11 Problematizing Periodization

Folk Art, National Narratives and Cultural Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Romanian Art History*

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Introduction

When in 1924 the Romanian poet-philosopher Lucian Blaga published his famous line 'I believe eternity was born in the village',[1] he evoked a conception of time and space that was at odds with conventional Western, allegedly 'universal', structures of periodization. Attempting to provide a philosophical foundation for the essence of his native land, he privileged the Romanian 'subhistory' and its particular temporal and metaphysical connection between environment and culture. In so doing, he offered a potent example of Romanian interwar efforts to bridge what Virgil Nemoianu calls 'the wide chasm separating Western and non-Western intellectual behavior'.[2] These centred on creative new frameworks for self-understanding that had culture and art at their heart.

In the 1920s, Romanian art historians also looked for ways of overcoming the intellectual 'chasm' between local traditions and Western canons. In particular, they mobilized folk art in the service of narratives that simultaneously were imbricated in the processes of nation building and participated in what Michela Passini calls 'the internationalization of cultural goods'.[3] This was the decade that saw art history assert itself in Romania as a self-confident discipline with international reach in the work of figures like Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcaş (1872–1952), Nicolae Iorga (1871–1940), George Oprescu (1881–1969) and Coriolan Petranu (1893–1945). Trained in the crucibles of Western art history – Berlin, Munich, Leipzig, Paris and Vienna – but operating within the febrile context of newly unified Greater Romania, they realized that the Western model, in particular its hierarchical concept of periodization, did not always offer a comfortable framework for the artistic production of the region. Far from providing universal schema, it tended to explain difference in terms of 'belatedness', 'derivation' and 'peripherality'. Instead, these scholars argued increasingly for the particular temporal rhythms of Romania's own art forms, both Byzantine and vernacular, perceived as deep-rooted, largely anonymous and uninterrupted. In its resistance to periodization, this heritage was believed to have preserved the 'national soul' through centuries of fickle foreign rule, thus offering autochthonous justification for the modern-day political project of nationhood.

This chapter explores the ways in which art historians used Romanian folk art and architecture as a way of circumventing the hierarchical aspects of Western periodization and establishing a more sympathetic framework for the national art narrative in the 1920s. For some, like Tzigara-Samurcaş, Iorga and Petranu, this was bound up with the wider cultural-ideological project of Romania's new post-war political borders. For

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others, such as Oprescu and the French art historian Henri Focillon (1881–1943), it was part of a broader interwar effort to build bridges between cultures by recognizing folk art as 'rooted in something universally human, common to all'.[4]

Problems of Periodization in South-Eastern Europe

As Anca Oroveanu, citing Gombrich, has pointed out, Western art is amenable to periodization, while non-Western art is not.[5] South-Eastern European art, shaped by a medley of Byzantine, Ottoman, Venetian, Georgian, Armenian and Russian influences and their interaction with a strong folk tradition, does not map comfortably onto Western hegemonic ideas of linear time (what Mary Roberts calls the West's 'disabling temporal logic') where the value of art is measured by its chronological novelty and time is historicized through stylistic change.[6] Yet (as Cosmin Minea discusses in Chapter 3 in this volume) for the early scholars who formulated the core art histories of the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, trying to interpret the local art in alignment with Western criteria was not only the result of their training in the main Western centres of art historical thought but also initially part of a wider political drive to demonstrate the Europeanization of the region and its ability to share in the modernist project. Carmen Popescu argues that as soon as the Balkans entered modernity and tried to integrate with the so-called civilized world, they had to negotiate Hegelian 'universal history', as well as respond to the expectations of the Occidental gaze. For 'half-awakened' peoples, 'entering history demanded an entire readjustment of local coordinates in keeping with Western values'.[7] This inevitably led to aspirational, if somewhat contorted, discussions of periodization and style. Tzigara-Samurcaş, for example, wrote in 1924 that Romania 'is the only country where not only all the great periods of European art are represented, sometimes even by examples which are unique within their genre, but where even the most opposing styles merge to give birth to new schools'.[8]

Hegel's development of the Herderian concept of *Volksgeist* to imply that only 'well-defined' people could aspire to a place in 'universal history' meant that the question of national styles became a pressing one.[9] One of the biggest challenges local scholars faced in their quest for a convincing national art narrative was the problem of how to bridge the temporal and cultural caesura between a largely uninterrupted tradition of Byzantine and folk art and the accelerated arrival of Western art forms, institutions and intellectual frameworks in the nineteenth century. Their solution lay in a positive re-evaluation of the atemporal nature of regional traditions, which were seen as existing outside the rhythm of historicized time and preserving a native *simț artistic* (artistic feeling) that transcended the shift to Western forms in the work of modern Romanian artists. Ideas of atemporality, longevity and authenticity thus not only became valuable tools in dealing with the challenges of periodization but also dismantled the Western distinction between fine art object and ethnographic artefact. As Tzigara-Samurcaş (founder of the Museum of National [Folk] Art in Bucharest), wrote in 1927:

> [F]olk art has maintained the superior value of continuity, in comparison to the art of the ruling classes. The latter is very sporadic: manifesting itself only when supported by rulers, in their absence it endures entire periods of stagnation. Another inferiority is the way it varies according to whoever commissions it . . . while folk art remains eternally unchanged.[10]

In their efforts to find alternative frameworks and value systems for art history, such scholars began an interrogation of the temporal, qualitative and spatial binaries that defined the region's alterity, binaries that today have also become the focus of attempts to reconsider the place of local art histories within master narratives and explore new models for dealing with the problems implicit in asynchronicity. The issue of periodization is thus in many ways at the heart of wider discussions not just about time and space in art history but also about geographies of art, concepts of 'circulations' and 'transfers' and theorizing about agency and reception.[11]

Interpretative Frameworks: Parochial versus Universal

Recent discussion of the ways that Romanian interwar art historians engaged with peasant art has often focused on the sometimes contentious nationalist agendas of the actors involved and on the influence of the controversial Viennese art historian Josef Strzygowski, whose interest in wooden architecture and efforts to reorientate art history away from Greece and Rome contributed much to the emergence of nationalist histories of art in the region.[12] Strzygowski's championing of cultures at the margins of traditional art historical interest, his belief in the importance of generative artistic influence from the north and east and his focus on material artefacts over text-based evidence were certainly evoked as legitimation for their national art by Romanian art historians, who used the discipline to construct ideas about identity in the fevered context of nation-building. Nowhere was peasant art given more explicit political value than in the disputed region of Transylvania, formerly part of the historical Kingdom of Hungary. In Cluj (Kolozsvár), where a Chair of Art History was created in 1920 following the Romanianization of the Hungarian university, Coriolan Petranu published important studies of the region's Romanian vernacular architecture. Influenced by Strzygowski, his work, together with that of his younger colleague Virgil Vătăşianu (1902–1993), attempted to bring to light the 'neglected' history of Romanian wooden architecture, particularly churches, and argue for its artistic merits and longevity in relation to Hungarian, Ukrainian and Saxon monuments.[13] Matthew Rampley contends that in the increasingly right-wing atmosphere of the 1930s, the contested field of Transylvanian art became a forum for essentialist ideas that sidelined Romania's minorities and 'threw an instructive light on some of the darker sides of the legacy of the Vienna School'.[14] The perceived insular focus of the search for a 'national soul' in folk art also meant, according to Rampley, that the ethnocentric writings of many scholars in the region 'had a certain parochial quality . . . concerned almost exclusively with questions of national art, which was almost a guarantee that their work would be only of local or regional interest'.[15]

A less provincializing view is offered by Popescu in her assessment of how European cultural politics of the 1920s embraced folk art as an attempt to build bridges between what Blaga called 'major and minor cultures' and rehabilitate those forms of expression not normally considered to belong to the realm of art. She relates this to wider efforts by international cultural organizations, such as the League of Nations' International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation, to create links between cultures after the war and forge a horizontal strategy around folk art (termed 'popular arts') as a way of transcending political geographies and elevating the working classes.[16] The Secretary of the Committee from 1923 to 1930 was George Oprescu who, together with his close friend Henri Focillon, organized the first congress of the Commission Internationale des Arts Populaires (CIAP) in Prague in 1928. Central to Oprescu's strategy was the international dissemination of knowledge about Romanian folk art.

