania itself (Figure 1). Viewers see women in front of their houses, or spinning in the lane, without posing to be photographed. Most of the time, these women are barefoot, carrying diverse objects, children or spinning (spindle in hand, wherever they go or find themselves: at home, in the lane, in the field, walking through the riverbed watching over cattle). People are photographed in their daily clothing; they do not wear any special or Sunday clothes.



Figure 1: Romanian peasant houses

Source: Published in Berlin, not circulated

In Figure 2, the viewer sees that the house wall is broken. Part of the wall is repaired near a window, which is very small. The photographed women appear in traditional roles (spinning, manufacturing clothes; a mother caring for her baby). The pictured local inhabitants are rather passive, they are mere objects part of the rural landscape.

In the first photographic postcard from Figure 3, viewers are presented with a family in front of their house. The women and the child are barefoot, while the man wears boots. On the mother's white apron, one can see dirt. The whole representation can be read as a representation of rural poverty. The stalks on the house testify to the peasants' close-to-nature lifestyle. This photograph is part of a series of picture postcards where the following appear: Romanian types – milkmaids; Romanian national costumes; – in the countryside, milking the cows. The second postcard from Figure 3 shows a Romanian woman barefoot, spinning. She is walking through the village, with animals in the background.

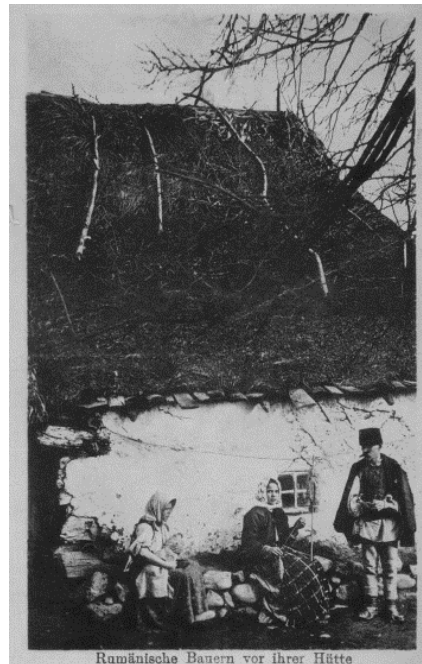


Figure 2: Romanian peasants in front of their house

Source: Published in Berlin, circulated in 1917.

Original title in German meaning "Romanian peasants in front of their cottage"



Figure 3: Romanian types – Peasants; Romanian peasant

Source: Photograph by O. Miehlmann, Hamburg. Not circulated; Published by NBC. Not circulated.

Original titles used in that of the figure, after translation into English

Designed representations, trying to maintain veracity, seriousness and authenticity

A second type is that of the directed representations, with a clear scenography, where the Romanian peasant women appear in daily or Sunday traditional costumes in their private space – within the house (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Romanian Woman in Săliște

Source: Published in Sibiu by Emil Fisher Publishing House. Not circulated. Bilingual title (Romanian and German) used in that of the figure, after translation into English

Romanian peasant women are represented also in the public space, as in Figure 5. It displays a photograph titled “The beauties of Săliște village” (Transylvania). In the centre of the photograph, viewers see a girl in traditional clothes, women around her being dressed up in their day-to-day clothing, and an old woman. They wear shoes, smile, and look at the camera.



Figure 5: The beauties of Săliște village (Transylvania)

Source: Published in Berlin by NBC. The gain from selling the picture postcard will be donated to a foundation that takes care of the descendants of those who died in the war. Photograph by Ltn. Rhien. Circulated in 1917. Original title used in that of the figure, after translation into English

Romantic representations of the Romanian peasant woman

In romantic representations of the Romanian peasant women, viewers can identify a gender hierarchy. Men appear in more dominant positions compared to women, based on the following: they wear shoes, the way they look at others, they sit while others stand, the work they do, etc. Women are often represented barefoot, a reality for many during that period, but also in order to sexualise their image (within the limits of decency as perceived before World War I and during the interwar period). For instance, especially in the photographs by Alexandru Bellu, we see that women are photographed walking through rivers beside cattle. One example is that of a woman spinning, and walking through the Cricov River. We can see part of her breast and one leg above the knee. She is close to nature, to the primitive. Such an image has a double role (see the first image in Figure 6): a) to show, in an idealised manner, an activity in the countryside; b) to sexualise the woman as she is photographed with her chest partially uncovered, in a moment when she raises her skirt to cross a river, exposing her legs for the viewer. Another image from the same collection shows a young woman leading a cart drawn by oxen. In this cart, an old, white-bearded man ensures the picturesque of the image (see the second image in Figure 6).

