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The Socialist Artistic Identity and the Bilateral Agreements in the Balkans (1945-1949)

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Introduction

Creating the Eastern Bloc in the postwar era entailed an intricate process which included the transformation and adjustment of Soviet institutions and politics in the countries with new communist regimes, as well as a system of interstate political alliances. Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, general secretary of the Romanian Workers' Party (RWP), tackled the issue at the party's first congress in 1948:

“It is easy to understand the significance of the fact of having lengthwise our borders, all around our country, only befriended states. In the past, when our country was ruled by regimes that served foreign imperialists, the latter were able to trigger conflicts and tensions between Romania and its neighbors. The purpose of this policy run by the imperialist powers was clear: we were supposed to be weak and isolated in order to be controlled. Concluding treaties of cooperation and mutual assistance between Romania and Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary and, recently, between Romania and USSR, proved that this state of affairs has ended forever¹”.

In spite of the fraternal ties and close cooperation between the communist states claimed recurrently in the political discourse of the Cold War, the system of political, economic, and cultural agreements did not bring about instant unity to the Bloc. On the contrary, cooperation was not only time dependent, but also sensitive to political turnovers and to institutional or personal relationships. Cultural exchanges that came along the political treaties shared a similar discourse about solidarity and common goals within the Bloc. Nonetheless, in certain cases, they were not mere accessories of political decision, as they constituted a kind of soft diplomacy being able to make negotiations, or common interests more apparent than the official political discourse did.

¹ Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej quoted by Petre Constantinescu-Iași, *Despre români și bulgari. Contribuții istorice la prietenia româno-bulgară*, Ed. de Stat, București, 1949, pp. 50-51. My translation from the Romanian.

I propose to look at the very first artistic exchanges between Romania and Bulgaria, and subsidiarily, between Romania and Yugoslavia, that took place almost immediately after the Second World War on the backdrop of the reassessment of Balkan politics, in order to reveal how art exhibitions and artistic meetings participated into the making and unmaking of regional politics. To this end, a survey of the institutions assigned to initiate and support cultural diplomacy will precede the core discussion about types of artistic exchanges in the wider context of political tensions in the region. One major cause was the prospect of a Balkan federation, which was advocated by Marshal Josip Tito as a counterbalance to the growing Soviet power, and for which Romania showed only a vacillating interest, but which was rich in artistic outcomes. The final part recomposes with the aid of archives, publications and artworks forgotten in museums' storage rooms the Romanian-Bulgarian exchanges next to their political triggers and political mission, which were closely interwoven with the organization of a joint exhibition in 1947.

Whereas the artistic exchanges within the Bloc after the Thaw, when the neo-avant-garde began to flourish, have attracted equally scholars and curators, those initiated in the first decade of the communist regimes have been largely under-researched. Even less have come under scholarly consideration the art, the artistic institutions or the international exchanges of the first years after the Second World War due to their rapid changes difficult to retrace and integrate into the longer history of art under communism. Although, in the case of Romania, studies dedicated to artistic exchanges in the above-mentioned period are totally missing, the present research can be situated in the theoretical framework suggested by recent publications that have challenged the centrality of the Soviet model in Socialist Realist art of the Eastern Bloc. They argued for more permeability between East and West but only touched on the role of artistic connections from within the Bloc². However, they called for more attention towards artistic practices and less to ideology, which can shape a different view on Socialist Realism. Archives largely unknown before (in particular those belonging to the collection of the Syndicate of Fine Arts but also to the Ministry of Arts) have contributed to pinpoint the role of Romanian officials, cultural institutions and artists to build and make use of bilateral

² See Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, Piotr Piotrowski, "Introduction: The Geography of Internationalism", in *Idem* (eds.), *Art beyond Borders. Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)*, Central University Press, Budapest, 2016, pp. 1-18; Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, "Remapping Socialist Realism: Renato Gutuso in Poland", in Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, Piotr Piotrowski (eds.), *Art beyond Borders...cit.*, pp. 139-150; Jérôme Bazin, "Le réalisme socialiste et ses modèles internationaux", *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, vol. 109, no. 1, 2011, pp. 73-87. See also the conference *La place du grand frère. Les échanges culturels entre l'Union Soviétique et les démocraties populaires à l'époque communiste*, Villa Noel, Bucharest, Sept. 2016. (proceedings published in *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. XVII, no. 1, 2017)

agreements. Furthermore, they have been revealing for the synchronous and sometimes asynchronous moves of internal and international policies and their consequences on the art scene.

On the local front, the way in which the artistic relationships between Romania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia advanced echoed the changes in the artistic field, and also shaped new tasks inside artistic institutions which were being transformed under the pressure of the new regime. Moreover, the ways in which the artistic events were organized and perceived reflected how Romanian artists related to their own state and how they interpreted official signals and requirements. For example, after coming back from Bulgaria in 1946, the young painter Alexandru Istrati dedicated most part of his report to the Syndicate of Fine Arts, the institution that had sent him in a documentary trip, not to his own artistic achievements, but to the benefits that Bulgarian artists received from the state³. He described in detail how the Bulgarian Ministry of Arts, the Artists Syndicate (called by him “the professional unit for requests”) and the Academy of Arts oversaw the well-being of artists, providing them with stable salaries, paid holidays, clubs, housing, studios, and artistic materials, concluding that they were superior to their Romanian counterpart⁴. Even if we could presume that, during the trip, Alexandru Istrati was shown only the bright side of a new artistic system that the communist regime in Bulgaria was trying to implement, his report was, nevertheless, highly significant for his own expectations from the Romanian state.

