

THE MODERN PORTRAIT IN THE ROMANIAN PAINTING FROM THE PATRIMONY OF THE ART MUSEUM OF IAȘI

Abstract

The portrait, this old need of man to immortalize his image, to eternize it one way or another, has known a development whose evolution stages were confounded in the end with the history of humanity. This route could be synthesized in a history of the artists' capacity and will to achieve the similitude with the respective methods. According to the exigency degree regarding the particular idea connected to the notion of portrait, we find examples of portraits ever since the old antiquity or the existence of the portrait could be denied until the occurrence of the realistic type, characteristic to the more recent periods.

The present paper is attempting, in the larger context of deciphering and understanding the occurrence and evolution of the pictorial portrait in the Romanian modern painting, to emphasize from the documentary and artistic point of view, the modern portrait in the Romanian painting from the patrimony of the Art Museum of Iași.

Chapter I: Short history of the portrait as distinctive artistic genre in painting

The arts history has registered the existence of the portrait achieved in all the artistic techniques, along time, going through epochs of great blossom or periods of apparent decline, being cultivated, more or less constantly, until nowadays. The portrait seems to have its origin in Sumer and the antique Egypt, in the third millennium, before Christ, consecrating in the Greek-Roman world due to the fact that, in its conception, the man, become measure of all things, and his face a certain standard, continued his eternal fight with the gods, exacerbating the representation of his own face. After a remarkable blossoming of this genre in the antique republican and imperial Rome, especially concerning sculpture, in the period of the Dark Ages, for a rather extended time interval, the preoccupations for the portrait have diminished, becoming prohibited under the suspicion of the heretical practicing of idolatry, sometimes aggressively combated by the Church. The creation of the portrait genre was a problem of first importance, later, for the European renaissance art, in its apogee period as in its late period as well, topic that was materialized through an exceptional development of the realistic portrait in the Europe of that epoch. Together with the portraiture of the other techniques of visual-plastic expression, the pictorial portrait has known a new assertion and development in the Renaissance, knowing the full consecration as autonomous artistic genre in the following centuries. From Jan van Eyck, Leonardo da Vinci and Rafael, la Tizian, Dürer, Holbein, Rembrandt and then Velázquez and Goya, the portrait in the easel painting developed and matured, reaching a popularity level that will impose it at the beginning of the XIX century,

including in the numerical plan, development without precedent determined by the high demand from the bourgeoisie clients who wanted to immortalize their face like the kings, popes, doges or important donors in the olden times.

Little by little, at the dawns of the impressionist “revolution” a decisive movement occurred from the classical concept about the portrait to a new vision, of Cézanne type, according to which the human figure had lost its quality of strictly reproductive representation. The human face no longer presenting interest for himself for the artist, has become a visual-plastic composition that is integrated in the set of forms, values and colours composing the painting, similar to any object of the real world. The new orientation has found a significant identity in Cézanne’s art, where the interest for the observation and reflection on the human conditions and his relation with the world, has passed on a secondary plan, in favor of the creator’s subjectivity in relation with his own feelings facing the model.

Chapter II : The Votive Portrait in the religious painting from Țara Românească and Moldova, XV- XVII centuries

Making an overview of the evolution of the portrait in the Romanian painting, we can decipher, during the different stages of the country development, the process of the genre maturing, strongly connected with the artist’s position in society. The first representations were registered together with the readers’ and saints’ faces, among the laic elements which appeared within the religious compositions, being characterized through an original combination of the canons from interpretations with the direct observation of the surrounding world.

Achieving since the beginning a general framework of the mediaeval votive portrait development in the Romanian States during the XI- XIV centuries, the research presents the evolution of the mediaeval votive portrait in Țara Românească and Moldova, during the XV, XVI, and XVII centuries, according to the Byzantine, oriental model, strongly connected with the artistic evolutions from Transylvania, seen as a “turn plate” of the artistic influences from the east, from the central-European portrait art. We took into account, the art of the votive portrait during Ștefan cel Mare and Petru Rareș time, culminating with the representations from Vasile Lupu’s time in Moldova, and the art of the votive portrait in Țara Românească during Neagoe Basarab, Matei Basarab and Constantin Brâncoveanu’s reigns. In addition, I have emphasized the contribution of embroidery workshops and the masterpiece of miniaturists in the evolution of the medieval portrait in the Romanian States.