For Oprescu, as for others who wrote about Romanian folk art for an international audience in the 1920s, the growing recognition of the artistic aspects of peasant culture offered a potential solution to a core challenge of art historiography in the region: how to overcome the inferiority implicit in Western periodization. In their writings, one can sense a shift away from the desire – which began in the nineteenth century – for Romania to assert itself as a competent player in the Western art game, and a growing awareness that there was a need, if not for an alternative model of art-related time, then at least for a different understanding of 'art' that minimized the importance of hegemonic temporal periods. Identifying 'authentic' national tradition with folk art rather than fine art became a way of deflecting the negative consequences of Hegelian historicity. But there was still the need, the unspoken plea, for legitimacy through Western acknowledgement. The writings of both Petranu and Tzigara-Samurcaş, for example, frequently make reference to the admiring comments of foreign commentators. Like other small nations, the Romanians also employed that persuasive tool of cultural soft power: the exhibition of 'national art', exported to museums in Western Europe and proselytized through catalogue essays. These are worth looking at, since they served as the international mouthpiece of Romanian art historians in the 1920s and demonstrate the discipline's role in international cultural diplomacy. They also illustrate the rivalries of a small field, particularly between Tzigara-Samurcaş on the one hand, and Oprescu and Iorga on the other.[17]

In what follows, I will discuss a number of key writings about Romanian folk art produced for a foreign audience. In many ways, these established a narrative that shaped international understanding of the field for decades to come. Although it was a somewhat fragile rhetoric, vulnerable to xenophobic appropriation in the interwar years and to reactionary class ideology in the socialist period, it did offer a deft way of sidestepping the problems of the 'universal' model of art historiography and linking the artistic traditions of the past with the arrival of Western forms in the modern era.

Tzigara-Samurcaş and Early Interest in Folk Art as Part of a National Art Narrative

Interest in Romanian folk art as a focal point of study, collection and preservation emerged with the arrival of Western institutions and intellectual preoccupations in the second half of the nineteenth century. Upper-class women played an important role in the early stages: both German-born Queen Elisabeth and British-born Crown Princess Marie collected and wore folk costume and patronized societies dedicated to the encouragement of the crafts, while other female writers and educationalists published some of the first illustrated albums of folk patterns. While these were intended mainly as records of regional differences and manuals for craft societies, they did contain some reflection on the naming, origins and importance of motifs.[18] At this point, folk art, although seen as worth protecting in the face of Europeanization and modernization, was not a significant part of the growing debate around a 'national style' in art and architecture, which tended to prioritize the country's Byzantine past. The beginnings of a public discourse concerning folk culture's role in a national *history of art* can be attributed to Tzigara-Samurcaş and his efforts in 1906, the year of the heady national celebrations of the Jubilee Exhibition in Bucharest, to found a Museum of National Art.[19]

Of the four art historians mentioned at the start of this chapter, Tzigara-Samurcaş is today the least recognized outside of Romania.[20] Even Romanian art historiography has only recently begun to reassess his significant role in the early stages of the discipline.[21] A colourful and argumentative character, he managed to alienate many of his colleagues, accusing Petranu of plagiarism and publicly falling out with Iorga and Oprescu on several occasions.[22] Despite such antagonisms, Tzigara-Samurcaş was a scholar of prodigious energy and a key figure in the emergence not only of art history but also museology and art conservation.[23] During his PhD at Munich University (awarded 1896), he worked with the *Volkskunde* specialist Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, as well as with Heinrich von Brunn (who had supervised Strzygowski's doctorate eleven years earlier) and Adolf Furtwängler. With further study periods in Paris (under Eugène Müntz) and Berlin (where he worked on the collections of the Museum of Decorative Arts under Wilhelm von Bode), he was well-versed in German and French approaches, as well as their strengths and weaknesses when applied to Romanian art. He pioneered the teaching of art history in Romania, arguing – in opposition to Iorga – that the discipline was distinct from history in that 'it speaks a language that can be grasped by all those who have eyes to see, without any need for an interpreter of literary works written in other languages'.[24] His inaugural lecture in May 1911, richly illustrated with his own glass slides, argued for art history's central position among the humanities.[25]

With its valuable record of Romanian monuments and peasant culture, Tzigara-Samurcaş's slide collection illustrated his progressive belief that folk art was as worthy of study as fine art and, consequently, in the need to break down hierarchies of 'high' and 'low', 'fine' and 'decorative' (Fig. 11.1).[26] In this, his interests intersected with the

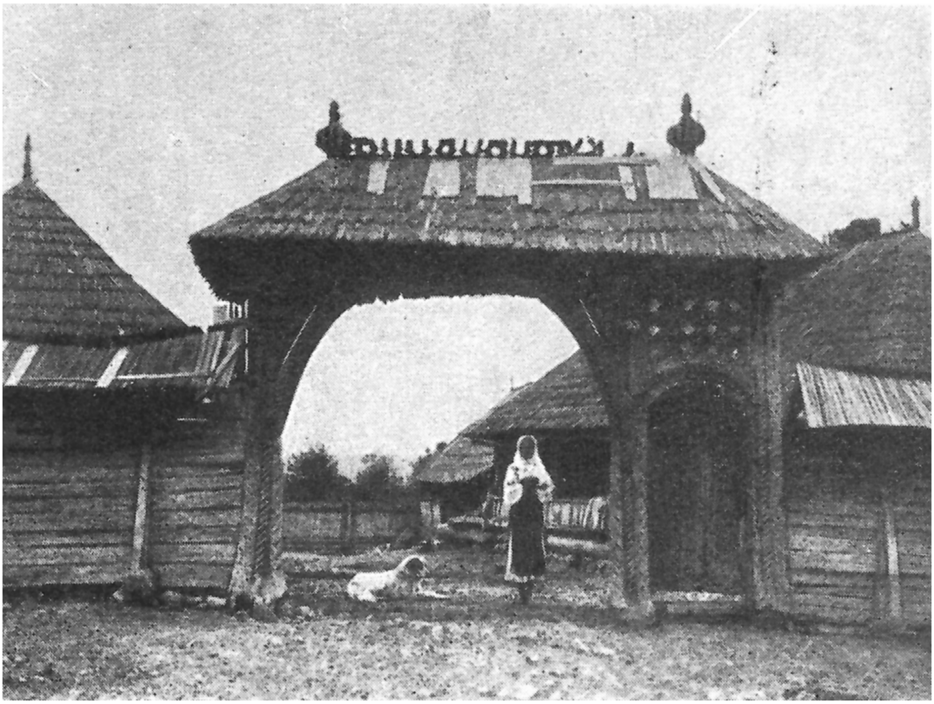


Figure 11.1 Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcaş 'Porte cochère de Bumbesti, Gorj, Oltenie', glass slide, republished in *L'Art du peuple roumain*, 1925.

