

“Pursuit of Happiness” by Roman Tolici. An axiological reflection on the contemporary human condition

Cristina GELAN¹

Abstract: *This article aims at an analysis of the desirability of the pursuit of happiness as it was constituted in an interdisciplinary discourse throughout time, from classical Greek antiquity to the contemporary era. Approaches from philosophy, sociology, psychology and art history, the latter entered more visibly in the specialized discourse as a result of the different types of discourse occasioned by the various directions of the evolution of art together with the artistic avant-garde artistic, have outlined over time multiple perspectives on the concept of happiness. Understood as a benchmark of morality, as a virtue or a vice, as a means to achieve perfection in the Afterlife, as an appanage of prosperity or subjective well-being, as an illusion or an idol, the issue of happiness has known various interpretations in history of humanity.*

Keywords: *pursuit of happiness; Roman Tolici; interdisciplinary discourse; subjective well-being; consumerism; alienation; vices;*

Introduction

The research on the idea of the *pursuit of happiness* places us categorically in an interdisciplinary approach. Approaches from philosophy, sociology, psychology and history of arts, the latter entered more visibly in the specialized discourse as a result of the different types of discourse occasioned by the various directions of the evolution of the visual arts together with the artistic avant-garde, have outlined over time multiple perspectives on the concept of happiness.

Philosophers' approaches focused on issues regarding the possibility, desirability and justification of happiness, and the perennial question was: *How to be happy?*. From a moral ideal, as in the philosophy of Socrates, to a *summum bonum* of Christianity, from the object of ceaseless and laborious efforts, to association with an idol², the idea of happiness has occupied a privileged place in Western culture.

This paper aims an analysis of the desirability of the pursuit of happiness as it was constituted in an interdisciplinary discourse (of philosophy, sociology, psychology and history of arts) throughout time, from classical Greek antiquity to the present day. The first part of this study proposes a series of landmarks in which the ethical, the religious and the secular have affirmed or canceled each other out of the discourse on the desirability of the pursuit of happiness, in different socio-political-cultural contexts. Morality, social relations, prosperity, quality and satisfaction of life, subjective well-being, personal gain, consumer society and consumerism, illusion and idolization are the landmarks in this scientific approach. The second

¹ Faculty of Arts, Ovidius University of Constanta, cristina.gelan@365.univ-ovidius.ro.

² Darrin M. McMahon. 2005. "The Quest for Happiness". *The Wilson Quarterly*, 29 (1): 62–71, p. 70.

part of the study proposes an analysis of a series of watercolors made by the contemporary Romanian artist, of Bessarabian origin, Roman Tolici. Seven watercolors, made by the artist, which propose contemporary representations of the seven vices or the seven deadly sins, are part of a metaphorical and satirical artistic discourse, which questions the search for landmarks in contemporary society, a society characterized by superficiality and alienation.

1. "Pursuit of Happiness" in the History of Humanity – Philosophical, Sociological and Psychological Reasons

The history of philosophy presents a variety of questions about the nature of happiness, which has been associated with the good life, "the notion that what matters in life is not just to live but to live well is most likely as old as human existence"³. Throughout time, in Western culture, philosophers have speculated endlessly about ways to rise above mere existence and achieve a desirable life – a favorable destiny, a virtuous life, divine grace, the sense of pleasure, the possession of material wealth etc. "that the history of the idea of happiness could be summarized in a series of bumper sticker equations: happiness = luck (Homeric era), happiness = virtue (classical era), happiness = heaven (medieval era), happiness = pleasure (Enlightenment era), and happiness = warm puppy (contemporary era)"⁴.

In ancient classical Greek philosophy, happiness was associated with the secure enjoyment of what is good and beautiful. In *Gorgias*, Socrates suggested that if a man is satisfied with many of the important things he does and has, this is a condition for him to be happy⁵. Therefore, happiness is related to the satisfaction of desires. Aristotel's *Nicomachean Ethics* is centered on the pursuit of happiness. For the philosopher from Stagira, happiness (*eudaimonia*) was considered achievable for anyone who wanted to have a life in accordance with the most valued virtues, but based on a universal moral goal (*telos*) of humanity⁶. According to the ethical system of *eudaimonism*, a philosophy that preceded Aristotle, individuals have a responsibility to recognize and live in accordance with *the daimon* or "true self". *The daimon* refers to each person's potentialities, the realization of which represents the greatest fulfillment in life of which each is capable. *The daimon* is an ideal in the sense of being an excellence, a perfection to which one strives and therefore can give meaning and direction to the life. Then *eudaimonia* is an activity in accordance with one's *daimon*. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle rejects the view of *eudaimonia* as a subjective state equivalent or similar to hedonic pleasure. Therefore, *eudaimonia* does not have a subjective component that embodies the experiences that arise from efforts to live in truth in accordance with one's *daimon*, by striving to develop one's skills and talents for purposes considered worthy in life⁷.

Both Plato and Aristotle saw happiness as a form that a good life could take, and happiness and morality were seen as interdependent, as the purpose of morality was to teach people how to live a good life.