In addition to the changes underwent by artistic institutions and artists, investigating the context of Balkan artistic exchanges in the early postwar era will shed a new light on the pre-history of Socialist Realism in the Eastern Bloc. More than a style, it was a model of institutional organization, which resulted from a process of adapting different Soviet art policies to the local realities. Going back to the period before the full accomplishment of the centralization of the art system has the advantage of disclosing various aspects of the process itself, as well as negotiations between the political and artistic institutions, their reversal or their failure. After this period, as the art system acquired stability, the debates, compromises and arrangements were less visible fainting behind more constrictive rules and a regulated discourse.

Diplomatic Institutions for the New Socialist Culture

Cultural diplomacy was recognized as a vital component of initiating and maintaining relationships and agreements with various political partners. Consequently, a dedicated institution was founded in Bucharest in 1948, namely

³ National Archives of Romania (NAR), Syndicate of Fine Arts (SFA) collection, file 16, p. 205.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

the Romanian Institute of Universal Culture⁵, conceived to centralize into a bureaucratic structure the cultural exchanges and the cultural propaganda for international audiences. Through its two main departments, the organization followed the political rift of the Cold War, segregating the countries and the specific programs into socialist and capitalist⁶. Cultural exchanges were settled by bilateral agreements, which were taken in charge by similar institutions in each country, to which a detailed program was added every year. This consisted mainly of a series of official commemorations of national heroes, cultural figures or historical events. Beside this, documentary trips and tours were the most common types of exchange. The institute did not provide crucial connections or programs for art, as it focused mainly on fields that were able to bring a wider public such as literature, theatre or folklore. The international relations, indisputably favoring those with socialist countries, were divided between more instances whose weight and function varied over time.

Until 1950, the Ministry of Arts and Information had a department of foreign cultural relations, which supervised international exhibitions and documentary trips. Afterwards, the function was undertaken by its successor, namely The Council for Culture and Art, which worked together with the newly founded Museum of Art of the People's Republic of Romania⁷ for exhibitions, and with the Romanian Artists' Union for documentary trips. Nonetheless, responsibilities assigned to each institution sometimes overlapped and decision-making depended on the power balance between them, as well as on personal and hierarchical authority. Because the artistic exchanges, which took place in the first decade of communist rule, put forth militant and ideological aspects of art production, the selection of artists was guided by their engagement towards the political value of art and the new art institution that supported it. Artistic exchanges with socialist countries endorsed connections and cooperation between the artists' unions, which created over time a network of official channels for art circulation within the Bloc and beyond (e.g. China). On a national level, they lent even more legitimacy to the centralized system of the artists' unions and to their role of granting benefits to their members in exchange of complying with state patronage and requirements.

⁵ The new institution had a regular activity only after 1950 when it was reorganized and re-titled The Romanian Institute of Foreign Relations.

⁶ The main departments were the Office for documentation and propaganda in socialist countries and its counterpart the Office for documentation and propaganda in capitalist countries. See NAR, Romanian Institute of Foreign Relations collection I, file 4, p. 116.

⁷ The Museum had a special department for exhibitions responsible for contemporary art exhibitions either of national scope such as the Yearly State Exhibition or for international events such as the exhibition *Art in Socialist Countries*, Moscow, 1958. The department became an independent institution in the 1960s under the name of National Office for Exhibitions that survived well in post-communist times.

In Romania, for the period 1945-1949, the Syndicate of Fine Arts, under the supervision of the Ministry of Arts, undertook many of the above tasks. Founded in 1921 as a syndicalist association, it was turned in the main institution meant to build a new relationship between artists and the communist state in the aftermath of the Second World War⁸. Most functions, eventually held by the Artists' Union that were created in 1950, were gradually assigned to the Syndicate. International contacts and bilateral exchanges with the socialist countries came also under its charge. They were shaped not only by the target set by the political cooperation within the Bloc or the Cold War discourse concerning the unity and socialist brotherhood among its states, but also by the internal structure of the Syndicate and its actions over the artistic field. However, during the early period of the communist regime, the international contacts were rather rare out of a number of reasons related to the reformulation of cultural diplomacy, to the rapid institutional changes and not least to the postwar scarcity. Furthermore, resources were largely directed toward internal institutional transformations, able to accommodate artists of all generations and artistic leanings under the same rule. Through a combination of incentives and constraints, the Syndicate managed, firstly, to centralize artistic sociability, as it became the sole permitted art group and, secondly, the art publicity, by controlling state commissions and exhibitions. Socialist Realism was gradually instilled and molded by these institutional structures, which interwove artists, artistic practices and hierarchies pertaining to interwar modernism and new requirements in terms of discourse, style and artistic behavior imposed by the policy of the communist state. Paralleling the institutional changes within the Syndicate, Socialist Realism underwent several redefinitions, mirrored on the one hand by its public events i.e. exhibitions and, on the other hand, by the dynamics of international events to which it contributed until its absorption into the Artists Union.