Photo: Author.

artist Apcar Baltazar (1880–1909) who, in 1908, was one of the first to argue for the role of folk art in creating a 'modern Romanian style' in painting and the decorative arts.[27] This idea was embedded in the plan to house the School of Fine Arts in the same building (the former State Mint) as the Museum of National Art, whose collections, Tzigara-Samurcaş believed, would serve as inspiration for the creation of modern Romanian art. Originally envisaged to bring together all forms of 'national art' – religious art, folk art, prehistoric art, Graeco-Roman art and a picture gallery – in a display that would assert the artistic continuity of the nation from prehistory to the present,[28] the museum's radical disregard of existing disciplinary boundaries was too much for the Director of the School of Fine Arts, George Demetrescu Mirea (1852–1934), who, in a squabble over the allocation of rooms, claimed that folk artefacts would be better housed in the Zoological Museum.[29]

The Standard Periodization Narrative of Romanian Art

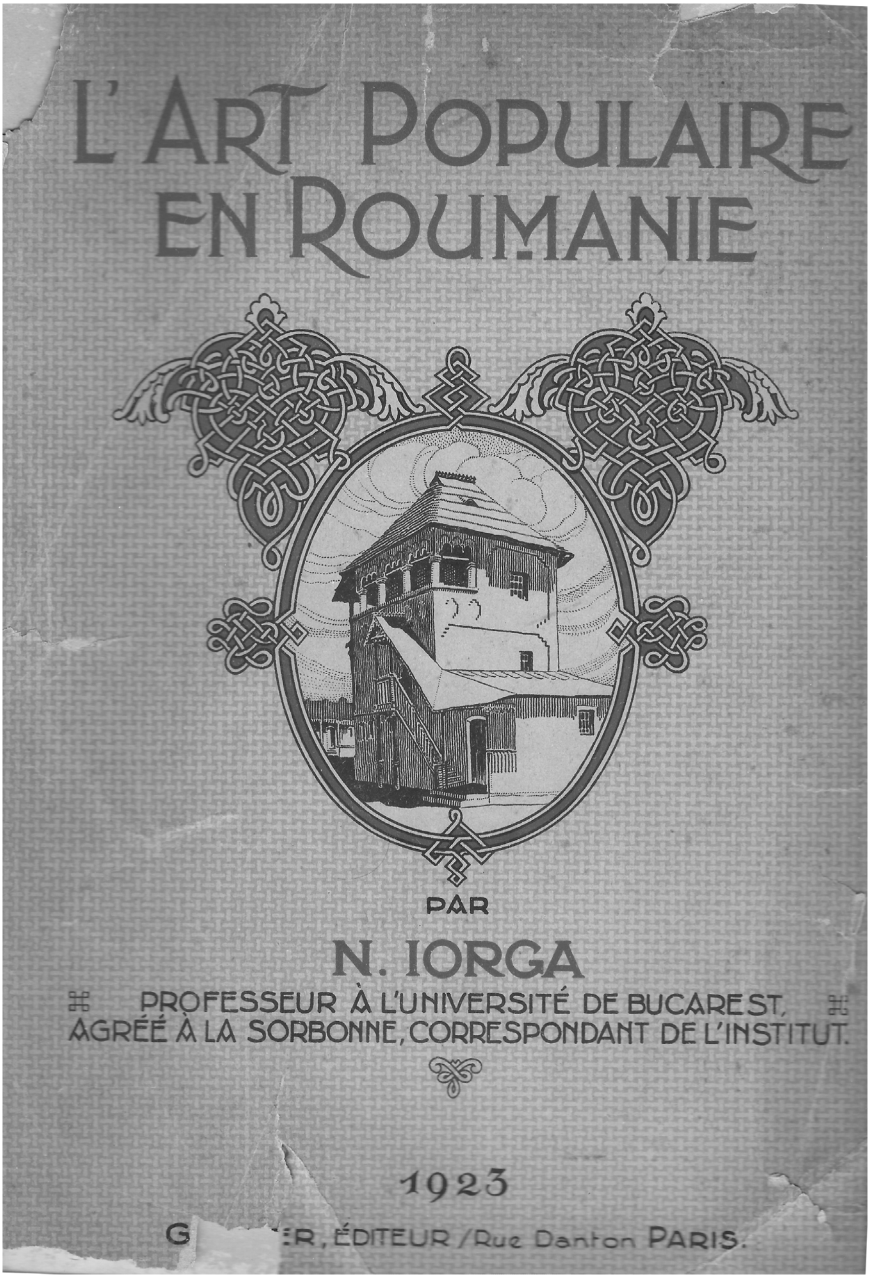
Mirea's attitude was fairly typical of the pre-war artistic establishment, which generally followed Western disciplinary constructs. In 1914, even Tzigara-Samurcaş, in a Paris-published essay entitled 'Esquisse sur l'Art Roumain' (Outline of Romanian Art), was still attempting to justify Romanian art to a Western audience in the West's own terms, including periodization. Almost apologetically, he recognized that, for the foreigner, Romanian art barely dates back further than 1866, when Napoleon III bought two canvases by Nicolae Grigorescu (1838–1907), 'the peasant of the Danube', from an exhibition.[30] The essay, an attempt to remedy this lacuna, then periodizes Romanian art in a manner that became standard for such narratives. With more than a nod to Strzygowski's *völkisch* materialism, it argues that the national artistic treasures 'reach back to the most distant periods', notably the Thracian civilization whose 'splendid specimens of the Neolithic Age', according to German specialists, 'support the superiority of this culture over that of the same period on the shores of the Aegean'.[31] The significance of the Roman period is reduced to a single monument (albeit one Tzigara-Samurcaş returned to frequently throughout his career), the Tropaeum Traiani at Adamklissi from the beginning of the second century. A 'true' Romanian tradition, Tzigara-Samurcaş claims, only began in the thirteenth century with the formation of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia and the start of an uninterrupted tradition of church and monastery building. In discussing their evolution, he uses both the trope of centre–periphery ('this distant corner of old Europe') and belatedness (commenting on the late arrival of Gothic art which, 'having sown its most beautiful masterpieces across Europe, came to breathe its last on Romanian soil in the seventeenth century, thus significantly prolonging the existence of a style long extinct in the West'). To period and style is linked the concept of influence: Gothic art came from the north and entered Moldavia via Hungary and Poland (manifesting itself most successfully in the church of Trei Ierarhi [Three Hierarchs] in Iaşi, 1639), while Wallachia was influenced by its proximity to 'the old towns of ancient Byzantium' and developed 'a fairly pure Byzantine style' in princely churches like Curtea de Argeş (1517).[32] Other influences gradually grafted themselves onto these roots: in Wallachia, Serbian churches became the model at the start of the fifteenth century, the start of the sixteenth century saw the influence of the Orient, while the seventeenth century was coloured by the Italian art of the Venetian-Dalmatian coast. It was the gradual interpenetration of the northern Gothic and the southern Byzantine that, at the dawn of the eighteenth century, finally produced a 'pure Romanian' style under the Wallachian Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu, with its most beautiful example at Hurez Monastery (1690).[33] Moldavia saw its own high point in the painted monasteries of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Tzigara-Samurcaş lamented Western scholars' improper knowledge of this past, criticizing in particular the eminent French Byzantinist Charles Diehl for his poorly informed and 'unengaging' section on Romania in his *Manuel d'art byzantin* (Manual of Byzantine Art, 1910).[34] Strzygowski, on the other hand, elicited unqualified admiration, having not only visited the Bukovinian painted monasteries the previous summer but also written an enthusiastic analysis in which he compared them to St Mark's Basilica in Venice, Orvieto Cathedral and the 'most beautiful marvels of the imperial treasury of Vienna'; he even claimed that 'the individuality of Romanian art' had influenced Mount Athos.[35] In Strzygowski, Tzigara-Samurcaş found not only a defender of Romania's 'forgotten' artworks but also an anti-Classicist, anti-philological methodology that redefined culture as 'an organic entity possessed by the nonliterate as well as the literate'.[36] The Austrian's belief that the material artefacts of art are a better record of the cultural chronology of the *Volk* than written records (largely the preserve of the elite) informed Tzigara-Samurcaş's arguments for the superiority of art history over history and offered a valuable framework for integrating folk art into the national art narrative. Correspondingly, 'Esquisse sur l'Art Roumain' linked the Paris-recognized fine art of Romania's modern artists with its lesser-known past through 'the innate artistic sentiment of the Romanian people', still retained in 'living' form in the material artefacts of the Carpathian peasant: 'For the peasant, often illiterate, is gifted with a marvellous feeling for harmony and elegance'. Threatened by the advance of modernity, Tzigara-Samurcaş advocated that the peasant's 'innate feeling for beauty' should be preserved through the aesthetics taught in Romania's art schools.[37]

