

CONSIDERATIONS ON AN EPISODE OF 20TH CENTURY HISTORY AND ART OF TIMIȘOARA: A CASE STUDY OF THE CIOBANU PALACE

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A reference to the historical process known as the Great Union connects the reader to the reality of the political context that favored the actions leading to the formation of Romania as a national state. The present study is an introduction to the history of the Banat province unfolding as the final episode of the Great Union with Romania presenting various perspectives that affected lifestyles and mentalities in a province with multiple political, confessional or cultural identities. We can discuss a series of metamorphoses unfolding to shape a diverse ethnic structure with a strong background in the European cultural space. Noted for its genuine diversity, the Banat province was always shaped by a convergence with European history, especially in the period when Timișoara, the capital city of Banat, became the residence of Carol Robert of Anjou, who lived in the castle that is today the Banat Museum building. One may notice in this aspect how historical experience plays a fundamental role in the identity of a region, specifically for the Romanian Banat, with its natural boundaries surrounding this political, administrative and cultural entity: the Mureș River in the North, the Tisza in the West and the Danube in the South.

We may also notice that the discourse about the past changes, different perspectives adding value or, on the contrary, imposing perspectives which are not historically accurate. What we as historians can do is to be objective and always present the historical truth, about a historical province with multiple artistic realities, where Romanians became art patrons, alongside Germans, Hungarians and Serbs. The reality seen through the eyes of the artists contributed to an episode in art history in which Romanian tradition started to play an important part.

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We today, consider Timișoara a cosmopolitan city, part of the modern Central European milieu, born when the Habsburgs conquered the province and shaped it as *Kronland*, a part of the empire where strong economic interests collided, which was in fact an official, successful experiment setting the modern coordinates of this area, with episodes of history which oscillated between the great powers of a specific period: Ottoman and Habsburg, the latter a period when colonists from all over Europe settled in Banat and developed a provincial civilization with multiple cultural layouts which define the area and prove its capacity of a melting pot. We have witnessed the so-called modernization transgressing to all fields at the beginning of the 18th century and we can recall in this sense the Baroque architecture and sculpture shaping the Banat province.¹ The ethnic character of the colonists who make up the melting pot of the Banat area was also an important factor in the transformation of the province's settlements into urban centers with all the requirements of such a denomination. In Neumann and others, we find references to the province as having multiple-coded cultural legacies with a future to be told if there is a past to promote.²

The legacy of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire is visible everywhere and everyone knows that Timișoara is often referred to as, "little Vienna" due to the similarities in urban planning, the religious and civil architecture, sculpture, even landscape art (following the prototype of Versailles with the English gardens realized by Le Notre for King Louis XIV), as a farfetched example but nevertheless a trend settler.

Which were the artistic realities of the Banat province after the Great Union with Romania is another question to be answered by the present study? Arts and history, above all, make up the vivid picture of those days when Romania was reunited. The fact that the provinces were joined after hundreds of years of political separation resulted in a fragmented society, where the determination of national identity conflicted with the multiethnic and multicultural truth. One nation-one state was the desideratum of Romanians in the historical provinces of Romania. The fulfillment of the national unity (the union of Banat with Romania) which, after World War I, was made of Oltenia, Wallachia, Dobrogea and Moldavia was the result of the political events leading to the change of Temeswar into Timișoara.³ It was an event that brought the Romanian problem

¹ R. Theodorescu, M. Porumb, coord., *Arta din România. Din preistorie în contemporaneitate*, vol II. (Cluj-Napoca: Ed. Academiei&Mega, 2018), 81–92.

² On this matter, see the studies that introduce updated concepts to contemporary historiographical stream, Victor Neumann, ed., *The Banat of Timișoara. A European Melting Pot* (London: Scala&Heritage, 2019), 1–2.

³ Florin Constantiniu, *A sincere History of the Romanian People* (București, 1997), 127.

to the European attention. The rise of the political movement of Bolshevism in Russia was another threat to the peace of national states in Europe after World War I. With a faction requiring the preservation of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, the Banat province entered the path of no return, of being a powerful voice in the debates over the formation of Great Romania. We tend to emphasize the role played by Romanians in the Banat, as they became promoters of local nationalism, adhering to the common ideological trends of other Romanian provinces. Most of the historians who studied the subject agree that World War I played a key role in the development of Romanian national consciousness, a key concept that became a reality after the war.