The picture postcards from the Al. Bellu collection are based on artistic photographs, directed and idyllic images where women are photographed with household and agricultural tools, near their houses or in nature. The animals are part of the props. These picture postcards that used Al. Bellu photographs were produced by several publishing houses: Socec & Co. S.A., “Cartea Românească”, L. Alcalay, and C. Sfetea, all in Bucharest. Published especially in the 1920s and after, these images present also a place and landscape: those of the Urlați settlement, in southern Romania (cf. Ciupă, 2018, p. 5).

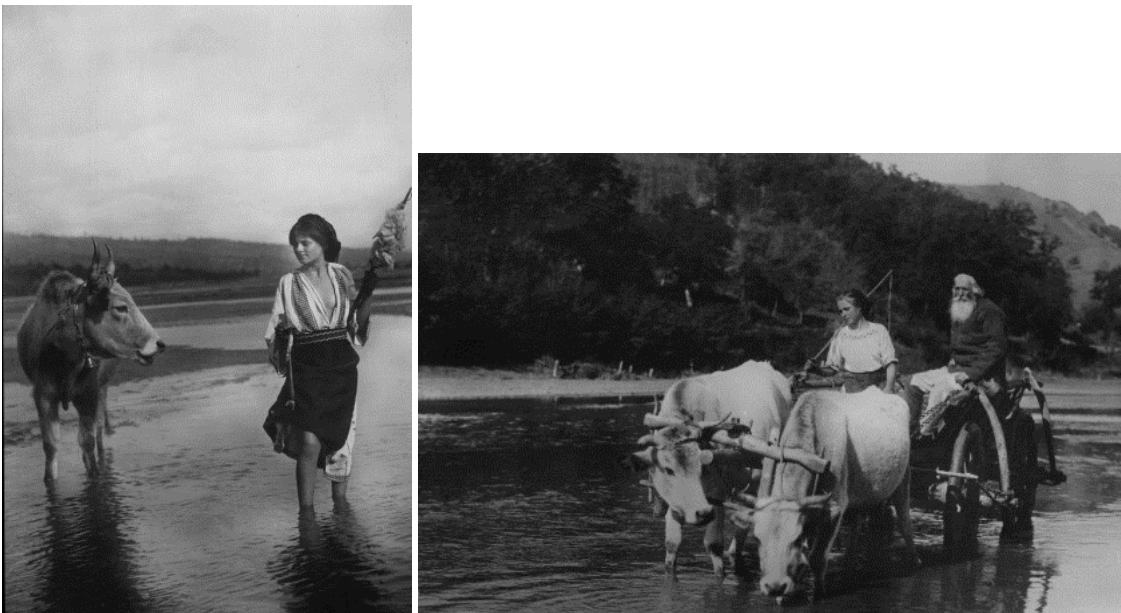


Figure 6: Idyllic country life

Source: Picture postcards published in Romania by “Cartea Românească” Publishing House, Bucharest.
A. Bellu Collection. Untitled. Not circulated

Al. Bellu's photography collection, used for picture postcards, presents an agrarian society that should be perceived as "the genuine space" of the rural world "preserving unaltered values of the Romanian nation" (Ciupală, 2018, p. 1). Al. Bellu¹ tries to represent the 'essence' of the rural world and its inhabitants. However, despite these idealised images, one cannot ignore the elements that hint at the marginal status of the rural area in relation to the process of modernisation of the Romanian society (cf. also Ciupală, 2018, p. 2).

This hegemonic discourse of the romantic picture postcards was supported by other discourses of the period, presenting an idyllic version of peasant life (Miroiu, 2010; Văcărescu, 2014; Ciupală, 2018; Stahli, 2021). Identity and power are reflected in representations (cf. Hall, 1977a, 1977b) and they imbue also the texture of photographic postcards. Picture postcards reflect discourses about Romanian nationhood and use landscape and people to build on purity and beauty and village life, proposing a certain type of emotional engagement with it and place attachment. Moreover, these romantic postcards also construct discourses about the Romanian space as a romantic tourism destination.