³ Pelin Kesebir & Edward Diener. 2008. "In Pursuit of Happiness: Empirical Answers to Philosophical Questions". *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Vol. 3, No. 2, *From Philosophical Thinking to Psychological Empiricism*, Part II: 117–125, p. 117.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Platon. 2003. *Gorgias*. București: Paideia.

⁶ Aristotel. 1988. *Nicomachean Ethics [Etica Nicomahică]*. București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1176a, 34, 1176b, 5–6, 1177a, 5, 1177a, 17, 1177b, 16–26, 1178a–1178a, 8, 1178b, 9–32.

⁷ See also Victor Eugen Gelan. 2020. "Happiness and Contemplation in Aristotle". *Revue Roumaine de Philosophie*, 64, 1: 117–124.

Hellenistic history has recorded a variety of schools of philosophy in which hedonism was considered the way to the good life. The Cyrenaics promoted the pursuit of pleasure, considering anything other than pleasure to be less important, including virtue also⁸. Epicurus, the founder of Epicureanism, believed that virtue and pleasure were interdependent and that it was simply impossible to live pleasantly without living prudently, honorably and justly⁹. The Epicureans included the concept of happiness in a general philosophy of pleasure, which led to an ethics of rational self-interest.

The idea found in the writings of the Greek philosophers that a good life, devoid of reason and morality, was simply not possible to achieve, was later found in the philosophy of ancient Rome. Cicero was a strong proponent of the idea that happiness is based on virtue. He believed that a virtuous human being could be happy regardless of situations, even when he is tortured; virtue was so indispensable to happiness that, if a man possessed it, he could be happy regardless of circumstances¹⁰. Thus, in the view of the Stoics, happiness was linked to withdrawal from the dangerous bustle of civic life and contentment with the minimal pleasures of life, for it involved no feeling, no passion or emotional state. Seneca also argued in the same sense¹¹. It was believed that the virtuous could be happy even in the most terrible circumstances.

During the Middle Ages, Christian philosophers gave happiness a spiritual dimension, which could only be achieved through devout faith and the grace of God. Thus virtue, indispensable for a good life, was no longer considered sufficient for happiness. Christian philosophers have distinguished between transitory happiness and eternal happiness. Earthly happiness was considered fallible – though not impossible to achieve – and eternal happiness was promised to those who reached the Kingdom of Heaven. Over the centuries, a theology was developed that promised eternal happiness as a reward for earthly privations, justified by appealing to the biblical text, more precisely to the promise of Jesus of Nazareth to his disciples – although "now is your time of grief, I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy" (John 16:22). This conception, in turn, was also based on a theology of sin, which St. Augustine explained, in *The City of God*, referring to the transgression outside the Garden of Eden, which brought with it the consequence that true happiness will be unattainable as a result of man's fall into temptation or as the Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran would say centuries later, as a result of man's fall in time¹².

For Boethius, happiness itself was identified with God; God was happiness incarnate, and death was considered the true happiness of the elect. A few centuries later, Thomas Aquinas believed that happiness was the ultimate goal of the rational being. Always yearning for happiness, the living could only hope on earth for *beatitudo imperfecta*, an imperfect happiness, a pale imitation of the absolute happiness that the believer can attain in the Afterlife.

The classical and medieval conceptions of happiness as "virtue" or "perfection" began to be largely ignored or considered outdated in the centuries that followed. The idea of happiness was associated with secular aspects. Through the refined studies at the Academy of Careggi, patronized by the Medici family, in the 15th century, notions such as progress and prosperity

⁸ Władysław Tatarkiewicz. 1976. *Analysis of happiness*. Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers Martinus Nijhoff, p. 317.

⁹ Epicur. 2021. "The Letter to Menoiceus". In *Epicurus and Ancient Epicureanism [Epicur și epicureismul antic]*, ed. by Andrei Cornea. București: Humanitas, pp. 263–274.

¹⁰ Marcus Tullius Cicero. 1966. *Tusculan Disputationis*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Univeishte Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd.

¹¹ Lucius Annaeus Seneca. 2013. *Letters to Lucilius [Scrisori către Lucilius]*, vol. 1. București: Editura Seneca Lucius Annaeus.

¹² Emil Cioran. 1994. *The fall in Time [Căderea în timp]*. București: Editura Humanitas, pp. 7–160.

were associated with a happy life, echoes that we were encountering a century earlier in the work of Giovanni Boccaccio. Faded by the ascetic discourse of the Dominican monk Girolamo Savonarola, by *Il Sacco di Roma* of 1527, by religious reforms and wars, the secular aspect of happiness was revived in the Age of Enlightenment. Pleasure was considered the path to happiness, and sometimes the two terms were considered synonymous. John Locke, whose ideas were a touchstone for 18th century philosophy, considered happiness to be an emotional state resulting from the appreciation one has of one's job and the facilitation of one's work values, and also the foundation of human freedom. The most radical of the Enlightenment, Denis Diderot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Claude Adrien Helvétius and Paul Henri Thiry d'Holbach, gave the concept of happiness a modernized Epicurean vision based on a strong civic conscience.