Referring to the evolution of the portrait in the old Romanian painting, we can decipher during the different stages of the society’s development, the process of maturity of the genre,

strongly connected with the artist's position in the society. Both in the case of Moldova and Țara Românească, we can invoke the same guiding marks of the evolution of the Romanian society in full development, despite the ottoman domination in this part of the Europe, starting from the first representations characterized through the rigorous combination of the rigors of the church painting with the direct observation of the surrounding world. The old Romanian painting has promoted the portrait as artistic genre, beyond the canonical constraints of the painting of Byzantine inspiration. The votive portrait of the reader did not necessarily present the individual characteristics of the person portrayed, not even in the last period in which the artistic and technical evolutions to a non-sanctification of the religious themes.

Chapter III : The lesson of the central – European portrait in gravure and its role in the portraiture from the Romanian States, in the XVII and XVIII centuries

The introduction of the apparatus portrait at the court of the two Romanian states through the central-European sources of Austria, Hungary and Poland, has produced a major change in the esthetic of the portrait when the artist stopped on a new symbol regarding the representation of the physical traits and later, on the psychic feelings of the model, sometimes appealing to an obvious descriptive accuracy in the representation of physical characteristics, of the physiognomy of the portrayed person.

Starting from the identification of Transylvania concomitantly as a transit area and focus area, radiating the central-European engraved portrait, the research emphasized the rich portraiture of Mihai Viteazul, Matei Basarab and Constantin Brâncoveanu, in Țara Românească and the one in Moldova, represented through the engraved portraiture of Vasile Lupu, Gheorghe Ștefan or Dimitrie Cantemir.

Together with some evidence of the existence of artists and some first portraits achieved in the technique of the easel painting in the Romanian States, the research aimed at the portrait art in Moldova and Țara Românească during the phanariot reigns, the influence of the engraved portrait on the pictorial apparatus portrait a special attention was represented by the portraiture of Constantin Mavrocordat, seen in the context of the development of a certain aristocratic spirit in the portraiture of the phanariot reigns, at the half of the XVIII century.

From the synthesis of these different types of representation of the human figure, some of local origin, having as sources the mediaeval church painting or the rustic popular creation, other important, through the apparatus portrait, from the central-European artistic space, a new type of representation was crystallized for the Romanian space, the pictorial portrait achieved in the technique of oil painting.

Chapter IV: The Portrait in the modern Romanian painting, from the patrimony of the Art Museum of Iași

Little by little, trying as if to retrieve the historical delay of this type of portrait's development, compared to the performances achieved by this genre in the west and center of Europe, the pictorial oil portrait, evoked fragmentarily in some documents at the end of the XVII century, during the XVIII century, developed almost explosively in the first decades of the XIX century, managing, partially, the artistic retrieval of a classical manner to paint, beyond the performances of creating a new image of an individual, of a personality of the time, more, the representation of a social category larger and larger, with a more generous access to the possibilities of representation and education through the painted image. This evolution was produced despite the fact that the first works of art of the modern painting still preserved a certain ambiguity, as an effect of the still strong tradition, in the awareness of the society in course of transformation, but also due to an inevitable, handicraft clumsiness, imputable maybe to the lack of experience and the insufficient artistic and technical training of the newly-trained artists, especially in the field of the modern portrait found at the begging of the road.

The first steps in the process of the artist's release from the subordinated condition of the artisans occurred towards the end of the XVIII century, when it began to make the distinction between the handicraftsmen who were painting the laic spaces and those who were "painting" the churches' frescos. Gradually, in the characteristics of the portrait-effigy, defined by presenting the physical resemblance, the artist's interest to emphasize the social status was developed, by representing the clothing property and the portrayed character's occupations, through the symbolic attributes of his occupation. The portraits of the autochthonous aristocracy, of some boyars from Moldova or Muntenia, or the portraits of some rich chapmen achieved by the artists, often anonymous, at the end of the XVIII century, and the beginning of the next century, passed to a new, modern vision, of the pictorial portrait representation, in the light of the influence of the apparatus portrait's lesson form the west and center of the Europe, combined with the artistic experience of some foreign artists and, later on, native artists coming into contact with a new world, in the social, economic and artistic space of the two Romanian Princedoms. In its turn, the painting of historical scenes, concept later on promoted in Moldova by Gheorghe Asachi at the foundation of the first School of Beautiful Arts from Iași in 1860, has contributed to the development of the pictorial portrait, together with the easel portraits of some famous Romanian rulers, portraits achieved in old, consecrated technique at the beginning of the XIX century in the Romanian States as well,

pictorial portraits taken over and interpreted from the images of this synthesis between the old, local painting and the apparatus painting, of central-European provenience. The artist outlined more and more emphatically his place and role in the social life together with the occurrence of the first nuclei of artistic education, the improvement of the first generation of artists abroad and the multilateral training of some of them. Gheorghe Asachi represented a first example in this regard, his special education, in the Renaissance spirit, fully contributing to the increase of the portrait art prestige in the Romanian States, to the consolidation of the new type of artist in the society.