The formation of Romanian consciousness in art can be reflected upon by a case study: the Pompiliu Ciobanu Palace of Timișoara and the contribution of Ferdinand Gallas as a sculptor, the later devoting his career to the idea of heroism and borderless nationality. How this Romanian consciousness became visible is analyzed by the present study, focusing on the personality of lawyer Pompiliu Ciobanu, an active participant to the local movement of national emancipation, who, as an important cultural leader, stood beside other local leaders, shaping the last part of the Secession movement in Timișoara with the commission of a palace, equal in size and artistic decoration with all the others built in the period. The palace itself stands as a sign of Romanian authority in the historical province as P. Ciobanu was one of the leaders who participated at the Great Union Assembly of Alba-Iulia in 1918. The visual discourse renders in an obvious manner the connection realized by the artistic movement in the Banat in the 30's between east and west, blending classical ornaments with national figurative representations.

Romanian national renaissance appears with a simple but eloquent image on the façade of Ciobanu's palace, a cartouche in which Ferdinand Gallas, the sculptor who was in charge with the decoration, positioned images of Romanian peasants (a shepherd and a peasant woman twisting wool) adorning the front and side of the three-storey building facing the National Bank building, as a declaration of tradition, having almost didactic values. From a symbolic point of view, one may observe that the palace carrying the name Ciobanu has the Shepherd (in Romanian, *cioban[u]*) doubled by the image of the Romanian paradigmatic image. Also, the allegory includes the ideology of tradition as a perennial form of visual propaganda.

One may notice that historical experience plays a fundamental role in the identity of a nation, throughout history Romania being defined by the concept of union, from the time of Michael the Brave's union (1600) of the principalities with Romanian population (Wallachia, Transylvania and Moldavia), which transformed him into the precursor of modern Romania, establishing

the Orthodox Metropolitan seat in Alba-Iulia in a period when only the Catholic, Lutheran and Calvin denominations were recognized despite the fact that Orthodox Romanians were twice as numerous. Other events such as the 1848 Revolution carried the dream of nation building, and the concept so often referred to as the “Great Romania” owns its existence to Dumitru Brătianu, who introduced the term in 1852. This nation building can be observed in the Union of Moldavia and Wallachia in 1859 (known as Romania since the 1866 Constitution), which became a kingdom after gaining independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1881. Between 1848 and World War I, the idea of Romanian unity was promoted inside the Memorandum movement with the Memorandum Act of 1892, which, as a result, brought the Romanian conscience into the attention of Europe. As the contemporary historiography mentions, the fulfillment of the national unity is not seen as the work of a single leader (politician, government or party), but it is considered as the “historic deed of the whole Romanian nation, channeled by the political leaders with great intelligence”.⁴

In this sense, we can state that Woodrow Wilson’s self-determination theory became one of the factors leading to the establishment of the national states in Europe after the end of World War I. During the Habsburg period, Romanians were politically weak, despite their large number, but the self-determination principle, adopted by the Entente Powers after World War I, worked in their favor, although the Banat was partitioned between successor states after the Trianon Treaty. This happened in a period when the Banat Germans and Hungarians controlled the economy and Romanians were not visible, as I have already mentioned. As a consequence, they started promoting a progressive regional national discourse. Such a case in point is the Ciobanu Palace with the layouts of Romanian identity.

The Ciobanu Palace represents a gesture of authority that ended the Secession style in the Banat, not in a geometrical distribution of decoration but in a figurative symbolic outline. It was the fourth palace built in line on the former place occupied by the Citadel of Habsburg Timișoara, the last in line after the Timișiana Bank (1911), J. Klein Palace (1911), Lipot Gombos Palace (1912) and Ciobanu Palace (1924–1926). Comissioned as an eclectic construction more than a Secession one, the arhitect Mathias Hubert signs the blueprints reajusting the historical discourse about the past. The theme of the Romanian Shepherd was reinacted on the facade of another paradigmatic building in Timișoara, that of the Prefecture Building.

Among the vast array of cases which testify how the past was activated

⁴ Ibid., 301–302.

for current political aims, we can mention Ferdinand Gallas, who was commissioned by the local authorities to create the bas-relief scenes in which he positioned the paramount image of Romanian tradition⁵ (the shepherd and the peasant woman), or a girls' round dance (at the Girls' School in Timișoara, today in Corbului Street).

A short biography of the sculptor Ferdinand Gallas (1893–1949) who made these bas-reliefs positions his creation in the artistic movement of the period, with influences from Russia. Among the monuments realized for Romanians promoting a progressive regional national discourse, we can also mention the World War I fallen soldiers' memorials at Ciacova and Șandra, ornaments at the Kuhn pharmacy, alto-relief of the Workers' Hostel in Timișoara. Annemarie Podlipny Hehn, who published his biography, mentions that he managed to publish some of his ideas in the "Periscope" Literature and Art Review, in Arad, where he posted pictures of the monuments, along with translations from Russian.⁶

We do not know how Gallas came into gaining the commission for the decoration of the Ciobanu Palace, what we see though is a special realization carrying the artistry of a sculptor educated between 1919 and 1921 at the Moscow Academy of Arts.