Immanuel Kant believed that happiness represented "the sum of the satisfaction of all inclinations" and it could not encompass our highest priority – morality. "The more basic problem, put in stark relief by Kant, is whether morality and our other aims are so profoundly different that there's simply no saying how to put them all together. We might be able to talk sensibly about what would be good for us, and about what would morally be best"¹³. The way that Imm. Kant used to problematize happiness caused a break in the traditionalist interpretation according to which good morals contribute to a good life. The fundamental question that the Königsberg philosopher asked in this regard is whether a good life really makes a person better? The Kantian answer was that morality is indifferent to happiness, because its goal is duty. In addition, for the German philosopher "the concept of happiness is such an indeterminate one that even though everyone wishes to attain happiness, yet he can never say definitely and consistently what it is that he really wishes and wills"¹⁴.

The early 19th century was dominated by a utilitarian view, according to which happiness equals utility, and utility was derived from maximum pleasure. Utilitarians, such as the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, considered the maximum surplus of pleasure as the cardinal goal of human endeavor and argued that the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people should be the basis of morality and legislation¹⁵. The utilitarian view that the goal of morality is to increase general happiness has faced at least one difficulty, however, namely that certain immoral ways can lead to the increase or attainment of happiness.

The idea that people have the right to pursue and achieve happiness gained widespread acceptance also as a result of the American Declaration of Independence in 1776. Thomas Jefferson considered the "pursuit of happiness" a "self-evident" truth in a context in which to secure the "greatest happiness for the greatest number" had become the moral imperative of the century¹⁶. A few years later, in 1789, when the French revolutionaries issued the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, its preamble included a commitment to work for the "happiness of all", which did not become achievable, but was a step toward associating happiness with a idol¹⁷.

Along with the philosophical discourse, sociological theories and research from psychology and later from the behavioral sciences have discussed the role of external

¹³ Daniel M. Haybron. 2012. "Review: Nicholas White, A Brief History of Happiness". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 85 (3): 729–732, p. 731.

¹⁴ Apud. Darrin M. McMahon, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

¹⁵ Jeremy Bentham. 1823. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

¹⁶ Darrin M. McMahon, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

¹⁷ See also Darrin M. McMahon, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

circumstances and their importance for the quality of life and implicitly the achievement of happiness. Sociologists have often seen happiness as a problematic, subjective phenomenon linked to problems of modernity such as consumerism, alienation and anomie. This construction of "happiness" had its origins in the theories of Karl Marx and Émile Durkheim and continues in contemporary writings such as those of Frank Furedi. Durkheim was concerned with establishing how social relations (or moral order) can endure in modern societies so that they can ensure the "health" of communities. The French philosopher and sociologist believed that to avoid the "evil" of anomie, the relations between individuals and within communities must provide adequate regulation of desires, as well as integration and participation in reciprocal relations. In this case, the educational system and the promotion of discipline were considered the most important ways, having a fundamental role in establishing the moral order.

Frank Furedi believed that happiness can never be achieved through the application of well-thought-out programs or therapeutic interventions, but that genuine happiness is the result of a human being's sense of accomplishment. Therefore, the idea is not to invent certain schemes to be followed in order for people to feel happy, but to encourage the creative potential of the human being so that it discovers its own authenticity. And this, believes the Canadian sociologist, happens in a healthy, safe, lively and dynamic environment where it's okay for people to be vulnerable sometimes.

The idea of providing a scheme for people to follow in order to feel happy has led, in certain contexts, to the correlation of happiness with a series of superficial, fleeting, emotional experiences, such as the pleasure of shopping, eating or drinking. Therefore, happiness has been interpreted as closely related to something mundane, trivial and has been associated with issues such as fixing contextual benchmarks on consumerism. In his study published in 2015, Mark Cieślík noted: "Happiness for ordinary people is an evaluative process whereby individuals weigh up courses of action, informed by their values and interests and think through what is best for them. Furthermore, this ethical conduct – of choosing between possible courses of action (the good/bad, ways to flourish) – happens as we make decisions, but then over time we also monitor, reflect and modify these choices. It is an ongoing evaluative process that is a feature of everyday practical reasoning and how we come to develop commitments and attachments to people, places, life goals and projects"¹⁸.

Thus, happiness began to be increasingly associated with quality of life¹⁹, with a sense of personal meaning and moods closely related to individual perceptions – people feel that their lives have meaning²⁰. Psychologists' studies have made it possible to distinguish between real happiness, determined by positive emotions and contentment with one's life, and ideal happiness, which sometimes seems beyond anyone's reach, because it aims at a complete and lasting state that touches the whole life, a perfect, pure, and perpetual state that implies extremely high standards. On the other hand, a series of studies by psychologists, correlated with some by economists, questioned a relative or absolute dimension of happiness, reaching the conclusion that "happiness is neither always relative nor always absolute but instead depends on the nature

¹⁸ Mark Cieślík. 2015. "Not Smiling but Frowning: Sociology and the 'Problem of Happiness'". *Sociology*, 49 (3): 422–437, p. 429.

¹⁹ Edward Diener. 2000. "Subjective well-being: The science of happiness and a proposal for a national index". *American Psychologist*, 55: 34–43; Laura A. King & Christie K. Napa. 1998. "What makes a life good?". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75: 156–165.

²⁰ Laura A. King & Joshua A. Hicks & Jennifer L. Krull & Amber K. Del Gaiso. 2006. "Positive affect and the experience of meaning in life". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90: 179–196.

of the consumption experience"²¹.