Nevertheless, there are some instances when from the idyllic and erotic representations of the Romanian peasant woman (Figure 7), some producers of picture postcards shift to ridicule her innocence and status. Such examples are "The Village Innocent" and others in the same series (Figure 8). The first picture postcard in Figure 8 is part of a series with similar images based on partial nudity and provoking titles. The titles of these picture postcards are in contrast with the young women's partial nudity. The interplay between image and text (cf. Francesconi, 2011) creates humour. These are comic postcards. The message transmitted in this way is imbued with sarcasm and mockery.

Maybe the photographer's intention was to represent youth, beauty, and the purity of the village world, but with an erotic hint introduced by the woman's wearing of an undone shirt, like in Figure 7. This initial message was distorted by adding a mocking title to the picture postcard (Figure 8). On the other hand, it is also possible that these picture postcards were intentionally realised with derision (the data we have about their production could not enable us to decide between the two). The picture postcards offer no information except for being published in Romania.

¹ This photographer is active at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th (he dies in 1921) (Ciupală, 2018, p. 5).



Figure 7: Idyllic and eroticised representations of the Romanian peasant woman

Source: Picture postcards published in Romania by “Cartea Românească” Publishing House, Bucharest.
A. Bellu Collection. Around 1920. Untitled. Not circulated

Clothes and background can convince about the identity of the person, but the title leads to viewer to receive the message in a certain way. The gaze of the young peasant woman is not directed toward the viewer, which is why the latter may savour undisturbed both the nudity and the joke. Most probably, the targeted audience is male, both Romanian and foreign (bilingual title).



Figure 8: Urlați (Romania) – The Village Innocent; In stalks; Faultless.

Source: Published in Romania. The first circulated in 1902. Bilingual titles (Romanian and French) used in that of the figure, after translation into English

In this category of postcards can be included some representations of women from the Romanian Royal family. They appear dressed up in traditional peasant clothes, spinning. In Figure 9, the viewer sees Prince Carol and Princess Elisaveta. In the background, there is nature – the woods. A pitcher is placed nearby, to mimic authenticity, their genuine presence there. Nature has the role to make this bucolic scene a veritable one. Still, everything is idyllic. The

gender hierarchy is obvious in this picture postcard. Prince Carol interacts with the viewer; he looks at the viewer. The princess, his sister, looks up to the prince, conveying to us that he is the main character. All looks are directed at the prince. The princess is part of the landscape. But, in contrast to most represented peasant women (either in veridical or idyllic hypostases), she wears shoes.



Figure 9: Prince Carol and Princess Elisaveta

Source: C. Sfetea Publishing House, Bucharest. Approx. 1910. Circulated in 1918

In picture postcards, Princess Maria is represented alongside her children (Figure 10). She is a peasant mother, spinning, represented between her two sons (second postcard in Figure 10). Besides power and royalty, this picture postcard presents a rustic, natural context, where the Princess, in the foreground, wears traditional Sunday clothes with the best quality elements. One can identify the antithesis between traditional pastoral life, far away from the household, characteristic of men (i.e., the presence of shepherds' bats and Astrakhan hats worn by the boys) and the role of the homemaker woman who is concerned about the household and crafts (because the Princess holds a spindle). At the same time, the image suggests feelings of pride and place attachment, integration, and acceptance. All the represented ones seem close to the people; they are part of the people. The daughter, Princess Maria, and then Prince Nicolae are the ones who attract the viewers' gaze. Especially in the second postcard the mother looks at Prince Nicolae and he looks at the photo camera. Considering these two picture postcards, we may draw the conclusion that women's roles in the rural area of Romania are paid tribute to and idealised by the Royal House members. Such postcards may also promote the image of Romania internationally and of the Royal family, too.