During all XIX century, the pictorial portrait evolved both within the more limited framework of official art, aiming at representing the figures of some high officials of that time, as well as within the larger framework of a progressive, militant artistic development catalyzed by the revolutionary moment of 1848. In the creation of the so-called “revolutionary” painters (Constantin D. Rosenthal) there were found the first references to the inner life of the characters represented, asserting this way a new human value. This way, there could be noticed a conscious selection of the elements of external physiognomy and inner structure, selection that contributed to a more profound revelation of the individualization of the person portrayed. The artist inevitably built a new model of portrait depending on the structure of its image of world and life.

A few observations were also made in this context on the appearance and development of self-portrait in modern Romanian painting. True pages of *personal diary* self-portraits appeared during certain periods, related to the fight against the lack of understanding and the various adversities between the artist and the society he/she belonged to. By means of the self-portrait, the painters expressed what they thought about the world and the contemporary existence with themselves. Just like the portrait, for the self-portrait, both the artist and – some time later – the public, were not satisfied anymore to find in art the veridical illustration of reality, trying to find in representations the exteriorization of the artist’s ideas, the public’s ideas respectively, reflection of its ideas about the world.

In the portrait painting of modern Romanian art, including that which is in the patrimony of the Art Museum of Iași, next to portraits and profiled self-portraits, usually, on a black background, there were exhibited images of the model situated in a natural fictions (imaginary) or real environment, most of the times expressly modified by the artist due to the compositional requirements of the plastic construction. In this situation, the artist’s individuality searched in the environment where it manifested itself, that ideal it had served, being valuable both for individual and for mankind as a whole.

Besides the research of the results of the Romanian artistic education officialization after 1860 and the representation of pictorial portrait in the Art Museum of Iași, by the work of Gheorghe Panaiteanu-Bardasare, C.D. Stahi, Emanoil Bardasare, Gheorghe Popovici and others, the research followed the contribution of some important Romanian artists such as Gheorghe Tattarescu, Theodor Aman, Nicolae Grigorescu, Ion Andreescu and Ștefan Luchian, to the development of modern Romanian portrait in the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth century, represented by works which are in the patrimony of the Art Museum of Iași.

The study continues with the analysis of the evolution of the development of the modern Romanian portrait in inter-war Romanian art, in which an important place was occupied by the creation of Theodor Pallady, Gheorghe Petrașcu, Ștefan Dimitrescu, Octav Băncilă and Nicolae Tonitza, but also of Jean Al. Steriadi, Camil Ressu, Iosif Iser, Ion Theodorescu Sion, Sabin Popp, Aurel Băeșu and others. Particular attention was paid to the role of the women-painters, portrait creators in inter-war Romanian art, with a few references to the portrait in Nutzi Acontz's art.

Following the chronological development of the creative activity of some artists represented by their portraitist work in the Art Museum of Iași, the research culminated with the analysis of the pictorial portrait in Romanian painting belonging to the post-war period and the transition to the representations after 1950. Analyzing works that are in the patrimony of the Art Museum of Iași, the research was concerned with the contribution of some important artists of this period: Nicolae Popa, Călin Alupi, Mihai Cămăruț, Costache Agafiței, Victor Mihăilescu Craiu, Petru Hârtopeanu, along with great names of the Romanian painting such as Alexandru Ciucurencu and Corneliu Baba. The artists who completed their studies and reached their artistic maturity during the '50s - '60s, were mentioned for their contribution to the development of the pictorial post-war portrait, which may be found in the Art Museum of Iași: Dan Hatmanu, Adrian Podoleanu, Ion Neagoe and others.

Chapter V: The Pictorial Portrait in the Personal Creation; From the Reproductive Representation to the Subjective Presentation of Creator's Personal Feelings in Relation to the Model.