Some psychologists have identified social desirability as an important variable when relating to the idea of happiness. On this point, Timothy A. Judge and John D. Kammeyer-Mueller noted: „Even if there are significant between-nation differences in job and life satisfaction, and even if these significant differences are "true" – due to substantive differences in happiness (...) One interpretation implicitly endorsed by Blanchflower and Oswald is that political, social, or cultural differences explain the happiness differences"²².

As a way to describe what "happiness" means, some psychologists have proposed the scientific study of happiness and correlated it with *subjective well-being* (SWB)²³. SWB refers to people's evaluations of their lives and includes both cognitive judgments of satisfaction and affective evaluations of states and emotions. This conceptualization emphasizes the subjective nature of happiness and believes that individual human beings are the best judges of their own happiness. Beyond providing a universally valid definition of happiness, modern psychologists have discussed a number of components that contribute to individual well-being, such as: life satisfaction (general judgments about one's life), satisfaction in certain important areas of life (health satisfaction, satisfaction of the workplace or of relationships), positive affect (the individual's positive emotions and moods), low levels of negative affectivity (prevalence of unpleasant emotions and moods)²⁴. Close examination of these has shown that these components have often been part of the philosophical discourse on happiness throughout human history. For example, the statement of frequent positive affect and undesirable negative affect in order to achieve happiness was part of the hedonistic tradition. Or, the recognition of *subjective well-being* as a crucial ingredient of happiness resonates with Wayne Sumner's contemporary philosophy, for which "happiness (or unhappiness) is a response by a subject to her life conditions as she sees them"²⁵. Ryff and Singer's concept of psychological *well-being*²⁶ and Ryan and Deci's *self-determination theory*, with their prescriptive character, which specifies certain needs to be fulfilled, such as autonomy, self-acceptance and self-mastery, as prerequisites of human well-being can be correlated with eudaimonist theories, including that of Aristotle²⁷.

Therefore, psychologists have proposed to understand happiness as an adaptive phenomenon from the evolutionary point of view, which determines various benefits and which is directly proportional to the level of individual satisfaction. In addition, the desirability of happiness was considered to be determined by the particularities of a socio-political-cultural context.

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic studies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries launched the idea that happiness is essentially something subjective, and that a mentally healthy person's sense of well-being is directly proportional to the fact that they can live with a certain

²¹ Christopher K. Hsee & Fei Xu & Ningyu Tang. 2008. "Two Recommendations on the Pursuit of Happiness". *The Journal of Legal Studies*, 37 (S2), "Legal Implications of the New Research on Happiness. A Conference Sponsored by the John M. Olin Program in Law and Economics at the University of Chicago Law School" (June 2008): 115–132, p. 120.

²² Timothy A. Judge, John D. Kammeyer-Mueller. 2011. "Happiness as a Societal Value". *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 25 (1): 30–41, p. 34.

²³ Edward Diener. 1984. "Subjective well-being". *Psychological Bulletin*, 95: 542–575.

²⁴ Pelin Kesebir & Edward Diener, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

²⁵ Wayne L. Sumner. 1999. *Welfare, happiness, and ethics*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Clarendon Press, p. 156.

²⁶ Carol D. Ryff & Burton Singer. 1996. "Psychological well-being: Meaning, measurement, and implications for psychotherapy research". *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 65: 14–23.

²⁷ Valerie Tiberius. 2006. "Well-being: Psychological research for philosophers". *Philosophy Compass*, 1: 493–505.

unhappiness – to reconcile itself to the "normal" unhappiness in its life. In the same, the contemporary sociologist Douglas Aoki believes that genuine happiness, in the sense in which psychoanalysis uses this term, always leaves room for unhappiness. Because "the presence of the unpleasant does not necessarily mean the diminution of happiness. It becomes part of a happy life that oscillates between the pleasant and the unpleasant, achievement and failure, being and becoming, work and play. In such a life, work becomes vocation and leisure need not be reinvented as the antithesis of work. Vocation includes leisure, exactly as a pleasurable pastime may comprise some amount of work. The idea of perfect happiness is consigned either to the domain of the momentary or the transient or to the mythic or the legendary. It cannot be achieved in life, but may be realised in exceptional moments"²⁸.

In one of his studies, Ashis Nandy drew attention to the fact that "The self-conscious, determined search for happiness has gradually transformed the idea of happiness from a mental state to an objectified quality of life that can be attained the way an athlete after training under specialists and going through a strict regimen of exercises and diet wins a medal in a track meet"²⁹ and that in a completely secularized society, the fear of death has become a constant presence in everyday life, and the idea of an Afterlife has become extremely fragile³⁰. In this context, the search for happiness began to be associated more and more with a response to a disease called unhappiness, especially in the period after the Second World War when "unhappiness in some parts of the world has been systematically medicalised"³¹. In this context, the idea was born that the acquisition of happiness is the prerogative of the guides to happiness: "It is now the domain of professionals, where the laity by itself cannot do much except cooperate with the experts. To acquire normal happiness, one now requires therapy, counselling or expert guidance – from a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst or professional counsellor or, alternatively, from a personal philosopher, wise man or woman, or a guru"³².