Figure 10: Princess Maria – the mother, Princess Maria and Prince Nicolae; Princess Maria with Prince Carol and Prince Nicolae

Source: C. Sfetea Publishing House, Bucharest, Romania; approx. 1906, Cartea Românească Publishing House, Bucharest. Original titles used in that of the figure, after translation into English

These types of photographic postcards reflect the different motivations of those that produced and promoted them. The idealised and romantic image of the peasant woman in the Romanian space is just one of these types; however, it was the most frequent of representations of women in picture postcards during the researched period. The other two identified representations – the truthful ones (not directed), which reflect more closely the reality of the time, and the directed ones, respectively, but trying to maintain a genuine image of the peasant women – diversify and make the visual discourse about the peasant women more expressive.

MAIN REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN

The Romanian peasant woman appears in evocative poses of her traditional and expected roles. For instance, the symbol of fertility and maternity appears often, and it is materialised through picture postcards where women are surrounded by children, holding, or touching them. Thus, a key role of women in the rural area was that of the *mother*. The picture postcard in Figure 11 presents two women in the foreground, one holding a baby and breastfeeding them. Both women are barefoot and dressed in traditional clothes. The interesting feature consists of the difference between the ways these women arranged their hair. These different ways suggest two different social roles and are in contradiction with the reality of the image: the mother wears her hair plaited in two tails, but the uncovered hair is characteristic of young girls. This is while the woman with a secondary role is presented with her head covered by a kerchief, and this is characteristic of the married woman. As the two women pay attention to the baby, who thus becomes the centre of interest in this representation, a symbol of continuity, family, heritage, fertility, and life. This image of maternity and of aspiration to maternity induces nostalgia for those who do not have children (child, maternity, idyllic village, need for nature).



Figure 11: Mother. Image of motherhood and aspiration to motherhood

Source: Al. Bellu Collection, 1901-1915. C. Sfetea Publishing House, Bucharest. Not circulated

Another role of the woman from the rural area, reiterating itself in the analysed picture postcards, is that of the *wife*. The picture postcard in Figure 12 shows a couple formed by a man, in a commanding position, expressing determination, his gaze directed away from the camera. He stands near his wife who, according to her body language, seems to have only a supporting role in the family hierarchy, obeying her man. Moreover, the woman's diligence, a feature necessary for the wife of a military, is reflected in the richness of the embroidery on her clothes, manufactured by herself.



Figure 12: Wife – Image of the diligent wife, dedicated to her family

Source: Bahnhof und Feldbuehhandel-Gesellschaft m.b.h. Berlin, 1905

Another very important role is that of the *housekeeper*. We may deduce from the picture postcard – “Romanian beauty in traditional clothes” – (Figure 13) that this woman is diligent as there are plenty of crafted objects gathered in a multifunctional living area: decorated plates and hung clay pitchers, the spindle, the white tablecloth (manufactured by the woman and decorated with traditional motifs). This role of the housekeeper is revealed by the presence of the manufactured objects gathered in the area for cooking and dining with the family. The richness of these objects, doubled by the good clothes of the woman who also wears several strings of beads, points to the diligence and richness of the woman.



Figure 13: Housekeeper – Image of the woman involved in household chores

Source: Bahnhof und Feldbuchhandel Gesellschaft m.b.h., Berlin, 1920.

Title in German, meaning “Romanian beauty in national costume”

The roles of women in the rural area did not limit to household activities, crafts and other non-agricultural traditional activities, as the viewers can notice many traditional tools for working in the field and around the house. On the contrary, peasant women got involved in lucrative activities that required much physical effort. Such situations could appear when men were not home (i.e., during the war) or because of the necessities during a certain period. Thus, the image of a peasant woman in traditional daily clothes carrying firewood (Figure 14) suggests the physical and mental strength of the woman from the rural area who, in certain situations, can take over the traditional activities undertaken by her male partner.



Figure 14: Hardworking – Image of the woman involved in hard work for her household

Source: Soccec et Co. Publishing House (Radu Al. Bellio Collection), beginning of the 20th century

In addition, we identified picture postcards where women were represented in the context of *artistic activities*. The selected picture postcard (Figure 15) presents three young women in traditional clothes, with friendly faces, dancing to flute music, inspiring joy and a state of general well-being, in a beautiful landscape, where there is also a picturesque old man. In the background, there is a house typical of the poor. The fact that women are barefoot is a matter of economic statute, and gender hierarchy, not a personal choice (the man in the postcard wears boots). This picture postcard highlights the role of women during artistic entertainment activities. Two of the represented women are married and the one in the middle is unmarried. Despite the fact that the household is poor, the image shows another face of the peasant women's life – a rich social life and their joy of living.



