

# THE BICENTENNIAL OF CAROL POPP DE SZATHMÁRI. CAROL POPP DE SZATHMÁRI'S SKETCHES FROM THE COLLECTIONS OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF TRANSYLVANIAN HISTORY FROM CLUJ-NAPOCA<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The Bicentennial of Carol Popp de Szathmári's birth is also marked by this paper, which includes a biographical sketch along with a brief presentation of the artist's works from the patrimony of the National Museum of Transylvanian History in Cluj-Napoca, a series of five prints, four landscapes and a scene with a historical subject.

**Keywords:** collection, engraving, lithography, prints, museum

Carol Popp de Szathmári, one of the most important nineteenth-century artists in the Romanian space, was born into a wealthy family in Cluj 200 years ago, on 11 January 1812. He attended the Reformed College in the city and completed his education through a series of journeys, of particular importance being the one he undertook to Italy. On his return to his homeland, he became the court painter of Prince Alexandru Dimitrie Ghica, maintaining this position under the reigns of five successive rulers: Alexandru Dimitrie Ghica (1834-1842), Gheorghe Bibescu (1843-1848), Barbu Știrbei (1849-1853, 1854-1856), Alexandru Ioan Cuza (1859-1866) and Carol I (1866-1914). He was also the first official photographer of the court, making a series of portraits for Alexandru Ioan Cuza and King Carol I. A highly talented artist, he evinced unfailing energy and amazing versatility in addressing a wide range of artistic genres: portrait painting, landscape, genre scenes. The long series of portraits signed by Szathmári attests to his status as the leading painter of the day, offering tangible samples of his remarkable ability to render diverse human types: *Portrait of a Woman*, *Marițica Bibescu*, *Tarsița Golescu*, *Metropolitan Miculescu Calinic*, *Portrait of a Man*, etc. A tireless traveller, he took his inspiration from reality, collecting information and popularising it through relevant images. His landscapes explored a little known space, evoking, in an ingenious and realistic manner, picturesque aspects from different corners of the country or from more exotic places: *Along the Olt Valley*, *Withered Willows*, *Manuk Inn Bucharest 1850*, *Bucharest Church*, *Stavropoleos Church*, *Sheepfold in the Carpathians*, *Thinning Grove*, *Fantastic Landscape*, *Seascape and People*, *Târnava Fortress*, *Curtea de Argeș*, *View from Vidin*, *Street in Turkey*, *View from Bucharest - the Filaret Barrier*, 1853, etc. An adept of documentarism, he described scenes as realistic snapshots revealing everyday life, official moments, scenes from markets, fairs and the village world: *Carol I and His General Staff*, *Comission Internationale de la Reorganisation des Principautés Danubiennes*, *Fair in Câmpulung (Muscel)*, *The Peasants' Hora*, *The Drăgaica Market*, *Ochi Albi's Taraf*, *Peasant Women by the River*,

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*At the Fair /At Moși, Monastery, Oriental Scene*, etc. His travels around the country led him to create a series of sketches and watercolours depicting in detail the Romanian folk costumes from various parts of the country. Such ethnographic subjects were little explored at the time, but they are extremely valuable today: *Girls from Dolj, Mehedinți Woman from Cernetz, Woman in a National Costume Râureni Vâlcea, Romanian Woman from Transylvania, Costume from the Bank of the Danube, Paraschiva from Mehadia, Women from the Banat. 14 August 1872, Olt Woman from Romanați, Hungarian Shop Assistant, Gypsy Woman, Shepherd from Teleorman, Argeș Woman with Wooden Pail, The Milkmaid from Tunari Village Ilfov*, etc.