Political and Cultural Agreements in the Balkans (1945-1948)

As Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej had underlined in his speech, Romania participated to the redesigning of the geopolitical borders of Europe by

⁸ *Statutele și regulamentele Sindicatului artelor frumoase, votate în ședința adunării generale din 12 martie 1921*, Atelierele tipografiei "Poporul", București, 1922; NAR, SFA collection, file 16, pp. 288-289. See also Magda Cârneli, *Artele plastice în România 1945-1989*, Editura Meridiane, București, 2000; Irina Cărăbaș, *1945-1953: Trasee instituționale și destine politice în arta românească postbelică*, Muzeul Literaturii Române, București, 2015, pp. 24-34, www.cesindcultura.acad.ro, accessed 15.05.2017; Dan Drăghia, "'Tovarășul artist!'. Conformism și beneficii în organizarea profesională a artiștilor plastici din România comunistă", in Caterina Preda (ed.), *The State Artist in Eastern Europe. The Role of the Creative Unions*, Ed. Universității din București, București, 2017, pp. 69-70.

concluding international agreements with its neighbors, USSR included. Only Yugoslavia was missing from Gheorghiu-Dej's list of neighbors, since the conference took place after the split between Tito and Stalin, which had led to its exclusion from the Bloc governed by the USSR. Consequently, the treaties with Yugoslavia were invalidated and any bilateral relations ended. Moreover, Tito's independent politics in the Balkans fell into disgrace and oblivion. Romania did not deal differently with the situation, although the bilateral agreement with Yugoslavia, next to the one with Bulgaria, seemed to have implied other version of the Eastern Bloc than the one later imposed by Stalin. Cultural exchanges between the three states before the split seemed at their turn to feel the pulse of political debates taking place behind the scene. As revealed by archives largely ignored before, artistic cooperation had been initiated previous to the treaties virtually paving the way for more consistent political intervention.

The project for a Balkan federation was not new. However, the aura and the powerful position held by the revolutionary and victorious Marshal Tito seemed to bring it closer to accomplishment in the aftermath of the Second World War. The Yugoslavian leader sought to implement his own vision of socialism, as well as to counterbalance the ever growing influence of USSR over the Eastern European countries⁹. Even if Tito took as main partner Georgi Dimitrov, the leader of the Communist Party and the communist government in Bulgaria, more countries had been involved or were tempted by negotiations in view of this project. The Romanian engagement with the idea of a Balkan federation is still under-researched, and therefore little is known about the possible discussions between the communist leaders. Seen through the lens of artistic exchanges, the intention to collaborate with Bulgaria and Yugoslavia closer than with other countries from the Bloc seemed rather conspicuous. Leaders and officials of the three countries did not underestimate the political and diplomatic potential of artistic events since they attended exhibition openings, contributed to their catalogues, gave dinners in honor of guest artists, and saw to their reflection in the press, especially in official mouthpieces such as *Scântea*.

The Romanian-Balkan artistic exchange started by inviting a small number of Bulgarian artists to the Official Salon resumed in 1945, after the war, and reached its peak towards the end of 1947, and in the first months of 1948. During this time, Josip Tito (17-19 December 1947), and then Georgi Dimitrov (16-19 January 1948) visited Bucharest in order to sign bilateral agreements. Each time the event was preceded by art exhibitions, as if art was a proof for political cooperation and artists were heralds of future decisions. As their titles suggested (*Three Romanian Painters in Yugoslavia*, December 1947; *Romanian Painters Present Bulgaria*, January 1948), the exhibitions argued for a better

⁹ Geoffrey Swain, *Tito. A Biography*, I.B. Tauris, London-New York, 2011, p. 92.

knowledge about one another, acquired on the spot, and for the transfer of social and political experience in their common task of building socialism.

Both Balkan leaders dedicated their multiple speeches held in Bucharest to the solidarity and transparency among all countries embracing the communist ideology, which propelled them toward a new historical stage unlike the imperialist side, whose goals were “anti-popular, anti-humanist, and anti-cultural”¹⁰. While Tito kept his message along the general lines of peaceful cooperation in the Bloc, without failing to mention the leadership of USSR¹¹, Dimitrov introduced a regional flavor by listing the bilateral agreement with Romania next to the ones with other Balkan countries such as Yugoslavia and Albania¹². Although, by the time, Stalin allegedly supported the federation, both visits to Bucharest increased the tension between USSR and the Balkan leaders. Tito, whose claims for independence from Moscow had already been numerous, did not inform Stalin about his visit to Romania¹³, whereas Dimitrov’s speech was reproved for its emphasis on federalization¹⁴. In spite of the grandiose welcoming of the Balkan leaders to Bucharest, the official discourse was different in each country. The Yugoslav press proclaimed the treaties with both Romania and Hungary as forwarding steps towards an extended union, which would have comprised the Balkan states as well as the Danubian ones¹⁵. On the contrary, the Romanian regime did not publicize at all its involvement in the federalization of the Balkans, while rather rejecting it. One editorial published in *Scântea* after Tito’s visit even argued that the bilateral agreement proved wrong the idea that Yugoslavia would have intended to form a Slavic bloc¹⁶, since it was willing to cooperate with non-Slav states such as Romania. In order to dash away with any suspicion, the article blamed the Western imperialist bloc for bringing forth such an idea meant to divide, spur violence, and justify aggression¹⁷. All these contradictions could have echoed distrust and doubt about Tito’s project, or yet uncompleted secret negotiations, which, however, did not cease totally until the split between Stalin and Tito in the summer of 1948.

¹⁰ “Cuvântarea lui Gheorghii Dimitrov”, *Scântea*, 19.01.1948, p. 3.

¹¹ “Discursul Mareșalului Tito”, *Scântea*, 19.12.1947, p. 3.