Figure 15: Involved in the life of the community – Image of women's joy for life - dancing

Source: Picture postcard published in Romania by "Cartea Românească" Publishing House (and also by C. Sfetea, Bucharest). Al. Bellu Collection. Around 1920. No title. Not circulated

We did not identify, except for one picture postcard that we analyse below, motifs of the Christian Orthodox religion of the Romanian women, except religious icons on walls. However, German women ethnics from the Romanian space are photographed with the Bible and strings of beads used for praying. Still, spiritual practices played an important role in rural women's lives. This picture postcard, titled „Port Național Român” [Romanian National Costume] (Figure 16) presents a woman in Sunday traditional clothes, on her knees, while praying to the Christian God represented through a cross. This woman wears plenty of jewellery: bracelets on her hands, a necklace, and earrings. She wears leather shoes, and her clothes feature a delicate and detailed work. On her head, she wears a kerchief with a special handicraft. The Christian icon is placed on what seems to be a mountainous cliff, partially covered in vegetation. Nearby the cliff, on the woman's left side, there is a very attentively painted pitcher. We can see nothing in the background, but the way the colour is dispersed could suggest a clearing in the woods. The woman looks sideways towards the religious object, not aware of the viewer who surprises her in this intimate moment. This picture postcard offers viewers a divine image of the Romanian woman, dressed in traditional clothes, her gaze full of love and emotion, praying to the divinity. Thus, the image of the woman in traditional costume merges with the one of Virgin Mary. Coupled with the text „Salutări din Romania” [Greetings from Romania], the picture postcard transmits to the viewer that in Romania tradition and religion are intermingled, women serve it carefully and both are dignified.



Figure 16: Spiritual – The image of the peasant woman in relation to the sacred

Source: Verlag Emil Fischer, Hofphotograph, Hermannstadt, Circulated in 1915.

Original title: "Greetings from Romania"

Women got involved also in other types of social and spiritual activities such as *guessing one's future using a barrel*. A peasant woman is photographed during this activity for women in the urban area (Figure 17).



Figure 17: Peasant woman with barrel

Source: Cartea Românească, București, the interwar period

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN AND THE OTHER PICTURED ELEMENTS

Next, we analysed the relationship between the representations of women and the other pictured elements such as *the agricultural landscape*. In the postcard of Figure 18, there is, on the left, a pack animal (an ox), and on the right, holding one horn of the cattle, a peasant woman. She is dressed in daily traditional clothes and has a black kerchief on her head. One notices her direct gaze towards the camera and the audience, and she exhibits a large smile. Her worked hands, direct look at the camera and large smile (most probably required by the photographer) suggest that the woman is an authentic peasant. The anonymisation of this woman, no mention of date and location, as well as the natural background makes the rural world an idyllic one, stopped in time, with simple and happy people, extremely attractive for the outside viewers. The fact that the woman holds the horn of the cattle suggests a symbiosis between the two, reinforcing her role in the household, and transmitting the message that this role of the woman is genuine. This postcard underlines one more key role of the peasant woman in the mostly agrarian Romanian society of the analysed period: to care for and use domestic animals.



Figure 18: Peasant women in relation to her agricultural work

Source: "Aus den Karpathen" - original title. Nothing is mentioned on the back of the postcard

At the same time, women are photographed often in front of their houses made of unburnt brick, covered by a straw or reed roof that points out *peasants' close-to-nature lifestyle*. In the postcard titled „Vedere la Țară” [View from the Countryside] (Figure 19), the viewer notices an old woman, a fact stressed by the two canes she leans on and her bent back. She is dressed in daily clothes and carries on her back a sack that is also tied around her waist, and she is barefoot. The woman looks directly at the camera and her audience, a frontal gaze that suggests that the woman is not used to having breaks, being busy with work and less sophisticated in comparison with aristocracy's more relaxed positions (Lindstrom, 2007, p. 268, quoting Lalvani, 1993, p. 449). Behind the woman, there is a traditional house where she might be living, most probably built from unburnt brick. In the centre of the photograph, we see a series of additions to the household, under a porch: a cart with wooden wheels, a spare wheel, and a basket made of sticks hanging on the wall of the house. The woman, together with the house and its additions, form very clearly the territorial reality of the Romanian space from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th: an agrarian society, traditional and lacking urbanisation, and, in comparison with the West European one, it is a peripheral space. The lack of the woman's name,

date and place, together with the vegetation and the landscape in the far background naturalises the picture postcard and gives it a feeling of timelessness, fixed, one that does not account for the passage of time. Figure 20 shows a peasant woman weaving a piece of cloth that can be seen also packed up near her loom. There is an icon on the wall. Lighting is done using a petrol lamp.