Greater Romania: Peasant Art and Nation-Building

With the events of the First World War, Tzigara-Samurcaş's desire for folk art to be placed firmly at the heart of the national narrative became a reality. Following Romania's vast territorial gains, the peasant became an important part of the justificatory political rhetoric of unification. As arguments for national enlargement at the 1919–20 Paris Peace Conference had hinged primarily on the presence of Romanian ethnic communities in Transylvania, the Banat, Bukovina and Bessarabia, the peasant now went from being a minor strand of national identity before the war to the common ethnic denominator of unification, mobilized in the interests of institutions and disciplines. The anthropologist Alexandra Urdea has argued that this involved an aestheticization of peasant objects that, in many cases, divorced artefacts from the social conditions of their production and created the paradox of a peasant class that was still reeling from the brutal suppression of a massive revolt in 1907 now being held up as the collective author of a national art.[38]

More widely, the changed status of the peasantry after the war – due to major land reform provoked by the revolt and fear of Bolshevist sympathies, together with the extension of universal male suffrage – meant that peasants began to feature ever more centrally in discourses around Romanian identity.[39] At a time when scholars were sharpening their disciplinary boundaries in relation to the 'national essence', many now began to write about folk culture. The period saw, for example, a wave of new ethnographic research in the ambitious, state-supported projects (1925–48) of the Bucharest Sociological School under Dimitrie Gusti. The country's pre-eminent historian, Iorga himself, published a study entitled *L'Art populaire en Roumanie* (Folk Art in Romania) in 1923 (Fig. 11.2).[40] Although criticized by the ever-antagonistic Tzigara-Samurcaş for prioritizing the philological methods of history (evidenced in Iorga's focus on the etymology of the names of folk artefacts rather than their morphological



L'ART POPULAIRE
EN ROUMANIE

PAR

N. IORGA

PROFESSEUR À L'UNIVERSITÉ DE BUCAREST,
AGRÉÉ À LA SORBONNE, CORRESPONDANT DE L'INSTITUT.

1923

G ER, ÉDITEUR /Rue Danton PARIS.

Figure 11.2 Nicolae Iorga, *L'art populaire en Roumanie: Son caractère, ses rapports et son origine*, Paris: Gamber, 1923.

Photo: Author.

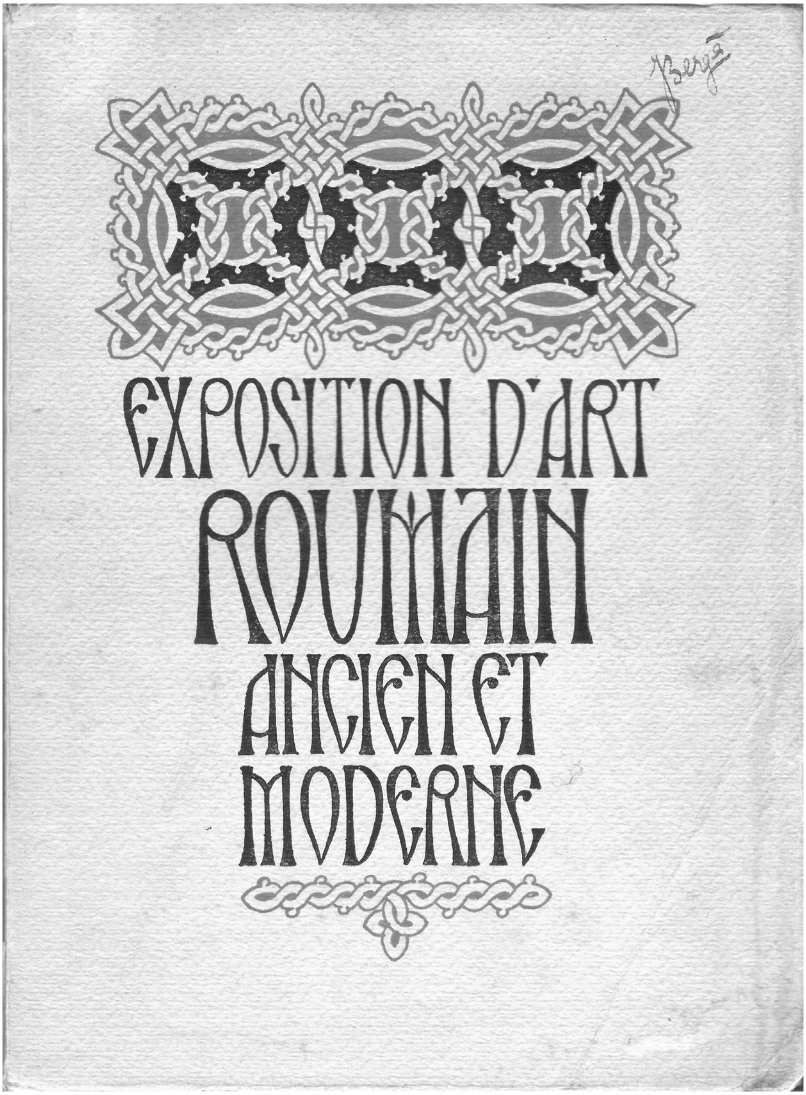
appearance),[41] Iorga's study created a potent national narrative with wider Balkan implications. It clearly demonstrated the growing power of Dacianism, the indigenist thesis of the Dacian/Thracian (as opposed to purely Latin) origins of the Romanian people that was used to strengthen political arguments against foreign influence and justify Romanian claims to continuity in Transylvania (Hungarians argued that Transylvania was uninhabited on the arrival of the Magyar tribes at the end of the ninth century). According to Katherine Verdery, this argument not only exalted the 'primitive' but tapped into 'Voltaire's idea, reiterated by Herder, that a people can progress only if they develop in organic continuity with their own nature rather than through forms borrowed or imposed from elsewhere', thus associating 'Dacian ancestry with the virtues of an autochthonous tradition in contrast to the predatory (if civilized) foreigners'.[42] Both Iorga and Tzigara-Samurcaş believed that the Dacian essence had been preserved in peasant art, conflating the two in a celebration of the natural, organic, spontaneous and durable. On this assumption, Iorga built the core ethno-nationalist claim of his essay: that the evidence of folk art, simultaneously archaic and living, proved the hitherto unrecognized primacy of the Thracian civilization that originated in the Danubian-Carpathian basin (i.e. Romania) and radiated its influence across the Balkans, Greece, Transylvania and even (via the Huns and the Goths) Norway and Sweden. With his Strzygowskian assertion that 'the origin of Hellenic life and civilization' came from the Thracian north,[43] Iorga crafted a narrative of Romania as 'an ancient, but misunderstood nation' of significant cultural importance.[44] For Iorga, therefore, the value of folk art lay in its ahistoricity and its resistance to periodization or stylistic change. In contrast to high art, folk arts alone

> are capable of giving us precious information about national origins and the oldest relationships between different civilizations of people. They can, therefore, provide the solution to the most arduous problems of the most obscure periods. Great chapters of history, otherwise unknown or barely elucidated by ethnographic hypotheses, become intelligible through these naïve artistic formulations.[45]

