

The Aesthetics of National Communism in Romania. The official representation in visual arts (1965 - 1989)

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Abstract: *The Romanian cultural word was irremediably marked by the communist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu's that started as a breath of fresh air for the artistic domain, and ended to be oppressive also because of the imposed aesthetics. From the early 70s the figure of Ceaușescu and of his wife Elena, started to be more and more present as a subject in the cultural press of the time and in exhibition. By the 80s, the dogmatic formulas of representation were supposed to be ideologically accurate and were subjected to scrutiny to a committee formed by artist and official of the communist party. On festive occasions the head of the Artists Union had a public positions to encourage the production of works in which the Romanian ruler to appear as an exemplary hero of the nation. Such analyze of context has the purpose to give us a wider picture of Romanian cultural background that can help to better understand the premises of the Romanian art scene after the fall of the communist regime.*

Key words: *visual arts, cultural context, politics, Romania, Nicolae Ceaușescu*

In the art of the period between 1965 and 1989, the human figure, as a subject for the art world, had come to have a great importance, in particular because of Nicolae Ceaușescu's cult of personality. The representation of the dictator, especially in the period of the eighties, was a constant and a necessary presence for in the cultural printed press of the time. The magazine "Arta"/"Art" (as the main cultural publication in the visual art field) didn't made any exception. The number 10-11 on 1977 was the first one to represent the president of the RSR in a cycle of many, that stopped in the winter of 1989, when the regime collapsed. He was on the cover of the magazine because of the celebration of his 60th anniversary. After that, when his portrait was missing from the cover, often that image was a reproduction of an art work, appeared in the first pages of the magazine.

The communist propaganda imposed, after 1981, dogmatic formulas of representation that were supposed to be ideologically accurate. The works which had the main focus on the head of the state were subject to scrutiny to a committee, which didn't necessarily made comments related to the qualities of the works of art, but was more about the subversively potential of the image. We have multiple representations, physiognomies and circumstances in which the communist leader appears as the main subject - a significant share of it being his so called work visits.



Fig.1: „Arta”, no.9/1977, cover page; Cornelia Ionescu Drăgușin, *Tov. Nicolae Ceaușescu/camarad Nicolae Ceaușescu*; „Arta”, no.8/1980; Zamfir Dumitrescu, *Portretul tov. Nicolae Ceaușescu/ The portrait of camarad Nicolae Ceaușescu*.

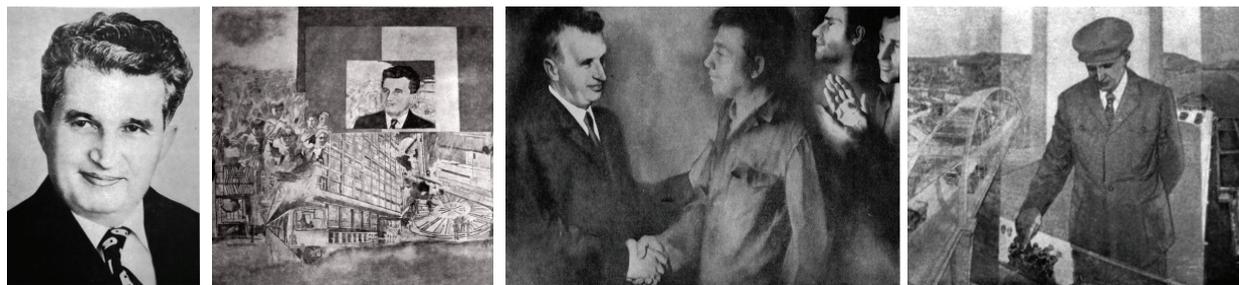


Fig.2: „Arta”, no.4/1981; Ion Bitzan, Vladimir Șetran, *Omagiu/ Homage*; Corneliu Brudașcu, *Vizită de lucru/ Work visit*; Ignat Ștefanov, *Vizită de lucru/ Work visit*.

Portraiture had an important role in the creation of a mystified image of Ceausescu. In the communist bloc, except the USSR, the Romanian leader has the richest artistic reflection. The paintings were ordered by the Romanian state, without a clear criteria. The primary requirement was to represent Ceausescu in a manner that could give as less interpretation reasons as possible. The representations is questionable because some of the moral traits were amplified (he was presented as an exemplary husband and family man), and the physical characteristics less flattering (he had a height complex, for example) had to be "trimmed" by the artists. An aspect of consequence would is that no artist had enjoyed the privilege that Ceausescu pose for, or to take his photo for artistic porpoise. The pictures used were those provided by the official photo lab found in a wing of Casa Scânteii, the building of the state official paper, photo that passed through a process of retouching¹.