¹² “Răspunsul lui Gheorghii Dimitrov”, *Scântea*, 16.01.1948, p. 3.

¹³ Geoffrey Swain, *Tito...cit.*, p. 92.

¹⁴ Georgii Dimitrov, *The Diary of Georgii Dimitrov 1933-1949*, ed. Ivo Banac, Yale University Press, New Haven-London, 2003, p. 434.

¹⁵ Tanja Zimmermann, “The Visualization of the Third Way in Tito’s Yugoslavia”, in Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, Piotr Piotrowski (eds.), *Art beyond Borders...cit.* p. 474.

¹⁶ The union of the so-called Southern Slavs was also a variant put forth by proponents of Balkan federalization. This idea had already a relatively long history and, on occasions, it constituted the incentive for cultural exchange. See for instance: Milena Georgieva, *South Slav Dialogues in Modernism. Bulgarian Art and the Art of Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia 1904-1912*, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, 2008.

¹⁷ Silviu Brucan, “Tratatul româno-iugoslav”, *Scântea*, 24.12.1947, p. 1.

On this background, the artistic exchanges between Romania and the Balkan countries were connected to the political vacillations, but not always tantamount to them. Similar art institutions from the three countries have been instrumental to set out a common program for exchange: the Romanian Syndicate of Fine Arts and the Artists' Unions from Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, all three of them founded under the protection of the communist regimes after the war. The inclusion of foreign artists in already existing collective exhibitions initiated an artistic circuit without spending additional resources.

Firstly, a Bulgarian section was added to the Official Salon in Bucharest in 1945, which by the time was the largest national exhibition originating in the modern system of arts adopted from France in the 19th century. At a first glance, neither the artists nor the types of works had changed by the war or by its immediate consequences. Artistic life seemed to have regained its previous tempo. Nevertheless, the sudden international opening of the Salon was new just like the double jury that selected the works for the exhibition. Both juries highlighted the growing importance of new institutional structures, the Syndicate and the Bulgarian Artists' Union, supported by each of the states. In the case of the Romanian jury, the involvement of the Syndicate was rather cautious and subtle as its members were chosen in such a way as not to distort too much the interwar art hierarchies. Thus, on its presidium sat Camil Ressu, whose great prominence within the local art field originated not only in a long successful career as a painter but also in the prestige gained as a professor and rector of the School of Fine Arts in Bucharest during the 1930s. After the war, he became the new president of the Syndicate of Fine Arts, a position which restored his institutional power under different political conditions. Thus, being the president of the jury attested both his interwar reputation and his new job. However, the discreet intruder in the jury of the Salon was M.H. Maxy who, in the pre-1944 period, had been a proponent of avant-garde art and consequently had not shown interest in official art events whatsoever. Only that his communist orientation propelled him from the margins of the artistic field to its center, very early in the postwar era, and assigned him many influent positions, including secretary (and later president) of the Syndicate. In the next year he was the head of the group of Romanian artists invited to exhibit at the Bulgarian Salon in Sofia¹⁸.

The same kind of artistic exchange was taking place between Bucharest and Belgrade starting with 1947. This time, the involvement of the state could be clearly perceived as well as the partial appropriation of the Salon in order to transmit direct political messages. The double foreword of the exhibition catalogue written by the Romanian minister of arts and information Ion Pas and the Yugoslav ambassador to Bucharest Dane Midracovic appeared as a clear

¹⁸ M.H. Maxy, "Artiști români în Bulgaria", *Lumea*, 10.02.1946, p. 7.

diplomatic gesture. Both of them argued for a more effective role of the artists in people's life and for their embarking on the postwar reconstruction in each of their countries. In exchange, as Ion Pas put forth, they were supported by the state:

“It is the servants' of art great merit that, by understanding their mission in the life of people, whose sorrows and aspirations they share, they do not despair and, all along, it is the great merit of our democratic regime that, in spite of the overwhelming tasks of the present moment, undertakes the duty of stimulating artistic manifestations and of assisting the artists”¹⁹.

However, both the Romanian official and his Yugoslav colleague showed moderation in their discourses, seemingly flattering the artists rather than putting pressure on them. The discourse outran the production of art since, either from Romania or Yugoslavia, the exhibits did not turn down the genres and the representational style established by the interwar modernism. For the moment, the newly installed communist regimes sought to attract artists' collaboration and to appropriate any art, even created in the bourgeois past that could have been interpreted as showing any sign of political or social engagement²⁰. Despite these public endorsements of each other's art policies, the course taken by the exchanges between Romania, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria was altered soon, on the one hand by the changes in the international politics within the Bloc and, on the other hand, due to the transformation of local art institutions.

The 1948 Salon was expected to be a highpoint of the artistic exchanges within the Bloc, by extending the invitation to more fraternal countries such as Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Furthermore, some of the subject matters displayed by the artworks have been designed especially on this occasion such as Eugen Gâscă's painting, *Welcoming Comrade Tito*²¹. But in less than a year, state's requirements for art had begun to change, particularly after the proclamation of the People's Republic of Romania. Artists came under more pressure to join political propaganda and Socialist Realist models and, since the official position and decision about practical regulations in art was still confusing, the jury of the Salon accepted only a small part of the received works. As novel archival documents show, many works sent from the socialist countries have been labeled as formalist and rejected²². Most of the Romanian works did not meet either the criteria of the jury and the artists must have been taken by surprise that what would have been accepted a year before, was no longer suitable. Following the rejection of more than 1.000 works out of the

¹⁹ Ion Pas, “Săptămâna artelor”, in *Salonul Oficial*, Monitorul oficial și imprimăriile statului, București, 1947, p. 7.