The idea of cultivable happiness has also been exploited by authoritarian political regimes, who have imposed on citizens the imperative to be happy, promoting the idea of the best of all possible worlds. Unhappiness was associated in this case with delinquency, and in the 20th century, "in many societies such dissenters have filled psychiatric clinics and jails"³³. In this situation the idea of happiness became more and more distant from its association with a state of mind and was associated more and more with a matter of personal achievements or gains correlated with those of other members of a community. And the European states that were under the domination of the totalitarian regimes were heavily marked by this aspect. In this context, the phrase "welfare state" was also born, which would later be exploited in what meant the development of the so-called consumer society, in which certain Hollywood patterns gave rise to an epiphenomenon of asceticism, an egocentric asceticism characterized by the absence of any kind of authenticity.

2. An artist, an exhibition and a vision of the pursuit of happiness

²⁸ Ashis Nandy. 2012. "The Idea of Happiness". *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47 (2): 45–48, p. 48.

²⁹ *Ibidem* p. 45.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 46.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 47.

Between February 22 and April 18, 2023, an exhibition entitled "Pursuit of Happiness" was opened at the Constanța Art Museum, with works of art signed by the artist Roman Tolici. Known as one of the most acclaimed contemporary artists of hyperrealism, R. Tolici was born in 1974, in the village Ghetlova, of Orhei district, located in the center of the Republic of Moldova. Graduated from the National University of Arts in Bucharest in 1998, the artist settled in the capital of Romania³⁴. Describing the artist of Bessarabian origin, the critic of art Valentina Inacu noted: "Roman Tolici is part of the twenties generation, a generation that marked the revival of painting on the Romanian contemporary art scene, by assimilating some languages not long ago prohibited in Romania, inspired of the art of the capitalist West. This generation produced an invariable and long-awaited detachment from the reductionist poetics and, at the same time, from the somewhat comfortable art policies of the communist period, getting involved in the process of connecting the local artistic dimension to practices and survival strategies adapted to current needs"³⁵.

Roman Tolici's artistic creation was "associated with a photographic realism infused by poetry and a surreal sense of everyday existence", and it has been written about his paintings that "seem to be details of a monumental story related to the general human questions and anxieties", made with a narrative force that "turns the recurrent subjects into never-ending chapters and the reflections of everyday life into projections about time, memory and traces captured by the artist's tender perception"³⁶.

The title of the exhibition "Pursuit of Happiness" was taken from the American Constitution, which the artist believed "somehow legislates as a civil right the pursuit of happiness, which pursuit in our times seems a little outdated"³⁷. In the context of the opening of the exhibition in Constanța, the artist stated that "Pursuit of individual happiness is seen today as a selfish endeavor. Happiness, such an abstract, relative, and particular notion, is now seen as an illusion of a century long left behind, when the American Constitution turned it into a civil right. Today the pursuit of happiness is out of fashion. Our searches have rather altruistic goals such as saving the planet, fighting for equality, inclusion, tolerance"³⁸.

The artworks of the exhibition that was opened at the Constanta Art Museum proposed a space for reflection on the condition of the contemporary human being. On a metaphorical and satirical note, they included aspects such as: references to the first and probably the most well-known of the promises of capitalist happiness – namely the American dream; the ethos of consumerist prosperity, which has its origin in the American Declaration of Independence, and which "has become an absolute imperative of the last decades and a measure of performance in

³⁴ *Biography Roman Tolici*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 20, 2023, from <https://romantolici.ro/about/>.

³⁵ Magdalena Popa Buluc. 2023, February. "Exhibition Event at the Constanța Art Museum: Roman Tolici. Approximations, distortions and limits, in a disturbing visual vocabulary". Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://jurnalul.ro/cultura/artevizuale/muzeul-de-arta-din-constanta-expozitie-roman-tolici-924404.html>.

³⁶ *Biography Roman Tolici*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 20, 2023, from <https://romantolici.ro/about/>.

³⁷ "Roman Tolici about the Exhibition *Pursuit of Happiness*". (n.d.). Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8W9n9fWijM>.

³⁸ Magdalena Popa Buluc. 2023, February. "Exhibition Event at the Constanța Art Museum: Roman Tolici. Approximations, distortions and limits, in a disturbing visual vocabulary". Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://jurnalul.ro/cultura/artevizuale/muzeul-de-arta-din-constanta-expozitie-roman-tolici-924404.html>.

progress, while its absence turns into a possible stigma of the new grammar of well-being"³⁹ and also a reflection on the condition of femininity in contemporary society.

"Pursuit of Happiness" – the exhibition opened at the Constanța Art Museum was dominated by works of art in which the main character was the woman, alongside works of art in which nature was exploited, and a small number of works of art (more precisely three of this) included representations of masculinity. The exhibition was also intended to be a eulogy to women, as the artist himself was confessing. Through the different representations of femininity, the artist proposed a discourse about the revaluation of women in contemporary society, but also about a kind of positive discrimination brought to women in the present days.