The personality cult of Nicolae Ceausescu and of his wife Elena made appear in the art of socialist Romania a whole series of art artworks (a part of those artworks can be found in the collection of the Contemporary Art Museum in Bucharest, but is not open to public). The frequency of the images increases starting from the early 70s. At first the appearances of the dictator figure was sporadic, he was depicted alone, but until the fall of communism Ceausescu's portraits had a great importance in the official art, and also his wife started to be depicted, and represented often beside him. Elena Ceausescu often when she does not appear alongside her husband, she benefits from representation "in the mirror". We can point here the works of Sabin Balasa, Traian Brădean, Ileana Balota, Izsak Martin, Horia Flămându.

The year 1974 marked the formal establishment of the dictatorship and the introduction of the cult of personality. An affront to the cultural environment of the Romanian was the appointment of Elena Ceausescu in the Romanian Academy in a special session that took place between February 28 and March 2, 1974². Any attitude and critics of the political decision made by Nicolae Ceaușescu were dampened firmly. There were not allowed arguments from the communist party members in respect to the administration and much less a resistance on the part of the cultural environment³.

In the chronology of Ceaușescu's representation an important role is his election as President in 1974. In an article about the Annual Graphics Exhibition from 1975, published in "Arta" is illustrated with the work of Constantin Pohrib called *Partidul, Ceaușescu, România! / The Party, Ceausescu, Romania!* an emblematic image, in which the leader is identified with the hole party, but also with Romania.

To Nicolae Ceaușescu, and to his wife, by the members of the cultural community, were brought tributes when celebrating their anniversaries, on which occasions were ordered artworks by the political structures of the state to the Artist Union. In 1977, Ion Pacea, as

¹ Magda Cârnci, *Artele plastice în România 1945-1989*, Meridiane, București, 2000 p. 433-440.

² Adam Burakowski, *Dictatura lui Nicolae Ceaușescu (1965-1989). Geniul Carpaților*, Polirom, Iași, 2011, p. 175.

³ Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Reinventarea politicului. Europa Răsăriteană de la Stalin la Havel*, Polirom, Iași, 2007, p. 120.

Vice President of The Romanian Artists Union, writes in behalf of the artists: *"the artists (...) – see in the comrade Nicolae Ceausescu a huge dynamic force in the country's ride toward a bright future, they see a wise helmsman and a close friend of the arts, helping them forever in their relentless work and aspirations towards fulfilling their social mission, to achieve a maximum level of civic and artistic effectiveness"*⁴. Along with the homage written by Pacea, the Artists Union sign a collective poem, in which they are trying to show the appreciation for the leader of the country. The paradox is that at that time the Writers Union didn't dedicate a poem in their official congratulation message.

In 1981, a similar position, more nuanced towards the cult of personality, can be found in the congratulations addressed from the behalf of the leadership of the Artists Union, and signed by Ion Irimescu, as president of the Artists Union, along with Paul Vasilescu, Secretary of the Party Committee: *"the artists professionals express pride and satisfaction to see being reflected in your personality, in your exemplary live - given entirely to the common good - the enormous work that you perform with astonishing competence and farsightedness (...) to fulfill their deepest visions and their most cherished beautiful dreams of truth and goodness, cherished by their very artistic nature [...]. The artists from this blessed land, which had a historic opportunity to have you as their leader, here to see you many more years leading it"*⁵.

Also in the exhibitions organized on the occasion of important events for Communist movement the portraits or compositions who represented Nicolae Ceaușescu occupied a central role. We evoke a few propagandistic names of events from the 70s and the 80s: *Thoroughfare of socialism* (Bucharest, 1978); *The youth, active factor in the performance of the party program* (Iași, 1978); *60 years from the establishment of the Romanian Communist Party* (Bucharest, 1981).

The paintings with Ceausescu's image were not only used for internal manifestation, but were integrated into external exhibitions also. A photo illustrating an article about an exhibition held in Pekin (Beijing), from the same number of "Arta" in which was presented the homage of the artists, shows that the speakers read their speeches on the background of a large-scale works that represents the Romanian leader⁶.



Fig.3: Image of the Romanian artist's exhibition in Pekin (Beijing), 1981

⁴ Ion Pacea, *Omagiu*, „Arta”, anul XXIV, nr. 10-11, 1977, p. 5.

⁵ Ion Irimescu, Paul Vasilescu, *Țara își omagiază președintele*, „Arta”, anul XXIX, nr. 1-2, 1981, p. 2.

⁶ „Arta”, Anul XXIX, Nr. 1-2, 1981, p. 2.

The investigation of Ceausescu's depictions and the visual art references associated with the cult of personality play an important role in drawing the outlines of the context in which artists use and had used the body and the representation of the body at the time. To have a wider picture the principle of comparison between the two very distinctive approaches can be a tool also in understanding the premises of the Romanian art scene after the fall of the communist regime.

So, we had an official aesthetics, that frequently used the mystified image of "hero of the nation", and generated an important production of doubtful works that are difficult to evaluate not only because of the aesthetic of the work (although that could be considered a problem), but rather because of the criteria by which art was promoted at the time.

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