²⁰ For Yugoslavia see: Carol S. Lily, *Power and Persuasion. Ideology and Rhetoric in Communist Yugoslavia 1944-1953*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado-Oxford, 2001, p. 95.

²¹ NAR, Ministry of Arts and Information 1948-1950 (MAI) collection, file 135/1948, p. 23.

²² NAR, MAI collection, file 135/1948, pp. 9-15.

1.100 received, the Salon was postponed²³. In the meanwhile, Yugoslavia was expelled from the Bloc so that it could not be a part of the exhibition anymore. Finally, the Salon was banned stating even more clearly that not only the international balance of power had been reassessed, but also that the relationship between the communist regime, now fully in power, and the artists had taken a new course²⁴.

Art Exhibitions and the Romanian-Bulgarian Cooperation between 1945-1949

The artistic exchanges between Romania and Bulgaria were the first step in establishing cultural relations within the Bloc in the early postwar era, which constantly developed in multiple forms of cooperation throughout several years. Archives, in particular those of the Syndicate of Fine Arts collection, have preserved sufficient documents to retrace the bureaucratic mechanisms that set them out. The major action, carefully prepared by both sides, gathered Bulgarian and Romanian artists in a number of occasions and reached its climax with an exhibition, which travelled from Bucharest to Sofia in 1947 (Figure 1). Its illustrated catalogue was an exception in the aftermath of the war, when art publications were poor or inexistent. Equally exceptional was its trilingual text (Romanian, Bulgarian and French) that testified to a wider international scope outpacing simple bilateral connections²⁵. The exchange of works, which were to enter state museums in both countries, has completed but not concluded the efforts to shape cultural diplomacy under the conditions of new artistic systems directed entirely by the state.

The close link with the policies of the regimes was underlined by the exhibition's honorific committees, containing official hierarchies headed by the Romanian and Bulgarian prime ministers, Petru Groza and Georgi Dimitrov, while the artists were assigned only the back of the list. The catalogue was again proclaiming, by verbal and visual means, the friendship connecting both countries considering the event "a new achievement in the life of Balkans"²⁶.

²³ NAR, MAI collection, file 135/1948, p. 16.

²⁴ Irina Cărăbaș, "Ultimul salon sau prima expoziție invizibilă a realismului socialist", in Ruxandra Demetrescu, Ioana Măgureanu, Irina Cărăbaș (eds), *Di suo' maniera e di sua' aria. Studii în onoarea Ancăi Oroveanu*, UNArte, București, 2012, pp. 130-143.

²⁵ *Expoziție de artă plastică româno-bulgară. Pictură – Sculptură – Grafică*, București, April-May, Sofia, May-June, 1947.

²⁶ Dimo Kazasov (ministry of information and arts), [Introduction], in *Expoziție de artă plastică româno-bulgară...cit.*, p. 8. News about the exhibition were published in Bulgaria under the umbrella of Balkan encounters. See "Confluences balcaniques", *Bulletin d'informations culturelles*, no. 29, 1947, p. 3.

Cornel Medrea's two projects for sculptural reliefs, featured in the exhibition, represented the Romanian-Bulgarian alliance as the fraternal bond of two muscled male figures uniting their hands, and as the embrace of two vaguely peasant-like female and male characters.

In the political context of 1947, this exhibition could be enlisted along other actions meant to create special connections with the Balkan states. At the same time, it also bore different diplomatic intentions drawing back to the previous dissensions between Bulgaria and Romania. In 1940, Romania was compelled to restore Southern Dobruja to Bulgaria, causing new tensions between the two states that would be refueled by the unclear situation of Romanian properties, which remained in Bulgaria after the Second World War²⁷. The rise to power of communist regimes, supported by the USSR, changed diplomatic priorities and the regimes were now required to adopt a discourse that asserted ideological closeness and friendship. Romanian publications issued under official guidance sought to outline a genealogy of the relations with Bulgaria that obliterated difficult episodes emphasizing instead a perfect parallelism between the two histories. From the birth of Romanian people till the more recent sufferings under Ottoman occupation and the prewar fascist dictatorships both countries were shown to share a heroic struggle for independence which was to be accomplished by the communist parties²⁸. As a neighbor, Bulgaria became the middle term that proved the Slavic influence over Romanians' history, conferring thus more legitimacy to the dependence on the USSR.

The postwar artistic exchanges were most probable initiated by the Romanian side through the invitation to the 1945 Official Salon in Bucharest. A bilateral agreement concerning exclusively the cooperation between the two professional associations and signed by M.H. Maxy, secretary of the Romanian syndicate and Alexander Jenkov, president of the Bulgarian union stipulated many common actions like collective exhibitions, press contributions, granting a prize, and documentary trips that would result in works representing "the landscape, the customs and the political life" of the other²⁹. Even if only a part of the project came true, the agreement set out a type of long-term relationship based on traveling exhibitions and documentary trips.

There were a few groups of Romanian artists visiting Bulgaria throughout the years 1945-1949, but their organization is not entirely retraceable. The trips

²⁷ Lucian Boia, *Balcic. Micul paradis al României mari*, Humanitas, București, 2014, pp. 167-175. Private properties owned by Romanian citizens in Bulgaria as well as those belonging to the Royal House of Romania in Blachik were lost after 1947. The latter were subject to long lasting negotiations which initially proposed to use them for artistic exchanges.