Among the works of art exhibited at the Constanța Art Museum, made in different techniques and of different sizes, there were also seven watercolors depicting seven young female characters. Each of the seven characters wore on one of their arms, either on the left or on the right arm, a banderole, on which was inscribed, in Latin, the name of one of the seven vices, which have been associated since the Christian tradition with the seven capital sins. The watercolors were inspired by a group of young female characters, who were taking photos in front of the Athenaeum in Bucharest. These works of art proposed a representation of the seven vices or the seven deadly sins as they were known in Christian tradition beginning with Gregory the Great⁴⁰, who formally recognized the virtues and vices as having religious significance and reduced the list of vices to seven: Pride (Superbia), Envy (Invidia), Anger (Ira), Sadness (Acedia), Avarice (Avaritia), Gluttony (Gula) and Lust or Whoredom (Luxuria)⁴¹, relating them to the seven deadly sins.



Fig. 1. Roman Tolici, *The Seven Deadly Sins*,

accessed on: <https://jurnalul.ro/galerie/muzeul-de-arta-din-constantia-expozitie-roman-tolici-18826505.html>

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ René Wasselynck. 1969. "La présence des Moralia de S. Grégoire le Grand dans les ouvrages de morale du XII^e siècle. Deuxième partie: Essai de synthèse", *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale*, 36: 31–45, pp. 36–37.

⁴¹ Francis T. Marchese. 2013. "Virtues and Vices: Examples of Medieval Knowledge Visualization", *Proceedings of 17th International Conference on Information Visualisation*, Londra: 359–365, p. 360.



Fig. 2. *Roman Tolici, Acedia (Sadness), 2021, watercolor on paper, 71 x 50 cm*

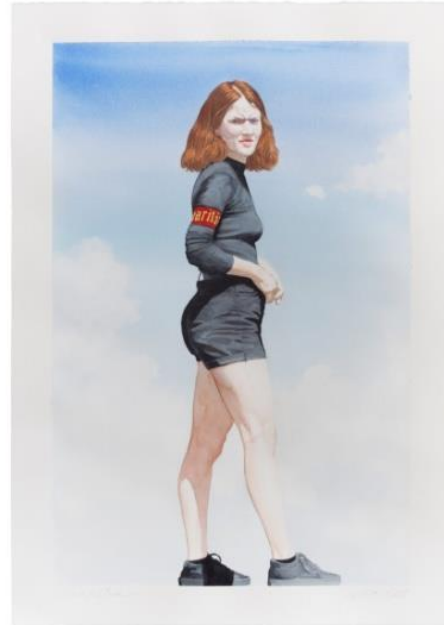


Fig. 3. *Roman Tolici, Avaritia (Avarice), 2021, watercolor on paper, 71 x 50 cm*