Exhibition Narratives, 1925

Iorga's book, published in Paris, was an early example of an international campaign of publications and exhibitions in the 1920s that used Romanian art as a vehicle for wider political aims. In contrast to earlier Romanian sections at the Paris International Exhibitions and Venice Biennales, this was a narrative that gave folk art equal status with both religious art and modern art, downplaying Romania's non-conformity with high art chronologies and reifying the archaic, the 'primitive' and the native artistic 'sensibility' that linked folk art and modern painters. The endeavour received valuable support from Henri Focillon who wrote a eulogizing essay for the catalogue of the 1925 *Exposition d'art roumain ancien et moderne* (Exhibition of Antique and Modern Romanian Art) held in the Jeu de Paume in Paris (Fig. 11.3). Focillon, who had established a strong friendship with Oprescu in 1921, set up the Institut Français in Bucharest in 1924 and was at the heart of French diplomatic efforts to expand cultural exchanges between the two countries.[46] The *Exposition* was the fourth in a series of exhibitions of 'national art' held at the Jeu de Paume between 1923 and 1939; Passini has demonstrated how these offered a political platform not only for the construction of the cultural heritage of the exhibiting nations but also for France to centre its own discourse of art history within such national genealogies.[47] In the case of Romania, like Italy, emphasis was laid on the spiritual link of shared Latinity as a civilizing force. Focillon's essay describes the Romanians as simultaneously 'rustic and refined', the result of 'a strong Dacian stock, thoroughly infused, rippling, with Latin – or rather Mediterranean – intelligence'.[48]

That the Romanian government chose to organize this separate national exhibition, rather than participate in the large-scale *Exposition Internationale des Arts*



EXPOSITION D'ART
ROUMAIN
ANCIEN ET
MODERNE

Figure 11.3 Exposition d'art roumain ancien et moderne: Catalogue des Œuvres exposées au Musée du Jeu de Paume du 25 mai au 1er août 1925, Paris: Georges Petit, 1925.

Photo: Author.

Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes (International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts) that dominated Paris that summer, is perhaps reflective of the tensions between the country's burgeoning international modernist scene and official, rather more conservative, narratives of what constituted 'Romanian' identity. The Romanian exhibition catalogue, for example, associated Cubism with Slavic aberration and praised Romanian painters for having escaped its influence: 'this anarchy, of essentially Slavic essence, imported into France rather than born there, is little suited to the rationalist spirit of the Romanian people'.[49] Instead, it claimed that Romanian painters like Grigorescu and Ion Andreescu absorbed healthy Barbizon Impressionism and spectacularly adapted it to evoke the native poetry of the Romanian landscape. According to Passini, such arguments about how French Impressionism allowed foreign artists to become 'national' were also used in the Jeu de Paume exhibitions of Belgium, Canada and Sweden, embedding the paradigm of French modern art within national narratives.[50] In the Romanian account, though, this was also closely linked to a foregrounding of the innate artistic sensibility of folk art. Focillon's essay lyrically wove together the various sections of the exhibition – folk art, contemporary painting, nineteenth-century painting and historical religious art (frescoes, icons and embroideries) – through their common reference to an anonymous tradition, 'born from the earth like a living plant'. Just as the Romanian language survived 'even when besieged and almost submerged' by foreign influences,[51] so folk art, with its 'marvellous ability to transform the spectacle of life into forms, into designs that are magnificently useless and deliciously necessary', retained 'this constancy of ancient virtues' which resurfaced in the high art of church decoration and even crossed the rupture brought by the arrival of modern Western art forms. For this reason, Focillon explained, folk art was given pride of place in the first room of the exhibition as the 'major chord', the 'basis' of Romanian art.[52] It was a narrative well-received by French critics like Paul Fierens, who wrote that the natural artistry of Romanian folk art, 'situated outside of time', best expressed 'the spirit of a race'.[53]

The symbiotic unity of the Romanian arts unfortunately did not extend to the art historians writing about them. The Jeu de Paume exhibition was marked by tensions between Tzigara-Samurcaş and other members of the organizing committee.[54] Humiliated that his catalogue essay on folk art had been reduced by Focillon to a single anonymous page, Tzigara-Samurcaş accepted an invitation from Eugène Pittard, Director of the Ethnographic Museum of Geneva, to organize a separate exhibition of Romanian art to accompany a meeting of the League of Nations in September. With the support of Crown Prince Carol, Tzigara-Samurcaş brought to Geneva from Paris the sections of religious and folk art, which he supplemented with newly purchased examples of Saxon and Szekler costumes and ceramics.[55] This time he wrote the accompanying publication himself: a luxuriously produced, 120-page essay, richly illustrated with many of his own photographs and drawings by Octav Roguski (Fig. 11.4).[56]

In contrast to his 1914 essay, which still stressed Romania's relationship to core Western terms of reference, Tzigara-Samurcaş's narrative now asserted the originality of Romanian art as the spontaneous production of 'the soil and inhabitants of Romania'.[57] Importantly, he made a distinction between 'the art of Romania and the art of the Romanian people which alone can be called our national art'.[58] The former, being the art of the ruling classes, is subject to externally imposed breaks that accompany the forever-changing overlords. Against this periodized art, driven by political circumstance and stylistic change, he positioned the superior and timeless 'art of the

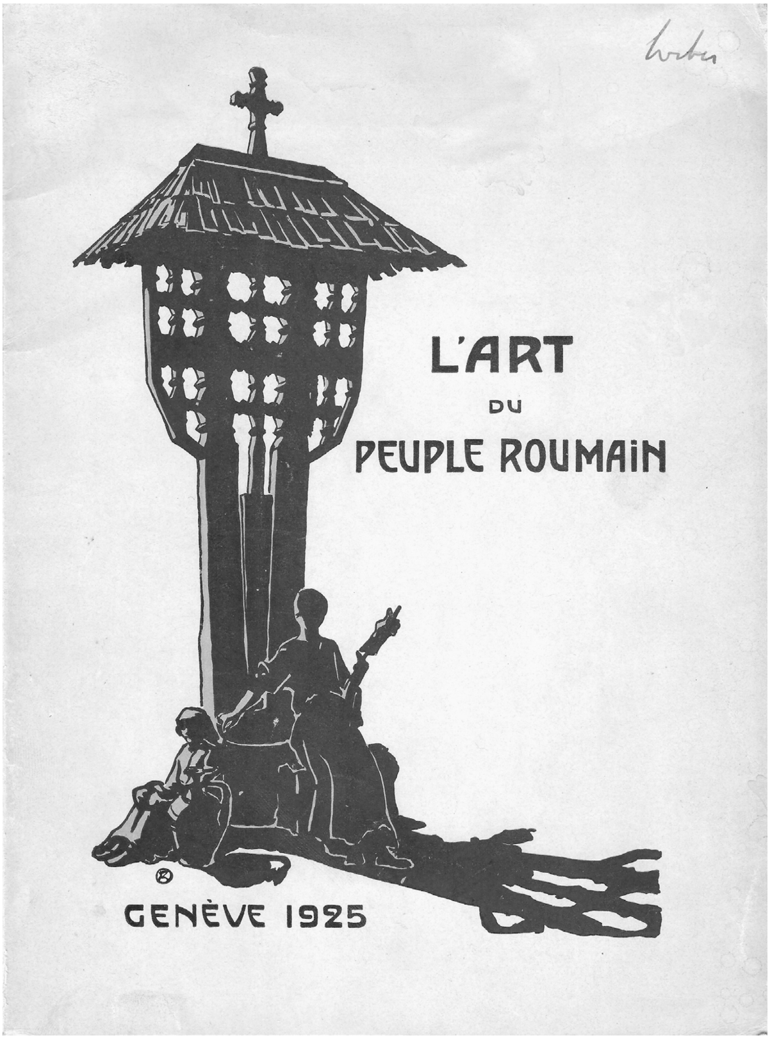
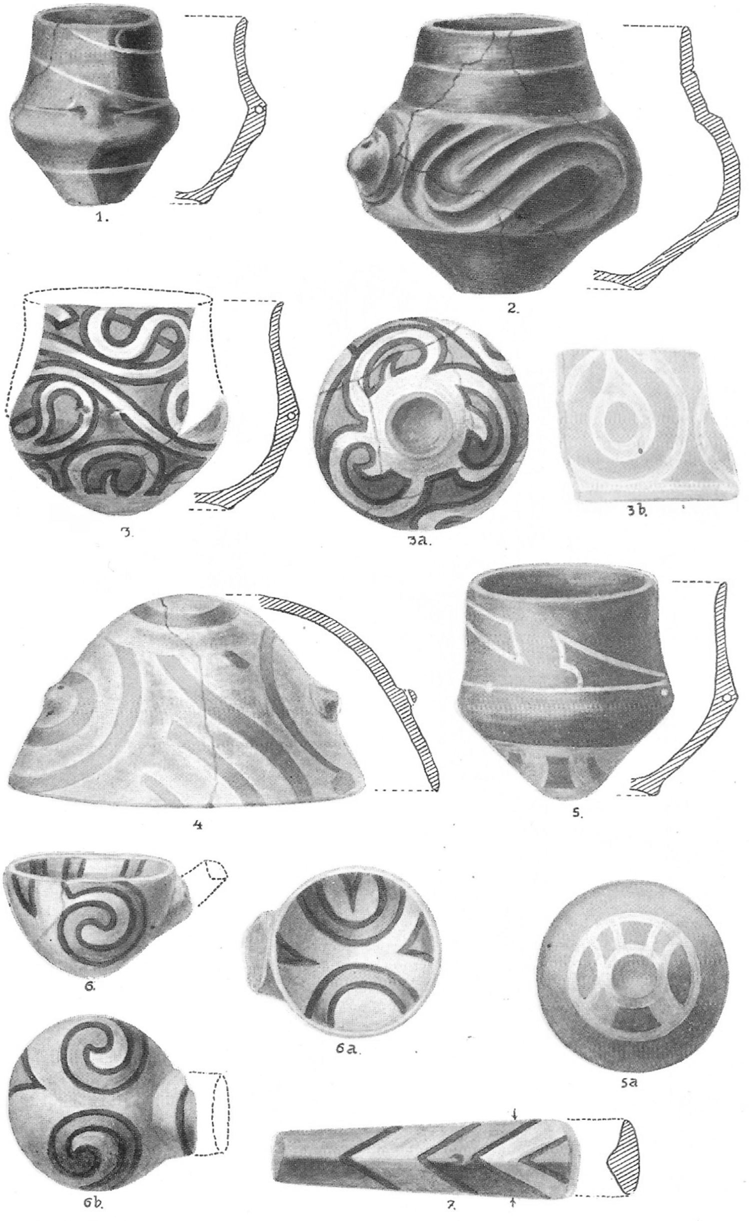