²⁸ Petre Constantinescu-Iași, *Raporturi culturale româno-bulgare*, Ministerul artelor și informațiilor, București, 1946; *Idem, Despre români și bulgari. Contribuții istorice la prietenia româno-bulgară*, Ed. de Stat, București, 1949.

²⁹ NAR, SFA collection, file 19, p. 130.

took place at different moments in time, either by groups or individual artists. Such journeys from a country with closed borders to a foreign land could have been counted among the benefits offered to artists by the Syndicate of Fine Arts, depending on the established hierarchies, interests, and the existing resources. Even much later in the socialist period, when the opportunities to travel for artists had already been enlarged, they were not accessible to anyone.

The minutes of a meeting of the Syndicate committee in 1945 nominated for a documentary trip to Bulgaria the following artists: Nutzi Acontz, Vasile Dobrian, Alexandru Istrati, Alexandru Padina, Traian Sfințescu and George Tomaziu³⁰. However, the list of those deserving such a benefit was repeatedly amended so that only three out of the initial group reached Bulgaria in 1946-1947, and only two of them participated to the joint exhibition. Next to Alexandru Istrati and Nutzi Acontz, the group working for the exhibition was completed by Cornel Medrea, Ada Geo, Jean Alexandru Steriadi, Nicolae Dărăscu, Marcela Cordescu and Ștefan Constantinescu.

In 1946, a separate group, which was led by Maxy, paid back the visit to the Bulgarian artists. Its major objective was the General Exhibition in Sofia, later described by Maxy in an extended press article bearing curious critical accents³¹. The undecided identity of the groups elected to be part of the artistic exchanges reflected the yet unstable configuration and hierarchy within the Syndicate. In fact, the group responsible with the exhibition mirrored quite clearly the various types of artists who joined/rejoined the Syndicate after the war: it was a mixture of old interwar masters, communist engaged artists, or on their way to become so, youngsters willing to make themselves known, and artists seeking protection under difficult and insecure conditions. The sculptor Cornel Medrea and the painters Nicolae Dărăscu and Jean Alexandru Steriadi had long established artistic careers and prestigious positions at the School of Fine Arts in Bucharest.

Recently, they had been activated as SFA members, while Steriadi had been appointed rector of the School in 1944. Their reputation bestowed credibility upon the Syndicate and its policies, which was exactly what the regime needed. Cultural figures were being attracted and appropriated by the communist system in order either to give legitimacy to its decisions or to camouflage them, a strategy which proved successful on the long term, as it maintained a psychological balance between the old and the new. Needless to say, the interwar masters were also held in respect by the Bulgarian side, where the situation was very similar since, at that moment, all active artists, including those promoted by the new regime, were proponents of modernist traditions. For instance, Nenko Balkansky, vice-president of the Bulgarian Artists Union at

³⁰ NAR, SFA collection, file 23, p. 31.

³¹ M.H. Maxy, "Artiști români în Bulgaria", *Lumea*, 10.02.1946, p. 3.

the time, recalled his stay in Paris where he had met Medrea and Steriadi³². Artists from younger generations were selected on quite diverse and rather personal criteria: sculptor Ada Geo was Medrea's wife, while painter Alexandru Istrati was Camil Ressu's assistant at the painting department of the School of Fine Arts.

Despite handling the interwar masters with velvet gloves, the regime knew that the future of a communist art belonged to the younger artists who had not yet being contaminated by modernist ideas. Therefore, they were being promoted in all artistic institutions in order to "grow" committed artists. From this point of view, the early picks for the Bulgarian-Romanian exchange (taking into account both the first nominees and the actual exhibition participants) have proven partially wrong: Istrati and Padina were to immigrate to France, while Tomaziu was imprisoned for espionage early in the 1950s. Belonging to a middle generation, the painter Nutzi Acontz did not live up either to this first promotion, and became a marginal figure of the new artistic system. Out of the middle generation, the graphic artist Marcela Cordescu and the painter Ștefan Constantinescu became proponents of official art, managing to adapt throughout their long careers to the various changes made by the regime in cultural policy.

The structure of Bulgarian groups sent to Romania proved similar ways of promotion, based on hierarchy and prestige within the Artists Union supported by the state. Alexander Jenkov, in 1945, and Boris Anghelushev, in 1946, led the groups in their capacity of presidents of the union. The second time, the president was assisted by the chief of Art Department of the Bulgarian-Soviet Association. Likewise, the majority of the artists embarking for the documentary trip to Romania in view of the exhibition belonged to different interwar generations, benefitting, just like their neighbors, from the efforts made by the regime to keep them close. Their symbolic power on the cultural scene was expected to provide legitimacy to new artistic institutions like the union, as well as, even if more discreetly at that time, to an art which was gradually accepting ideologically based subject matters. Enlightening in this respect were the articles, which combined short biographies with the appraisal of modernist works, dedicated to interwar masters such as Bentcho Obrechkov, Zlatiu Boyadjiev or David Peretz, all of them participants to the joint exhibition in 1947, by the Bulgarian official cultural bulletin published for external propaganda³³. For the moment, this did not seem inconsistent neither with their participation to the documentary trip to Romania in 1946, supported

³² Nenko Blakanski, "Sept peintres roumains", *Bulletin d'informations culturelles*, no. 27, 1946, pp. 10-11.