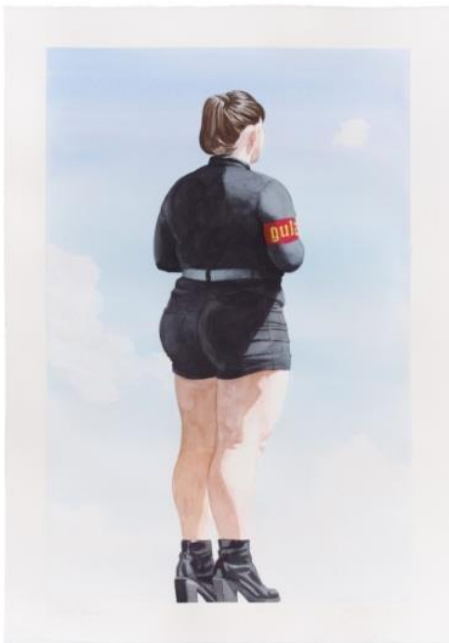


Fig. 4. *Roman Tolici, Gula (Gluttony), 2021, watercolor on paper, 71 x 50 cm*

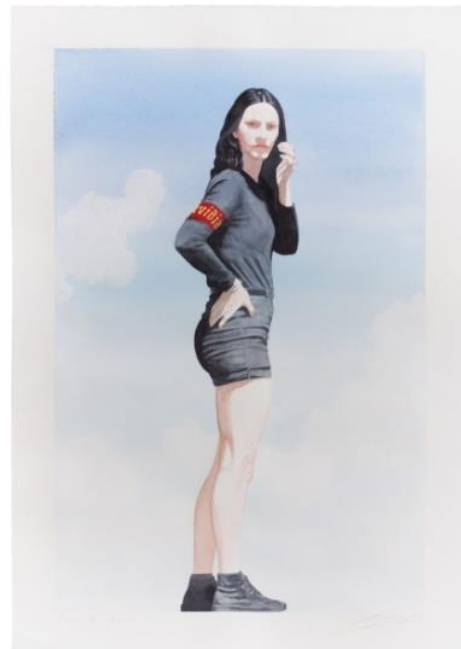


Fig. 5. *Roman Tolici, Invidia (Envy), 2021, watercolor on paper, 71 x 50 cm*

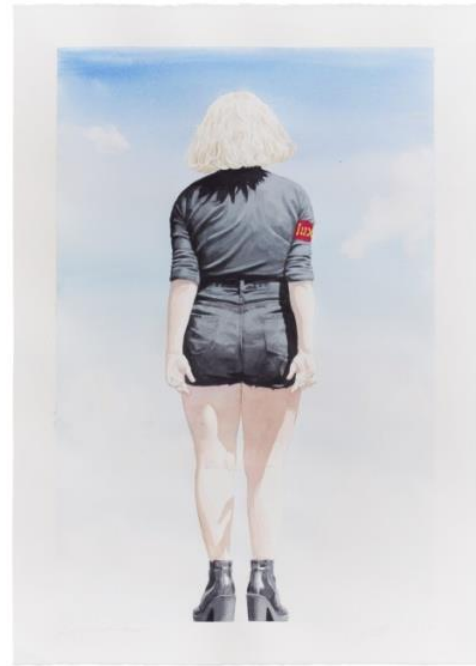


Fig. 6. *Roman Tolici, Ira (Anger), 2021, watercolor on paper, 71 x 50 cm*

Fig. 7. *Roman Tolici, Luxuria (Lust/Whoredom), 2021, watercolor on paper, 71 x 50 cm*

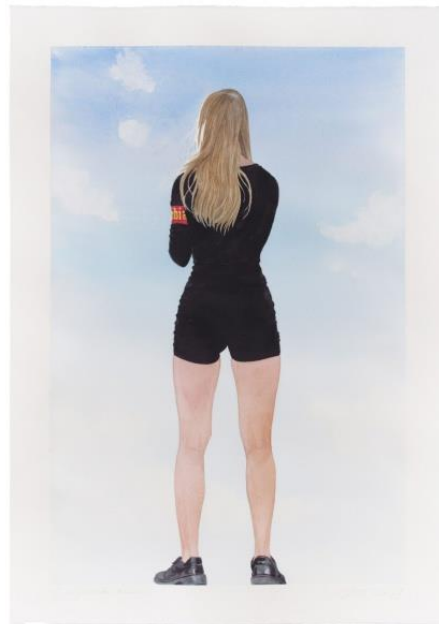


Fig. 8. *Roman Tolici, Superbia (Pride), 2021, watercolor on paper, 71 x 50 cm*

The seven watercolors on paper, each measuring 71 x 50 cm, were made in 2021 and were part of two other exhibitions, one opened in Bucharest, and the other at an art fair in Rome. They are part of a discourse that questions the search for landmarks in contemporary society, to the paradox of the contemporary human condition, originating in consumerism, which involves the search for truth in lies, beauty in ugliness, good in evil, in a context in which everything is permitted and in which the sin, the vice is valued, cultivated, encouraged or at least permitted.

Roman Tolici's way of representing vices finds a correspondence in the manuscript illustrations made by miniaturists between the 11th – 13th centuries to the poem *Psychomachia*, written in the 5th century by the Roman Christian poet Aurelius Prudentius Clemens. Thus, while in the 11th century vices began to be represented as characters females in contemporary clothing, in the 12th century they were included the vices began to be represented in static positions and in the 13th century they began to be represented as women from the city. Prudentius' poem depicted an allegory of the battle of souls for the supremacy of faith, sustained by virtue, against idolatry, sustained by vice, and illustrated manuscripts of this poem were produced as late as the 13th century. Beginning in the 5th century, the first illustrated manuscripts of *Psychomachia*, known as the earliest source containing depictions, accompanied by descriptions of the personifications of seven virtues and seven vices, featured human figures, usually female representations, engaged in combat violent, "like soldiers on the battlefield of the soul"⁴², but who were dressed and behaved like men. A. Katzenellenbogen observes that in the 11th century the figures began to be represented with contemporary clothing, and in the 12th century there was a process of simplifying these representations, by the fact that they were limited to antagonistic pairs, which were removed from the context of the fight⁴³. The dynamic conception of virtues and vices in the *Psychomachia* manuscripts was complemented by a series of static representations, which "no longer show groups of virtues participating with earthly weapons in a realistically described action [...], which is to be interpreted symbolically, but are quite direct images of an intellectual schema"⁴⁴. In the latest known version of the manuscript of *Psychomachia*, which dates from 1298, the miniaturist represented the virtues as nuns, and the vices as women from the city. He placed the action in the world around him, in a context where there was a tendency to apply the richness of everyday experience to the discernment of good and evil⁴⁵.

If the poem of Prudentius described an allegory of the battle of souls for the supremacy of faith, supported by virtues, against idolatry, maintained by vices, and the manuscripts with illustrations to this poem produced from the 5th century until the end of the 13th century, contained representations in which the contemporary discourse was embedded as a result of the Christian ideology that dominated the period of the 5th – 13th centuries, the representations proposed by Roman Tolici are an expression of the contemporary discourse of the 21st century, in which sin, vice it is appreciated, cultivated, encouraged or at least allowed. The ascetic dimension of the Christian life, whose happiness comes as a reward in the Afterlife, which we

⁴² S. Georgia Nugent. 2000. "Virtus or Virgo? The Female Personifications of Prudentius's *Psychomachia*". In *Virtue and Vice. The Personifications in the Index of Christian Art*, ed. by Column Hourihane, 13–28, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, p. 16.

⁴³ Adolf Katzenellenbogen. 1989. *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Medieval Art: From Early Christian Times to the Thirteenth Century*, Toronto, Buffalo, Londra: University of Toronto Press and Medieval Academy of America, (the first edition in 1939, Londra: Warburg Institute), pp. 7–8.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 7–8.

find in the conception of philosophers and theologians from the period of the 5th – 13th centuries, has transgressed the space of everyday life in the world of the 21st century, in which asceticism became an epiphenomenon. Roman Tolici masterfully captures this aspect in his works of art.