Figure 11.4 Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcaş, *L'Art du peuple roumain: Catalogue de l'exposition de Genève; Musée Rath*. Geneva: Kundig, 1925. Cover illustration by Octav Roguski.

Photo: Author.

Romanian people', used unabashedly to argue for Romanian territorial rights in the new regions. As evidence, he offered morphological analysis, most notably the claim that the spirals of Neolithic pottery found in Ariuşd (Erősd, Transylvania) were still present in Romanian peasant motifs (Fig. 11.5), just as the incised markings of bronze-age figurines prefigured Romanian peasant costume: 'By noting this same spiral ornament in all Romanian pottery and in many other areas of our folk art, one naturally deduces the link which exists between our present-day art and the prehistoric art of around 2500 years before Christ'.[59]



Dessin de F. Laszlo

Céramique peinte de l'époque néolithique. Fouilles d'Ariusd Transilvanie.

Musée de St. Gheorghe.

Figure 11.5 Neolithic painted ceramics from Ariuşd, Transylvania. In Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcaş, *L'Art du peuple roumain*, 1925

Photo: Author.

Furthermore, he argued that the spiral motif offered clear evidence in support of 'recent theories' (i.e. Strzygowski) that the march of civilization went from north to south and that the spirals found in Greek art originated in the region between Kiev and Romania.[60] He drew Herderian parallels with language, arguing that peasants were the true guardians of the originary Romanian tongue. When efforts were made to 'purify' the language of Greek and Slavonic elements in the nineteenth century, it was the language patiently preserved by the peasants that the scholars turned to. But he was careful to state that the Latin language was the only enduring thing left by the Romans. Lest he undermine his own Strzygowskian efforts to counteract Classical influence, he asserted that the Romans 'had very little influence on the art of the local population, who, through their descent from the Thracians were from an artistic viewpoint far superior to the Romans, who were practical people rather than artistic ones'.[61]

Setting aside its valuable documentation of folk art, Tzigara-Samurcaş's essay is a fairly dogmatic exercise in nationalist art history. Despite Crown Prince Carol's wish in his catalogue preface that the exhibition should bring 'fraternity' between the different groups inhabiting the Romanian lands, Tzigara-Samurcaş was at pains to assert the superiority of Romanian folk art over Transylvanian-Saxon, Magyar or Szekler. Performed in front of the League of Nations, his exhibition was an open attempt to use art history to justify Romania's recent land gains. Such a political narrative would have been difficult to craft using the stylistic periodizations of Western frameworks. But by arguing for the timeless, rooted nature of folk art and its ability to preserve evidence of perceived distant ancestors, Tzigara-Samurcaş was able to conflate time and space and politicize the geography of art in Romania's favour.

Oprescu and *The Studio*

A considerably more nuanced interpretation of folk art was provided by Oprescu in his 1929 volume *Peasant Art in Roumania* which appeared as a special publication of *The Studio* in London (Fig. 11.6). Oprescu, who had been Secretary of the League of Nations' International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation since 1923, had opposed the Geneva exhibition, more likely due to his professional differences with Tzigara-Samurcaş than any desire to inhibit international knowledge of Romanian art. His account of peasant art, published the year after he and Focillon helped organize the 1928 International Congress of Folk Arts and Folklore in Prague, very much reflected that congress's internationalist vision of folk art as transcending political geography and reflecting a wider human condition. *The Studio* was an apt forum for his study. With its support for the Arts and Crafts movement, the British journal played an important role in challenging the museum-based distinction between fine art and ethnographic object. Oprescu's essay, which had its origins in his 1922 book *Arta ţărănească la români* (Romanian Peasant Art),[62] was the latest in *The Studio*'s series of *Peasant Art* publications covering Sweden, Lapland and Iceland (1910), Austria and Hungary (1911), Russia (1912), Italy (1913) and Switzerland (1924). David Crowley has explored how many of these essays reflected 'a common *Weltanschauung* inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement', the ruralist-themed writings of thinkers like William Morris having been widely read across Europe since the 1890s.[63] The movement had a significant supporter in Romania's Queen Marie who subscribed to *The Studio*, designed Arts and Crafts interiors for her residences, promoted the sale of Romanian