Apparently, with no direct connection to the issue of the modern portrait that is in the patrimony of the Art Museum of Iași, the last chapter of this research dares a succinct presentation of the personal activity of creation, in the field of pictorial portrait. The argument of this presentation is supported by two well founded reasons: the quality of professional plastic creator plastic, with a significant exhibition activity, including in the domain of the pictorial portrait and a relatively limited experience that I have accumulated in as

museographer at the Art Museum within the „*Moldova*” National Museum Complex of Iași, where I had direct contact with the artistic-visual patrimony, including the pictorial portrait.

The Individual Portrait

At the beginning, the issue of the representation of human image in the pictorial portrait was limited to some individual portraits, although I was also familiar with the experience of group portrait, especially within the themes realized within the artistic training at university. Also, within the works performed on various occasions, creation camps and artistic documentation, I resorted to group representations of the pictorial portrait within some compositions that emphasized the human face. Being at the beginning of my professional artistic activity, within the individual representations the feminine portrait painting extracted from the immediate reality prevailed. The representation pattern doesn't contradict the lesson dedicated to the bust-portrait, placed on an apparently black background, but with subtle possibilities of suggesting the space by thermic modulations of the screen. In the configuration of some models transposed into fantasy vestimentary decorum, the preoccupation oriented towards the illustration of a certain calm detachment of the characters. This detachment of the character allowed me to make a more synthetic evaluation of the portrait, with an increase of the diversification of expressive-plastic solutions, based on macrolinear structures centrifugally gravitating around the model image.

Generally, both in portrait and self-portrait I used a luminous palette, with a limited number of colors, based on which I tried to make sensitive, chromatic mixtures, temperate in their chromatic energy, emphasized by the rhythmic linear exercise or by agglomerations controlled by very colorful points, with a precise role to dynamically “move” the plastic surface. Even when I resorted to the use of some intensely colored, concentrated surfaces, I tried to find by a value contrast the personal balance of the portrait composition, beyond the requirements of a true physiognomic resemblance with the model used.

The Group Portrait

At the same time with making the individual portraits, either bust or compositional, my preoccupations also oriented towards the group portrait represented in compositions with two or three characters, presented in common, domestic hypostases, inspired from the immediate reality. The subjects evoke daily activities extracted from the natural human existence which is in a permanent interaction with some elements that provide a certain domestic comfort. Generally speaking, it is about the group portrait of women, what we usually understand in this case by the beauty of the face is indefinable. From individual to

individual, the taste and the feeling towards this beauty are categories so different that it is impossible to impose certain rules to the judgments made relative to this. The analysis of human physiognomy tends to get out of the plastic fields to get into the psychological field. On the other hand, that criterion of face beauty consists of each feature and the relatively-rigorous harmony of the whole. Still, ugliness or rather deformity caused by old age of some models exists, but it has to be plastically understood in the generous framework of the relativity which, being positive from an esthetic point of view, appears as another form of beauty, beyond caricature or grotesque.

The allegoric portrait

Besides my preoccupation to research and discover in the portrait the allegoric significance of the elements used (the symbol of the owl or the black cat, the allegorical significances of the Days and the Night etc.) in relation with the representation of the model before me, or of the imaginary, fantasist character, sometimes figurate after a simple verbal evocation, opening thus the album of another existence, there remains the deep reflection on the conception and plastic language used, on the interest for maintaining a permanent balance of the pictorial and decorative, in a continuous effort of conciliation with the subject approached. On the background of this perennial preoccupation, my allegorical portraits do not put special problems of identifying the significances of the symbols used. Beyond their allegorical or symbolic message, beyond any intentional possible hermeticism, the portraits achieved reflect an interior, semi-melancholic state, sometimes giving the emotional impression of a contemplative restrained gravity, marked by the use of some supersaturated chromatic structures, an agglomeration of the tones mixed sometimes in successive, superposed, smothered, but which are permanently trying to communicate a certain latent energy.

Disciple of some prestigious professors and artists of the Iași painting, among which Corneliu Ionescu, the regretted Nicolae Mátyus and Ion Neagoe, benefiting from the valuable guidance of the regrettable professor PhD Claudiu Paradais within the Art Museum of Iași, I have attempted through this research to bring a modest homage to those who have contributed to the advancement of the Romanian artistic-plastic phenomenon, of the pictorial portrait development, both in the plan of the artistic creation, and in that of the theoretical research in the field.