A painter and a graphic artist, the author of numerous paintings, graphic works and watercolours, Carol Popp de Szathmári discovered photography early on and, sensing its potential, he became the first art photographer and documentarian in the Romanian space, as well as one of the pioneers of European photography. The subjects he addressed in his photographs resumed the vast range of themes in his work: portraits, landscapes, ethnographic topics. Distinguishing himself through the photographs he took in the Crimean War (1853-1856), Szathmári ranked among the top war photographers in the world. He participated as a photographer in the War of Independence (1877-1878), thoroughly documenting its key moments. His fulminant career was propelled by the artist's presence in a series of universal exhibitions: London 1851, 1862; Paris 1855, 1867; Vienna 1873 etc. He was awarded medals and honours: *Napoleon III Emperor*, 1855, *Galileo Galilei Pisa*, 1860, *Queen Victoria London*, 1860; *Bene Meriti*, 1868; *Weltausstellung Wien*, 1873, *Christine Königin von Schweden*, 1875; *Order of the Star of Romania (Knight)*, 1884, and so on. He died in Bucharest on 3 July 1887, leaving behind an impressive work, a complete universe, images that faithfully render a world long gone, a remarkable fresco of the era in which he lived.

From his vast work, the National Museum of Transylvanian History in Cluj-Napoca hosts five prints, four landscapes and a scene with a historical subject.

The first of these, *The Great Hall of the Castle in Hunedoara*<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 1) shows a skewed perspective on the interior of the hall. The majestic vaults of the Hunyad Castle host a prosaic activity, the building site<sup>3</sup> featuring a group of workers who are closely supervised by the foreman; the latter is providing information to an important official who is inspecting the place. The light warm floods the room, generously enveloping the row of massive pillars that divide the space into two. The artist's full attention is focused on the architecture, the elegant Gothic interior, describing its fine details - the intertwining vaults, the ogives, the keystones, the ornate consoles, the octagonal pillars, the moulded capitals. The human element is simply sketched, without the remarkable accuracy of the architectural elements; the characters present in the scene are

<sup>2</sup> *A Nagy Terem a V. Hunyadi Varban. Természet után köre rajolta Szathmári. Sala Mare a Castelului de la Hunedoara. După un desen efectuat de Szathmári* [The Great Hall of the Castle in Hunedoara. After a drawing by Szathmári]. Inv. no. M 5376; dimensions 21,8x16,1 cm; source - The Transylvanian Museum Library (a transfer made in 1905); dating - the second half of the nineteenth century.

<sup>3</sup> In the latter half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, the castle went through a long series of restoration and consolidation works, some of them causing irreparable damage to the monument.

anonymous pawns captured in the midst of their daily efforts, providing, at the same time, a dimensional scale to the image. What is interesting is the combination between the two construction extremes: the highly refined original architecture and the sad practice of interior repartitioning, a combination that illustrates the numerous interventions in the castle throughout time.

The second print made after Carol Popp de Szathmári's drawings is a mountainscape showing *The Banpotoc Waterfall*<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 2). Picturesquely located on a steep mountain slope, a water mill ingeniously exploits the waterfall, slightly altering its course. A few minute characters discretely animate the spectacular scenery. The vigorous nature is featured in successive sequences attentively depicting various locations under the matte, cloudless sky. The river that meanders in the distance, the smooth ridge of the mountain and the steep cliffs form, together with the contorted vegetation at the foot of the mountain, the harmonious picture of bright natural scenery. Composed vertically, with the massive mountains positioned directly in front of the viewer, the image seems to suggest an in-depth perspective through the panorama of the river meadow in the background. Beyond the landscape itself, the aesthetic value of the image is definitely enhanced by inspired choice of the perspectival angle.

The third print is a *veduta* depicting *The Castle of Hunedoara*<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 3) from its main entrance, with the long bridge crossing the Zlaști Creek. The chosen observation point highlights the compound aspect of the castle and the specific silhouette of the architectural conglomerate, which seems a natural extension of the rock on which it was erected. The visual impact created by the massive stone pillars built directly into the water bed strikes the viewer and takes hold of the image, slowly channelling attention to the castle itself. The artillery terrace, the Club Tower adorned by the exterior diamond-shaped fresco, the Gate Tower with the carriage gateway, the original gallery with bellows supported on consoles, the gallery and the Neboisa Tower quickly stand out in the concise visual enumeration of circular and rectangular towers. The modest house built in the valley and a few stray characters form a unique scale that gives the viewer information on the impressive size of the castle.