To sum up the representations so far, most of the time women are represented barefoot, spinning, working at the loom, or carrying diverse objects. They are photographed in varied places: at home, in the lane, in the field, or in the river.



Figure 19: In the household

Source: I. Șaraga & S. Schwartz Deposit, Șelari 7. Original title in Romanian, meaning: "View from the countryside"

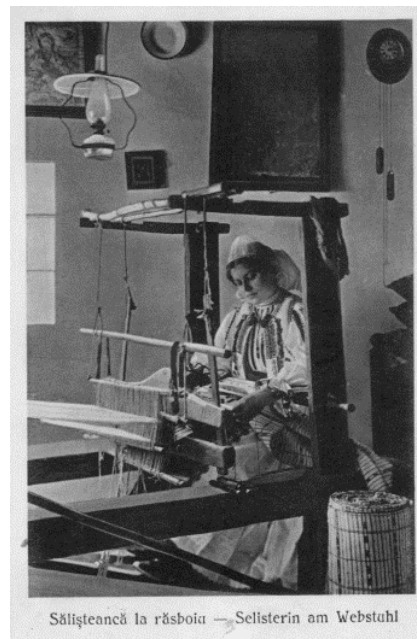


Figure 20: Peasant woman with her tools

Source: Produced in Sibiu by Emil Fisher Publishing House. Circulated in 1915. Bilingual title (Romanian and German), meaning "Woman from Săliște at the loom"

The relationship between the woman from the rural area and her *life partner* presents, likewise, certain defining features. This picture postcard titled *National Costume* (i.e., “Port Național – Rumaenische Volkstrachten”) presents a couple (Figure 21), probably husband and wife, in the natural landscape, near a river, with a small waterfall in the background – a romantic landscape. The two are wearing traditional costumes. They are surrounded by woods and in front of them there is a small pond. In this postcard are also portrayed the gender relationships of the period, in the Romanian rural space. The viewer can notice the man’s dominant position and the woman’s submission. In addition, the man has footwear while the woman is barefoot. He stands in a higher position compared to the woman and he reaches out to her. He also looks at her, obliquely, in an aristocratic manner, while she looks at the camera, this suggesting lack of relaxation on her behalf and more simplicity. The man is sure of himself and masters all.

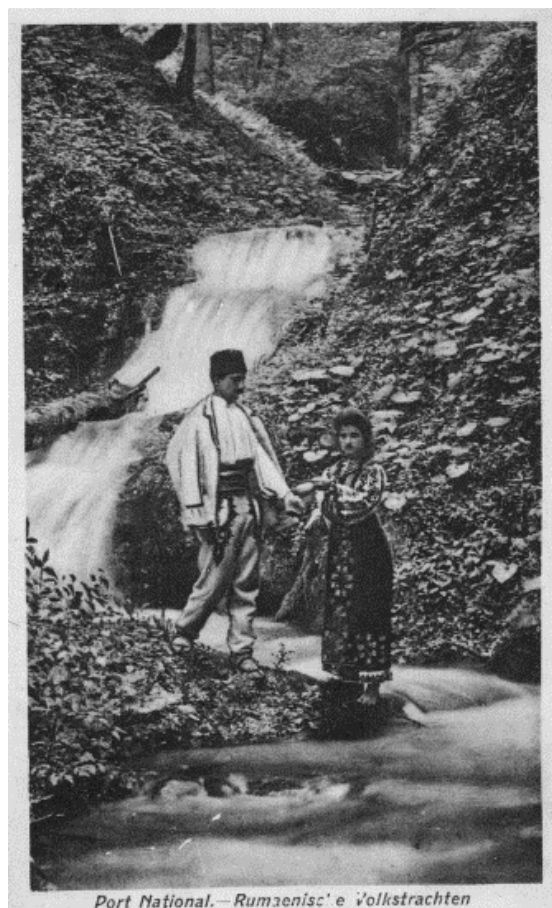


Figure 21: Peasant woman with her life partner

Source: Depozitul I. Șaraga & S. Schwartz, Șelari 7.
Bilingual title (Romanian and German), meaning “National costume”