³³ Milko Bitchev, "Cendres de fusées éteintes: Bentcho Obrechkov", *Bulletin d'informations culturelles*, no. 24, 1946, pp. 10-11; Ilya Bechkov, "David Peretz", *Bulletin d'informations culturelles*, no. 25, 1946, pp. 10-11; Mikhail Gheorghiev, "Toute la vie paysanne dans l'art de Zlatiu Boyadjiev", *Bulletin d'informations culturelles*, no. 26, 1946, pp. 8-9.

by state institutions, nor with their work connected to key issues of communist propaganda.

The documentary trips were a mixture of artistic residency, cultural tourism, cultural diplomacy and institutional experience. The titles of the works selected for the show communicated the exact objectives of the journeys, especially of that across Romania. It was more thoroughly conceived as a propaganda tour that connected main industrial sites of the country, such as Breaza, Brașov, Hunedoara and Ghelar³⁴. Among them, Brașov held a distinctive position, not only because of its consistent industrial function but also because it was an important artistic center. The Bulgarian artists had the occasion to meet local artists enlisted in one of the very few branches of the Syndicate of Fine Arts across the country³⁵. All visited places had to draw an image of a new Romania which had hard industry and the proletariat at the core of its society and economy. This intention was fully reflected at the official level of the Bulgarian side as shown by the article-report on the documentary trip published by Boris Angelushev:

“If in what concerns art we were allowed to follow our inspiration, in return, we had to prove clear cut political orientation. This was the goal of our visits to Malaxa, Astra [factories in Brașov], Hunedoara and Ghelar where no occasion was wasted for expressing the ideological kinship of our countries. Thus, we were present not only as artists but also as political representatives of our people”³⁶.

The Bulgarian approach to the documentary trip seemed more relaxed since more time was to be spent in Sozopol, by the sea, taking up the tradition of interwar artistic colonies. Therefore, most part of the artworks produced by the Romanian artists were simply landscapes.

Although the Bulgarian artists were more duteous in making images that matched the regimes’ desiderata, the works from both countries shared a common appearance based on modernist means of representation, drawn particularly from post-impressionism. From today’s perspective, in spite of their subject matter belonging to the propaganda repertoire those artworks seem far away from the style, activism and representation type that one usually associates with engaged art and Socialist Realism. The representations – paintings, drawings or watercolors – were mainly distant, non-narrative images, which rarely depicted industrial work as such (Alexander Stamenov, *The Iron Plant in*

³⁴ Except for Breaza which was a well-known resort where the Syndicate owned a guest house, the other places were industrial centers: machine and equipment industry (Brașov), steel plant (Hunedoara), mining (Ghelar).

³⁵ Nicolae Blebea, “Pictorii bulgari care vizitează România sunt oaspeții Brașovului”, *Drum Nou*, 24.11.1946, p. 3.

³⁶ Boris Anguelouchev, “Cinquante jours en Roumanie”, *Bulletin d’informations culturelles*, no. 29, 1947, p. 9.

Hunedoara, Figure 2). On the contrary, the industrial work was replaced by landscapes or urban views, and sometimes even portraits featuring industrial constructions in the background (Bentcho Obrechkov, *Urban Landscape in Romania*, Figure 3, Zlatiu Boyadjev, *Hunedoara* or Dan Băjenaru, *Oil Refinery*). Furthermore, the people portrayed in landscapes or in individual scenes were far from the heroic muscled figure of the socialist realist worker. Instead, peasants or peasant like figures populated their works, linking back to the images of national specificity that were central to the art scenes of both countries in the period prior to the Second World War. Beyond this continuity, the representations of peasants were revealing for the actual social structure in the visited places in which the percentage of industrial workers was very low (David Peretz, *Hunedoara*, Figures 4 and 5).

All the works selected for the Bulgarian-Romanian exhibition shared an intermediary nature between old and new, between modernist representation and socialist realist subject-matter, between the personal choice of the artist and the pressures of art institutions. They configured an initial stage in the process of instilment of Socialist Realism, which was soon to be overcome and forgotten. If the new requirements for the Socialist Realist aesthetics, formulated in the 1950s, had expelled them from the realm of official art, the recovery of interwar modernism, which occurred later, during the Thaw, did not consider them either. The exchanged works, supposed to further strengthen the bilateral cooperation, eventually entered the National Museums of Art in Bucharest and Sofia, never to be displayed after 1947. Both museums preserve in their storage rooms these forgotten images that draw back to a period when communist cultural policy was still in its making.

Towards a Socialist Identity in Art

Retracing artistic exchanges between Romania and Bulgaria and, on a smaller scale, between Romania and Yugoslavia, during the early bid for power of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, not only gives higher profile to a less considered area in postwar history but also suggests the special mission of art in the context of political and diplomatic relations. In the case of the Balkan federation, art played an important role in the preparation and the follow-up of political negotiations, without divulging them on a direct manner.

While the bilateral exchanges with Yugoslavia were cut off by the political discord between Stalin and Tito, leading to the dissolution of Balkan federalization, the cooperation with Bulgaria underwent a serious recast following the radical changes of cultural policy. After 1947, documentary trips and exhibitions continued, but with less official pomp until 1949, when Socialist Realism took over the cultural discourse in both countries. The final

act occurred in Sofia where, in 1949, an exhibition inspired by the trips to Romania made by Zlatiu Boyadjiev, David Peretz and Vasil Barakov, was closed under the accusation of formalism³⁷. This was nothing else but a confirmation of the great significance of exhibitions in the process of molding a new relationship between artists and the communist state. As M.H. Maxy already stated in an article recording his experience in Bulgaria in 1946, their ultimate goal was creating a new kind of artist:

“The need to bring the masses near to artistic products, as well as the urge for artists to grasp the conditions of active life of our people are issues that cannot be solved in one day. Therefore, the salons of painting must at least offer a glimpse of their intentions toward them”³⁸.