The fourth print, a landscape depicting the River Mureș near the town of *Ocna Mureș, Uioara*<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 4) captivates the viewer with its authentic landscape and the restitutive quality of the image. The grandeur of the panoramic view over the Mureș

<sup>4</sup> *A Bănpatak Vizzuhatag. Természet után kőre rajolta Szathmári. Leykam A. Könyomó intézetében Bécsben. Cascada de la Bănpatak (Banpotoc) După un desen efectuat de Szathmári. [The Banpatak (Banpotoc) Waterfall. After a drawing by Szathmári].* Inv. no. M 5377; dimensions 21,8x16,2 cm; source - The Transylvanian Museum Library (a transfer made in 1905); dating - the second half of the nineteenth century.

<sup>5</sup> *Vajda-Hunyad. Természet után kőre rajolta Szathmári. Hunedoara. După un desen efectuat de Szathmári [The Castle of Hunedoara. After a drawing by Szathmári].* Inv. no. M 5378; dimensions 21,8x16,5 cm; source - The Transylvanian Museum Library (a transfer made in 1905); dating - the second half of the nineteenth century.

<sup>6</sup> *Maros-Ujvar. Természet után kőre rajolta Szathmári. Uioara. După un desen efectuat de Szathmári. [Maros-Ujvar after a drawing by Szathmári]* Inv. no. M 5379; dimensions 21,8x16 cm; source - The Transylvanian Museum Library (a transfer made in 1905); dating - the second half of the nineteenth century.

Floodplain seems to omit any other element, but a closer look may detect the small settlement on the banks of the river, the boat floating on the water or the trees scattered along its banks. Elements like the shining sun, the varied terrain and the clear water, reflecting the lush vegetation, compose a vaguely transfixed idyllic landscape. Although seemingly simple, the image is skilfully conceived: the massive mountains in the background, the winding path of the Mureș River, the vegetation clustered in the river floodplain and the architectural outline of the town succeed one another in rapid sequences, driving attention to the humans in the foreground, engaged in an informal chat that breaks the static monotony of the overall picture.

The lithograph *The Opening of the Transylvanian Diet of 1841 in Cluj*<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 5), executed in the printing press of the Greek-Catholic Royal High School with the Book and Lithography Institute in Cluj,<sup>8</sup> is the only piece on a historical subject signed by Carol Popp de Szathmári to be found in the patrimony of the Museum in Cluj. The image is part of the album the artist designed during the works of the Diet of Cluj (1841-1843), which made history by launching the concept of the unique nation in Hungarian Transylvania and by adopting the 1842 law relating to the imposition of Hungarian as a diplomatic language instead of Latin, to be used at all the administrative and judiciary levels, according to the desires expressed by the advocates of assimilation. In 1841, Szathmári arrived in Cluj, where he was commissioned to compile an album containing the portraits of the members who formed the Diet of Cluj. In the spirit of romantic nationalism, Szathmári portrayed dozens of important political figures of the time, who appeared in the lithographic album that came out in 1842: Count Teleki József, Baron Jósika János, Baron Kemény Ferenc, Baron Wesselényi Miklós, Count Lázár László, Baron Bornemisza János, Bishop Ioan Lemeni, Count Teleki Miklós, Count Haller Ignác, Count Kálnoki György, Count Kemény Domokos, etc. The lithograph owned by the National Museum of Transylvanian History in Cluj-Napoca presents the opening of the works in a fully packed hall. The space is divided into two unequal horizontal registers. The lower register of the image is flooded by a lot of characters in specific costumes, a series of impersonal heads quickly sketched in front of the tricolour canopy that protects the painting and the governor's stall. The upper register of the picture is wider, being dedicated to the elegant architecture of the Great Hall in Reduta Palace from Cluj, the building where the Transylvanian Diet convened at the time. The classical interior characteristic of the two floors of the building, with the double row of bright, large windows, elegantly counterbalances the congestion in the lower register, reflected here in the boxes and balconies that are teeming with loosely sketched characters. The imposing chandeliers, the pendulum clock and the statues flanking the windows succinctly describe the opulent interior of the representative hall in the palace.