The woman is represented *in relation to her children*. The selected postcard is not titled and illustrates a mother surrounded by her four children (Figure 22). All wear traditional daily clothes and traditional woollen and rubber sandals. The mother’s central position confers balance and may mean that she is perceived as the protector of the family, especially as she holds one of her children. The viewer notices the family’s frontal gaze, directed to the camera, and their neutral facial expressions. The frontal gaze in photographs is not surprising because it is a feature of the

working class and of the poor (Lindstrom, 2007, p. 268). The five of them are surrounded by vegetation, and behind them, there is a haystack supported by wood. A metaphorical image is created through the absence of the historical context, the anonymisation of the people and photographing them in their local environment (Lindstrom, 2007, pp. 261-262, quoting Albers & James, 1990, p. 357), rendering the rural family as idyllic. The absence of the father from the photograph may suggest the woman's widowhood. This postcard portrays one of the woman's fundamental roles, that of bearing and giving birth to children, a role much praised during the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, in the Romanian space. The flowers that they all hold in their hands are a symbol of life and continuity.

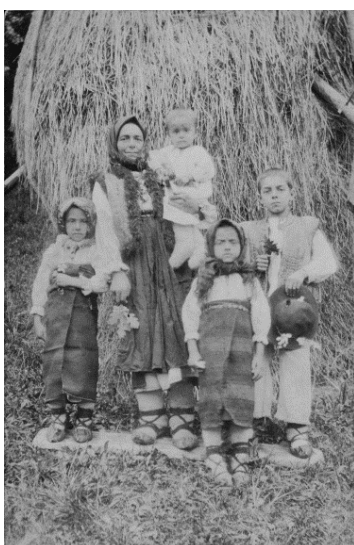


Figure 22: Peasant woman with her children

Source: No source is mentioned on the back of the postcard

With their presence mainly restricted to the private sphere because their duties and roles as mothers and wives manifested there fully, women were meant to completely show commitment to their family, their “main vocation was self-sacrifice” (Miroiu, 2010, p. 577; cf. also Roman, 2001). As in texts from the end of the 19th century, the woman is represented in secondary social roles (cf. Samoilă, 2018, p. 859). Caring for the household and performing their “affective labour” (Ghit, 2018, p. 22) – the upbringing of children – were central activities to the peasant women's life. Still, their hard life is rendered mostly as picturesque.

Based on the above-mentioned findings, the identified key features of the visual discourse about women in the rural area are the following: rural themes picture postcards are present in the research timeframe and are reiterated, creating certain iconic roles for peasant women (including royal family members dressed up in traditional clothes); there are repeated representations of very many traditional tools for working in the field and in the household; the symbol of fertility or maternity is widely represented, translated through the presence of children; the rural Romanian space and image of women are idealised according to the culture of the period (i.e., *sămănătorist* movement); often women are photographed barefoot – an aspect that debunks the Romanian idyllic rural world; men appear commanding in comparison to women, through diverse features: footwear, gaze, sitting position, type of work, etc. The last two features point to a gender hierarchy and to a patriarchal rural world.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of a corpus of 114 photographic postcards focused on the diverse representations of peasant women, their roles, and the elements women from the rural area were associated with. Summing up our findings, we noticed the following: the foreign and Romanian publishing houses produced picture postcards that created a complex image of women from the Romanian village; there are numerous and varied representations of women and some of their elements became iconic; women's roles are varied, but they are traditional ones: mother, wife, worker, etc.; representations are often naturalised, romantic, or sexualised.

Considering the entire discussion above, picture postcards can be a useful source for studying the visual discourse during certain historical contexts, as these representations are based on a certain way of thinking about and perceiving society. More precisely, our findings are useful for similar research on gender and its visual construction from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Moreover, these are relevant for other studies on representations from the socialist period, enabling the identification of continuities and discontinuities in the visual discourse promoted by picture postcards.

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