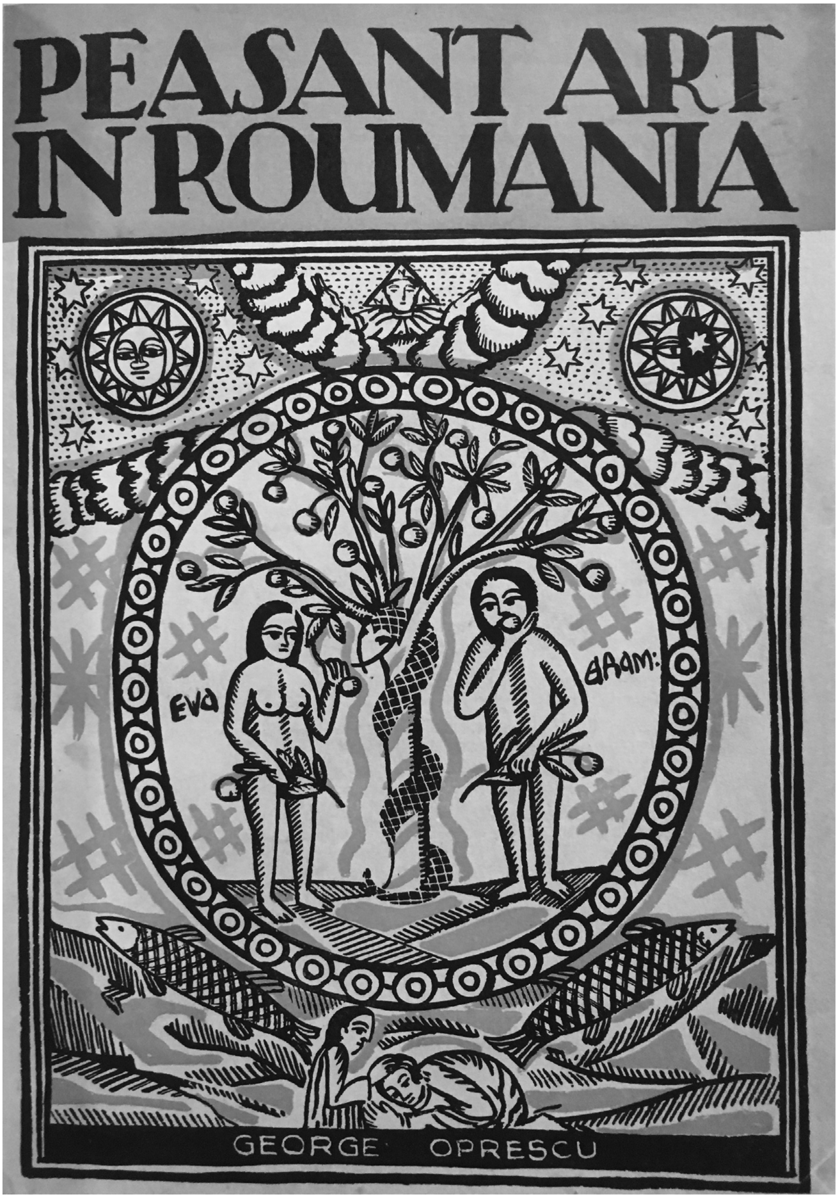


Figure 11.6 George Oprescu, *Peasant Art in Roumania*, special Autumn number of *The Studio*, London: Herbert Reiach, 1929.

Photo: Author.

peasant blouses in the department store Liberty in London and, as an important patron of peasant craft societies, also wrote the foreword to Oprescu's book.

This British context aside, both Passini and Ioana Vlasiu have argued for the clear influence of Focillon's ideas on Oprescu's essay, in particular his formalist approach, interest in mass psychology and exploration of the relationship between art, civilization and society.[64] Passini claims that this intellectual friendship was indicative of wider French attempts at cultural hegemony in interwar Romania, to create (quoting Focillon) a 'bulwark against the threats of the "old geographic attraction emanating from Vienna and the universities of Central Europe" '.[65] Certainly Focillon, in his introduction to the 1931 volume of the Prague Congress, shared Oprescu's desire to widen the definition of 'art' to include work hitherto considered to belong to ethnography.[66] Both insisted that the value of an artwork lay in its ability to appeal to the senses, a formalist vision clearly articulated by Oprescu:

> What, then, is that impulse, that irresistible force, which will not let the peasant rest content with the merely useful, but drives him to seek the best proportioned and most harmonious forms, that which appeals to the eye by colour and line, is pleasant to the touch and produces that rare sense of contentment, and that poise of mind and joy which characterize aesthetic enjoyment?[67]

Of particular interest is the way Oprescu thought about time and periodization in his essay. In contrast to Tzigara-Samurcaş's blunt insistence on an unbroken four and a half thousand year-old tradition of peasant art as justification for territorial claims, Oprescu probed more interesting questions, including issues of centre–periphery and belatedness. Peasant art, he argued, is not simply a derivative form of town (i.e. 'high') art. And influence is not monodirectional from high to low, but rather mutually horizontal. Significantly, he could not quite resist periodization, at one point stating:

> Among all the objects of peasant art in our possession, those which are distinguished by a high standard of workmanship belong to the second half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century. . . . It is therefore between 1700 and 1860 that we must place the most brilliant period of our peasant art.[68]

Yet there is a paradox: he recognizes that these dates 'coincide with what is known to have been one of the saddest periods of our national life', that of Phanariot rule, noting that 'periods of great public misery and calamity are those in which art grows silent and dies'.[69] Although he has no explanation for this – beyond speculating that either 'the peasant's life was perhaps not as wretched as has been said' or, conversely, that difficult periods can stimulate the greatest art ('Fromentin has shown us the Dutch school of painting coming into being in the midst of atrocious wars') – what is significant here is that, unlike Iorga and Tzigara-Samurcaş, he does not entirely deny coevalness to the peasant.[70] He mitigates his colleagues' insistence on peasant art's impermeability to the rhythms and ruptures of so-called civilization, and recognizes its relationship to wider societal factors. Underpinning this more nuanced approach was his resistance to the nationalism of the First World War and the use of art history to justify political aims:

> [N]ot long ago it [peasant art] was the battlefield on which the nations of central and eastern Europe fought and wrangled, each of the contending parties proclaiming its own superiority. . . . Now this will not do at all. Peasant art is the exclusive apanage of none. . . . [I]t is rooted in something universally human, common to all.[71]

While still celebrating the particular merits of Romanian folk art – this being after all a publication intended to extol its unique particularities to an international audience – he subsumed it into a wider narrative that accorded well with the League of Nations' vision of a humanity that rested on unifying principles, while respecting local roots. In contrast to the nationalist argument of Iorga and Tzigara-Samurcaş that Romania was the source and disseminator of geometrical ornamentation, Oprescu believed that the style had appeared simultaneously in disparate lands, the result either of human psychology or of conditions dictated by materials and tools.[72] As noted by Popescu, this approach was similar to Focillon's idea of 'diversity within unity' in the introduction to *Vie des forms* (Life of Forms, 1934).[73] Oprescu's reverence for the integrity and specificity of folk art also fed into wider attempts by the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation to reverse the fundamental directionalities of art history by advocating that the periphery (or *arrière*) could help the so-called civilized centre recover its artistic sensibility, and thus its moral soul, in the modern age.[74]

Conclusion

Oprescu acknowledged his allegiance to French modes of art history, dedicating his study to Focillon and publishing a French version of the text in 1937. His self-reflexivity concerning methods, his recognition of the value of interdisciplinarity in the swiftly growing field of folk studies and his attempt at a cultural politics that, while nurturing the local, transcended aggressive nationalism, ensured a sympathetic legacy for his work. Although used for different ends, he shared with Tzigara-Samurcaş, Iorga, Petranu (and of course Strzygowski) an awareness that incorporating folk art into art history allowed the possibility of overcoming the problems of the Western canon and permitting new frameworks for cultures hitherto deemed 'peripheral', 'minor' or Europe's 'exotic other'. Against the 'rootlessness' of modernism, folk art appeared to offer authenticity and contextualization. High art had accelerated Occidental time, while for folk art past and present were contemporary. As Popescu explains: 'It was precisely this shortcut in the constant flow of the linear time of history, the coexistence between past and present, that represented the force of Balkan "rootedness" '.[75] Inevitably, it was an intellectual manoeuvre in which the voice of the peasant herself was rarely heard: the only named practitioners in Oprescu's book were the Paris-trained ceramicist Nora Steriadi (1889–1948) and the tapestry workshops of Princess Elisa Brătianu (1870–1957), wife of two former Prime Ministers. But in this distancing lay the power of peasant art to offer an alternative to the Western periodized canon and to resist colonization by 'radiating centres'. To return to Blaga:

> The village has not let itself be tempted and drawn into the 'history' made by others over our heads. It has preserved itself chastely, untouched in the autonomy with which poverty and mythology have endowed it, and awaits the time when it will serve as the sure foundation of an authentically Romanian history.[76]

Notes

* I am grateful to Robert Born and Cosmin Minea for their comments on an early draft of this chapter.

1 'Eu cred că veşnicia s-a nascut la sat': Blaga, 'Sufletul satului'.