<sup>7</sup> Az 1841<sup>ki</sup> "Ország gyűlés" meg nyitása. Királyi Biztos Branyitskai L. Báro Jósika Iános Ur. És Nagy Méltósága által, Kolósvárt. Vázolta Szathmári. Deschiderea Dietei Transilvaniei din 1841 de la Cluj [The Opening of the Transylvanian Diet of 1841 in Cluj]. Lithograph after a drawing by Szathmári. Inv. no. M 3574; dimensions 46,8x37,6 cm; source - The Transylvanian Museum Library (a transfer made in 1903); dating - 1841.

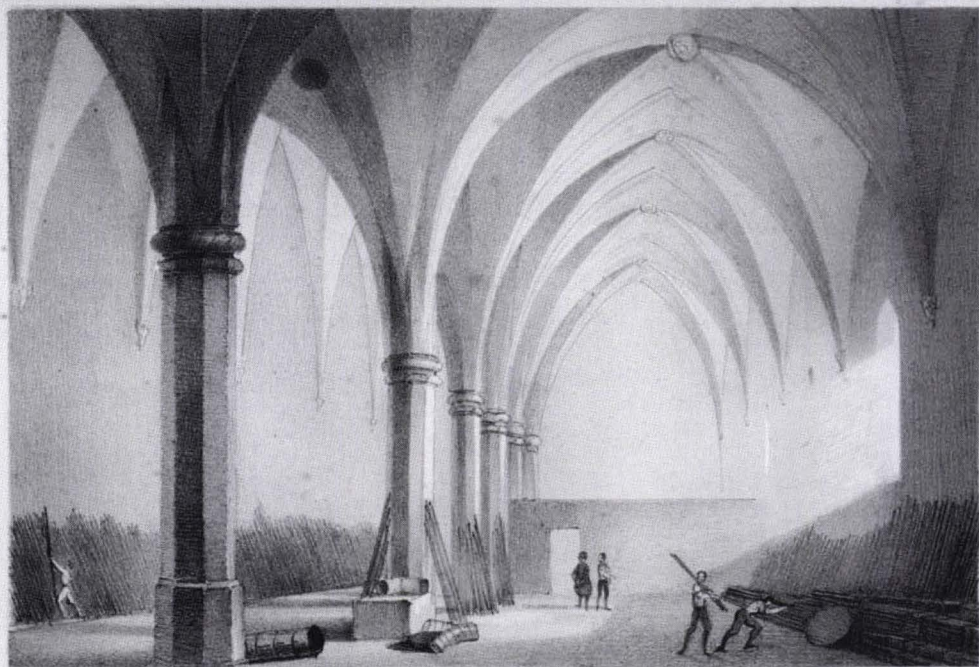
<sup>8</sup> Information taken from the old inventory registers of the museum.

The print was partially coloured: the canopy and the outfits of the noblemen standing on the margins form spots of intermediate colours (red, yellow, blue, green, brown, grey, and purple) between the bright white in the upper half and the grey-brown tones in the lower register of the image.

The prints presented in this paper are only a modest testimonial to Carol Popp de Szathmári's impressive artistic versatility. Beyond the nostalgic scent exuded by such images, his *vedute* maintain their documentary nature, picturesque quality and unconventional spontaneity intact, wrapping the accurately documented information of yesteryear in a delightful artistic glaze.

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Termesztet után kőre rajzolta Szathmári.

A VASI TEREMTETÉNY KŐRÉK VÁLLALAT.



Termesztet után kőre rajzolta Szathmári.

Laykott A. Klaymód intenzitelen. Bőcsen.

A BÁNIPATAKI VÍZZUHATÁG.