Cultural exchanges between Romania and Bulgaria were soon formalized through their placement under the control of the Romanian Institute for Foreign Relations, which assigned them equal status as those with other socialist countries. After the new rapprochement between Moscow and Belgrade, the relations with Yugoslavia underwent similar bureaucratization and the diminishing of the importance of visual art within the diplomatic frame.

All in all, these early artistic exchanges set out a series of practices that were maintained throughout the entire socialist period and therefore contributed to charting a common artistic identity. Although the Soviet cultural model settled certain borders and modes of action in each country through imported art institutions or policies, the artistic exchanges within the Eastern Bloc had also an independent life, which sometimes even bypassed the primary model. Furthermore, in each country, Socialist Realism was configured at the intersection of Soviet directives, local artistic hierarchies and practices, and bilateral exchanges. A socialist identity began to take shape very early being further consolidated under Socialist Realist conditions and later re-molded in order to reach a different, more expanded and less official zone during the Thaw.

³⁷ Dimiter Pampulov, *Zlatiu Boyadjiev. Videniata na velikia maistor*, Janet 45, Plovdiv, 2013, pp. 101-102. I thank Ada Hajdu for the translation from the Bulgarian.

³⁸ M.H. Maxy, “Artiști români în Bulgaria”, cit.

Illustrations

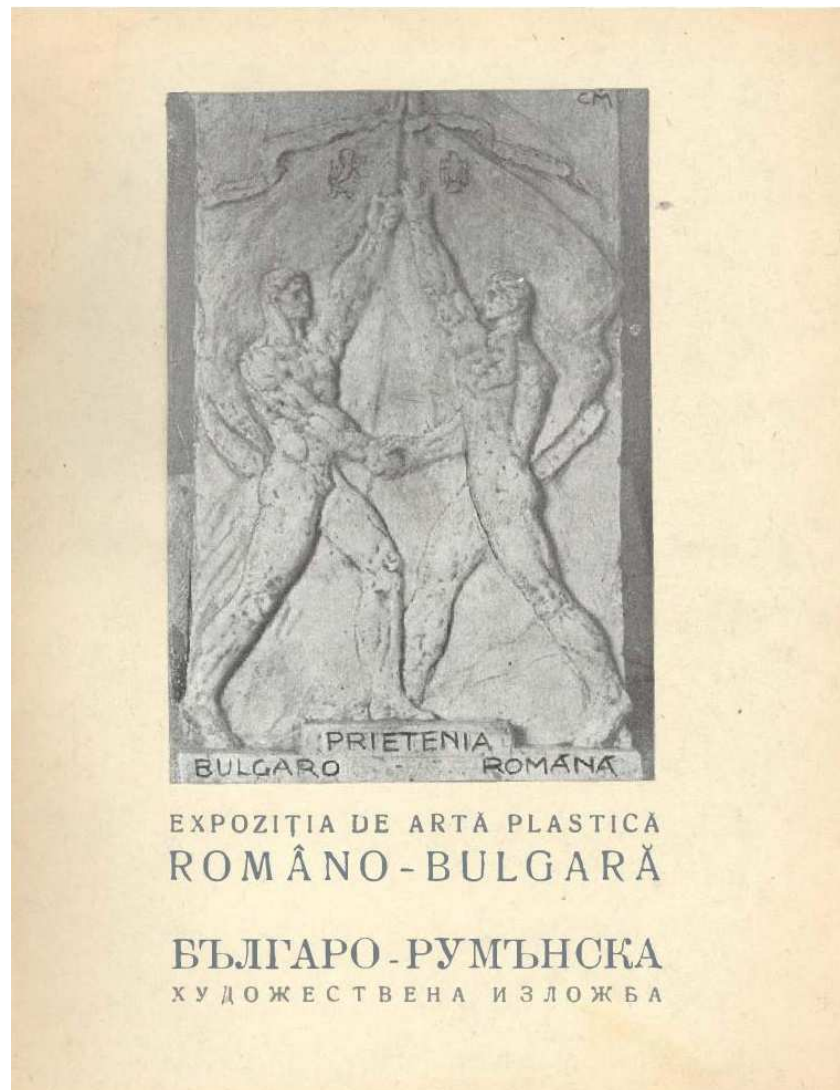


Figure 1. Romanian-Bulgarian Exhibition, 1947: cover of the exhibition catalogue with Cornel Medrea's project for the monument of Romanian-Bulgarian Friendship.



Figure 2. Alexander Stamenov, *The Iron Plant in Hunedoara*,
49x65 cm, oil on canvas, 1946.
© National Museum of Art, Bucharest



Figure 3. Bencio Obrechkov, *Urban Landscape in Romania*,
46x55 cm, oil on canvas, 1946.
© National Museum of Art, Bucharest



Figure 4. David Peretz, *Hunedoara*,
70x87 cm, oil on canvas, 1946.
© National Museum of Art, Bucharest



Figure 5. David Peretz, *Woman Portrait*, backside of *Hunedoara*,
70x87 cm, oil on canvas, 1946.
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