2 Nemoianu, 'Mihai Sora and the Traditions of Romanian Philosophy', 591.

3 Passini, 'Les expositions d'arts étrangers', 143.
4 Oprescu, *Peasant Art in Roumania*, 5.
5 Oroveanu, *Periodization in the History of Art*, 1.
6 Roberts, 'Artists, *Amateurs*, and the Pleated Time of Ottoman Modernity', 82.
7 Popescu, 'Being Specific', 821–22.
8 Tzigara-Samurcaş, *L'Art du peuple roumain*, 4.
9 Popescu, 'Space, Time: Identity', 193.
10 Tzigara-Samurcaş, 'Conferința despre arta țărănească', 259.
11 Among the extensive recent literature in this field, see András, 'The Obscure Object of Desire'; Badovinac, 'Interrupted Histories'; Kaufmann, 'Periodization and Its Discontents'; Kaufmann, Dossin and Joyeux-Prunel, *Circulations in the Global History of Art*; Murawska-Muthesius, 'Mapping Eastern Europe'; Murawska-Muthesius, *Borders in Art*; Piotrowski, 'On the Spatial Turn'.
12 See, for example, Rampley, 'The Strzygowski School of Cluj'; Born, 'The Historiography of Art in Transylvania'; Miron, 'Learned History – Lived History'; Marosi, 'Josef Strzygowski als Entwerfer'.
13 Miron, 'Learned History – Lived History', 10–12. On Vătăşianu, see Simon, *Artă şi identitate națională*.
14 Rampley, 'The Strzygowski School of Cluj', 21.
15 Rampley, 'Rethinking the Geography of Art', 4.
16 Popescu, ' "Cultures majeures, cultures mineures" '.
17 Tensions which culminated in Tzigara-Samurcaş's acrimonious 1927 article, 'The Artistic Dictatorship of Iorga & Co.', the '& Co.' being 'the even more ignorant G. Oprescu', 'Dictatura artistică Iorga & Co.', 254–56.
18 For example, Cornescu, *Cusături româneşti*; Miller-Verghy, *Modele Româneşti*.
19 Originally called the 'Museum of Ethnography, National Art, Decorative and Industrial Art'. For its evolving name, see Pohrib, 'Tradition and Ethnographic Display'.
20 Iorga established an international reputation as Romania's foremost historian and later Prime Minister, Petranu was well-known in the German-speaking world, while Oprescu's international interwar activities and ability to work alongside the post-war regime ensured he would be commemorated as the founder of the G. Oprescu Art History Institute in Bucharest. Tzigara-Samurcaş, a Germanophile and friend of the royal family, was effectively written out of history during the Socialist period. In 1974, a Romanian researcher noted that 'today almost nothing is spoken or written about him' (Leahu, 'Al. Tzigara-Samurcaş, muzeograf', 173).
21 A full re-evaluation of Tzigara-Samurcaş's work has been hindered by the partial destruction of his archive in the 1989 Revolution and by the current demarcation between the ethnographic remit of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant and the various institutes of art history. Discussion has therefore focused on his role in the founding of the museum (see, for example, Popovaț, *Muzeul de la Şosea*), with insufficient analysis of his wider-ranging cultural activities. A sense of these can be gained from the bio-bibliography compiled by the Central University Library of Bucharest (Podgoreanu, *Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcaş Biobibliografie*).
22 Tzigara-Samurcaş, 'Muzeele din Transilvania'. Other public disputes included a 1902 spat with Professor Grigore Tocilescu over the running of the Museum of Antiquities, a 1904 argument with the architect Ion Mincu regarding the restoration of Stavropoleos Church, and a calumnious disagreement with Constantin Istrati, Commissar of the 1906 Jubilee Exhibition, that led to an aborted duel.
23 In addition to founding the Museum of National Art, he served as Professor of Art History at the School of Fine Arts in Bucharest and later the University of Cernauți, Librarian and Director of the Carol I University Foundation, Director of the Aman Museum, Founder of the Society of Romanian Tourists, Inspector-General of Museums and Editor-in-Chief of the cultural magazine *Convorbiri literare*, among other activities.
24 Anon., 'Al. Tzigara-Samurcaş', 267. In 1910, Iorga opposed the creation of a Chair of Art History at Bucharest University, refusing to see the discipline as distinct from history.
25 Tzigara-Samurcaş, 'Istoria artei la universitate'. The Ion Mincu Institute of Architecture has digitized around 2500 of his slides: see Brătuleanu, *The Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcaş Archive*. Another part of the archive is held by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant.

26 For discussion of his role in stimulating the decorative arts in Romania, see Vlasiu, 'Réflexions sur les arts décoratifs', 50–51.
27 Baltazar, 'Spre un stil românesc'. See also Cărăbaş, 'The Shadow of the Object', 103–7.
28 Pohrib, 'Tradition and Ethnographic Display', 320.
29 Tzigara-Samurcaş, 'Vrăjmaşii muzeului', 200. For the complicated history of the museum, see Popovaţ, *Muzeul de la Şosea*.
30 Tzigara-Samurcaş, 'Esquisse sur l'Art Roumain', 100.
31 Ibid., 102. Tzigara-Samurcaş's view was probably also influenced by the *völkisch* ideas of the German archaeologist Gustaf Kossinna, as well as by Carl Schuchhardt who had Romanian connections and built up the South-East European prehistoric collections of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. I am grateful to Robert Born for this information.
32 Ibid., 102.
33 Ibid., 103.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid. The analysis referred to is Strzygowski's 'Kunstschätze der Bukowina'.
36 Marchand, 'The Rhetoric of Artifacts', 129.
37 Tzigara-Samurcaş, 'Esquisse sur l'Art Roumain', 101.
38 Urdea, *From Storeroom to Stage*, 22.
39 Verdery, 'Antecedents', 44–45.
40 Iorga, *L'Art populaire en Roumanie*.
41 Tzigara-Samurcaş, 'Dictatura artistică Iorga & Co.', 255–56.
42 Verdery, 'Antecedents', 37–38.
43 Iorga, *L'Art populaire*, 133.
44 Ibid., 135.
45 Ibid., viii.
46 Passini, 'France and the Evolution of Art History'.
47 Passini, 'Les expositions d'arts étrangers'.
48 Focillon, 'L'Art et l'histoire en Roumanie', 17.
49 Cantacuzène, 'La Peinture moderne', 77.
50 Passini, 'Les expositions d'arts étrangers', 150.
51 Focillon, 'L'Art et l'histoire en Roumanie', 17.
52 Ibid., 21–22.
53 Fierens, 'L'art roumain ancien et moderne'.
54 Iorga, Focillon and Oprescu were hostile to Tzigara-Samurcaş's perceived pro-German conduct during the war, leading to his exclusion from several of the Paris arrangements: see Tzigara-Samurcaş, 'Expoziţia românească de la Paris', 156–57.
55 Tzigara-Samurcaş, 'Aceeaşi expoziţie la Geneva', 161–70.
56 Tzigara-Samurcaş, *L'Art du Peuple Roumain*. Roguski was a Brăila-born artist of Polish origin who worked with Tzigara-Samurcaş at the Museum of National Art from 1907 onwards.
57 Ibid., 1.
58 Ibid., 4.
59 Ibid., 27.
60 Ibid., 21.
61 Ibid., 7.
62 Oprescu, *Arta ţărănească la români*.
63 Crowley, 'The Uses of Peasant Design in Austria-Hungary', 8. For Romanian interest, see, for example, Petică, 'Esthetismul lui Ruskin'.
64 Passini, 'France and the Evolution of Art History', 24; Vlasiu, 'L'expérience roumaine', 231–40.
65 Passini, 'France and the Evolution of Art History', 24.
66 Focillon, 'Introduction'.
67 Oprescu, *Peasant Art*, 1.
68 Ibid., 178.
69 Ibid., 179.
70 Ibid., 179–80.
71 Ibid., 5.
72 Oprescu, *Peasant Art*, 7–8.

73 Popescu, ' "Cultures majeures, cultures mineures" ', 240.
74 Ibid., 242.
75 Popescu, 'Being Specific', 839.
76 Blaga, 'Elogiul satului românesc', 56–57.

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