The last Secession palace built in Timișoara, the Ciobanu Palace, documents the trend of a period when Romanian values started to be present in the artistic milieu. Romanians were part of the historical multiethnic province that changed after the union with Romania, an episode of national affirmation, best expressed by means of artistic imagery. Pompiliu Ciobanu, the lawyer who commissioned the palace as his own residence, had, in the years that followed, an attitude of supporting Romanians to express and identify themselves as an Orthodox majority, as he was among the patrons who contributed to the construction of the Orthodox Cathedral in Timișoara. He was the founder of the Romanian–Hungarian Commerce Chamber in Budapest, among other social foundations performing a rich cultural activity.⁷ Romanian tradition in art started to develop in a milieu defined by European traditions, the Banat province

⁵ Ioan Augustin, "Arhitectura interbelică și cheștiunea arhitecturii din România în secolul XX," in *Teme ale arhitecturii din România în secolul XX* (București: Ed. Institutul Cultural Român, 2003), 245; *Spațiul modernității românești. 1906–1947* (București: Ed. Fundației Arhitect Design, 2011).

⁶ On the issue of Gallas bibliography and work, see Ioachim Miloia, "Sculptorul Ferdinand Gallas," *Analele Banatului* III, aprilie-iunie (1930): 63–72; *Ferdinand Gallas- monografie* (Timișoara: Ed. Artpress, 2002); *Imagini ale identității naționale* (Iași: Ed. Institutul European, 2007).

⁷ M. Gruneanțu, L. Ionescu *Contribuția avocaților din Transilvania și Banat la Marea Unire* (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2018), 275.

unfolding one of its multicultural specificities. How Romanians became patrons of the arts in this nation – defining period has been the topic of this study, a pre-
amble to a largely debated subject in contemporary historiography.

CONSIDERAȚII ASUPRA UNUI EPISOD ÎN ISTORIA
ȘI ARTA SECOLULUI XX: STUDIU DE CAZ –
PALATUL CIOBANU DIN TIMIȘOARA

Rezumat

Redefinirea provinciei Banat în perioada interbelică a însemnat o reorientare către valorile tradiționale ce sunt exprimate în arta de sorginte europeană, stilul Secession și ultimele clădiri realizate în plin modernism. Palatul Ciobanu din Timișoara este un caz aparte prin definirea identității și promovarea valorilor tradiționale în plan vizual prin intermediul basoreliefurilor de pe fațada realizată de Ferdinand Gallas. Tema țăranului român atestă cu elocvență didactică apartenența comanditarului, avocat Pompiliu Ciobanu, la mediul românesc, activ participant la Marea Unire din 1918 și susținător al cauzei afirmării naționale. Pe locul liber rămas după dărâmarea cetății fortificate Vauban, în primul deceniu al sec. XX se ridică palate emblematice pentru comanditari și mediul lor etnic și cultural. Un astfel de palat cu valoare identitară este și palatul Ciobanu construit între 1924–1926 de către arhitectul Mathias Hubert.



Fig. 1. Ciobanu Palace, front view, detail of Romanian peasant theme frieze, Ferdinand Gallas, Timișoara, 1924–1926 (restoration in process – 2020). / Palatul Ciobanu, fațada, cu detaliu reprezentând friza cu tema țăranului român, Ferdinand Gallas, Timișoara, 1924–1926 (în timpul restaurării – 2020).



Fig. 2. Ciobanu Palace, Mathias Hubert-architect, Ferdinand Gallas-sculptor, Timișoara, 1924–1926 (detail of the façade cartouche). / Palatul Ciobanu, arhitect: Mathias Hubert, sculptor: Ferdinand Gallas, Timișoara, 1924–1926 (detaliu: cartușul de pe fațada imobilului).



Fig. 3. Façade of Eliza Ionescu School (School for Girls), high relief detail, Ferdinand Gallas, Timișoara. / Fațada Școlii Eliza Ionescu (Școala de fete), altorelief, detaliu, Ferdinand Gallas, Timișoara.



Fig. 4. Monument for fallen war heroes, F. Gallas, Șandra (Timiș County). / Monument dedicat eroilor căzuți în război, F. Gallas, Șandra (județul Timiș).