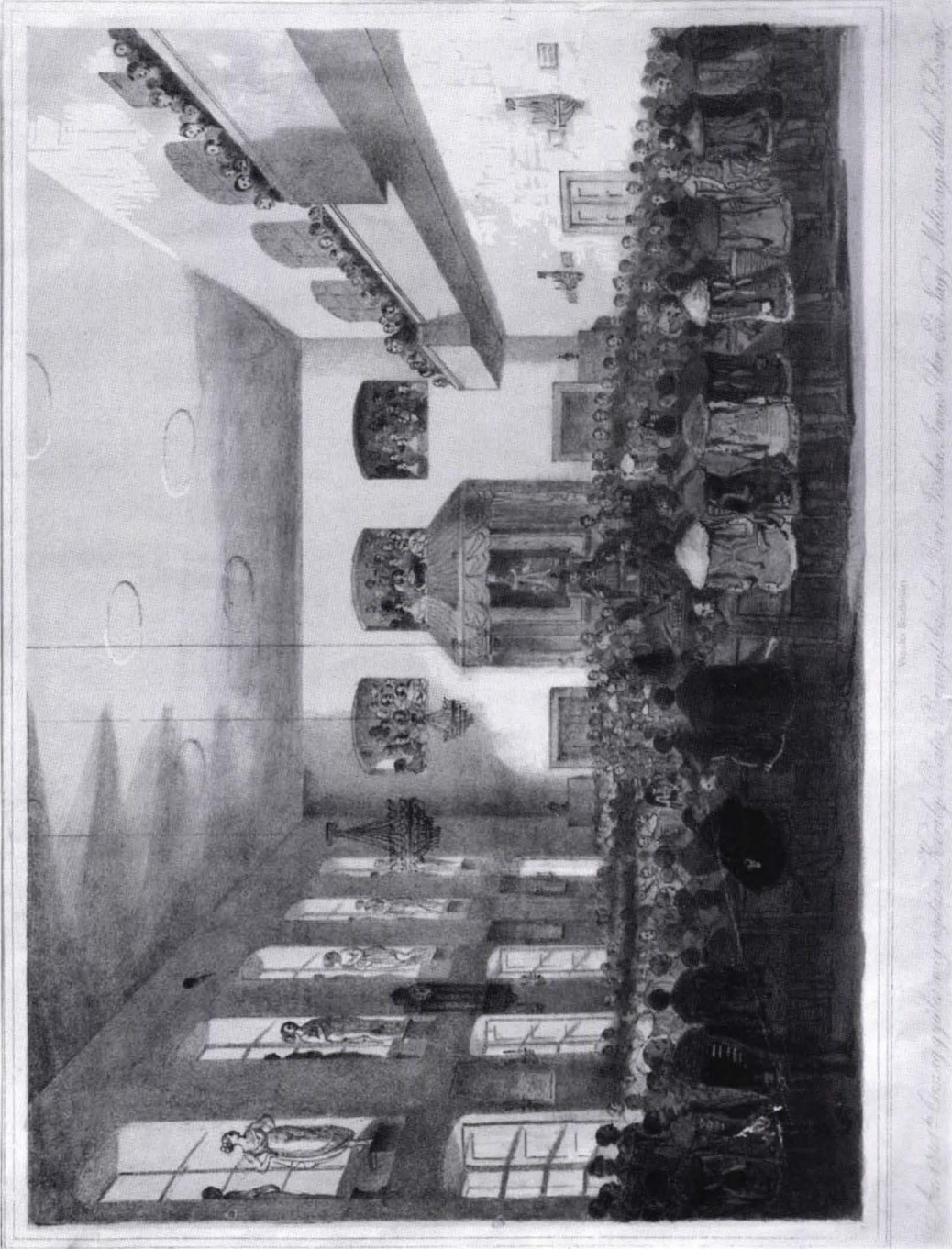
Természet után köre rajzolta Szathmári

VAJDA-KUTYA.



Természet után köre rajzolta Szathmári

MAROS-ÚJVAR.



View of the interior

The view of the interior of the hall, showing the large chandelier and the people standing in the room.