The series of the seven watercolors made by Roman Tolici were included in a special discourse in the exhibition at the Constanța Art Museum, an artistic discourse about the pursuit of happiness, a problem that has raised various interpretations since the classical period of ancient Greek philosophy, when man as an individual and a member of society became the point of interest to which the three great representatives of classical Greek philosophy – Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. About the first, Cicero would say that "he was the first to bring philosophy down from heaven, to place it in cities, to introduce it even into people's homes, and to force it to study life, morals, what is good and what is bad"⁴⁶. For starting from the 5th century B.H. the desirability of happiness was a constant of socio-political-cultural contexts, and the standards that were formulated regarding happiness involved a subjective ontological dimension: "I think that standards of happiness are ontologically subjective and epistemologically objective. In other words, a man's commitments are made by him, but nevertheless they can be justified and criticized independently of what he thinks or does"⁴⁷.

The discourse of the 21st century, based on consumerism, follows the same ideological discourse according to which earthly happiness is only an idol: "Earthly happiness was emerging as the idol of idols, the locus of meaning in modern life, the source of human aspiration, the purpose of existence, the why and the wherefore. And yet, as Carlyle did appreciate, this new God was proving to be as mysterious and enigmatic as the old, whether in the form of the "pleasant things" for which the people clamored, or the "real happiness" spoken of by Marx. (...) Belief in happiness, like an older belief in God, is a type of faith, an assumption about the meaning and purpose of human existence that, for all its perennial appeal, is a relatively recent development in human affairs"⁴⁸. Earthly happiness as an idol regarding the purpose of human existence is, however, originated in another approach to happiness, because happiness has become "more as feeling good than being good"⁴⁹; and Roman Tolici captures this aspect in his artistic discourse. Happiness is related to the satisfaction of desires, and the satisfaction of desires is the appanage of contemporary society, characterized by superficiality and alienation.

3. Conclusions

Since the beginning of philosophical reflection on the human condition, from the classical period of ancient Greek philosophy, the issue of happiness had had an essential purpose. Later, the issue of happiness became a subject of analysis for other types of discourses, such as the sociological and psychological or more recently of the behavioral sciences. With the beginning of the 20th century, the development of different trends in the visual arts, as a result of the implications of the artistic avant-garde, proposed an discourse in relation to a series of problematizations of postmodernity, and the topic of happiness also made its place, sometimes even explicitly.

⁴⁶ Cicero *apud* M. Robert Wenley. 2009. *Socrate and Christos*, București: Editura Herald, p. 44.

⁴⁷ John Kekes. 1982. „Happiness”. *Mind*, 91 (363): 358376, p. 369.

⁴⁸ Darrin M. McMahon, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁴⁹ Darrin M. McMahon. 2006. *Happiness: A history*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Pres, p. 65.

The initial reflections on the desirability of happiness concerned ethical aspects, which were later supplemented by aspects such as social interrelationship, prosperity, quality and satisfaction of life, subjective well-being, personal gain, consumer society and consumerism, illusion and idolization. This study proposed an interdisciplinary excursion regarding such reflections outlined over time, and its applicative part returned to a discourse of art theory which can be found in the artistic creation of the contemporary hyperrealist artist Roman Tolici. Seven watercolors, made by the artist, which represent his point of view on the seven deadly sins or the seven vices, were analyzed from the perspective of the artist's own discourse, a metaphorical and satirical discourse, which questions the search for landmarks in contemporary society, a society characterized by superficiality and alienation. They have also been correlated with the earliest representations of vice, which were found in the manuscripts of the poem *Psychomahia*, written by the Christian Latin poet Prudentius in the 5th century, and with the different kinds of discourse that were associated with them, between the 5th and 13th centuries, when manuscripts with such representations were developed. The analysis highlighted the fact that there were at least three different types of representations of vices in the mentioned period, and they were in accordance with the evolution of Christian ideology. However, these types of representations also had their roots in the evolution of the cultural context and in the mentality of the time. The same thing could be observed regarding the seven watercolors proposed by R. Tolici, which were exhibited at the Constanța Art Museum, during February 22 and April 18, 2023, in the exhibition entitled "Pursuit of Happiness" and which were analyzed in this paper. They are the expression of a contemporary discourse of the 21st century, which problematizes the lack of moral landmarks and the alteration of the line between good and evil, between morality and immorality, in which immorality, or at least the lack of ethical landmarks, has become valued, cultivated, encouraged or at least allowed.

Acknowledgements

The author expresses gratitude to the artist Roman Tolici, who gave the author the opportunity to write this paper. Many thanks to the artist Roman Tolici for the interesting discussions we had together about the seven watercolors that were the subject of this research and for the agreement to use images of his artworks.

4. References

● Books

- Aristotel. 1988. *Nicomachean Ethics* [*Etica Nicomahică*]. București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică.
- Bentham, Jeremy. 1823. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Cicero, Marcus Tullius. 1966. *Tusculan Disputationis*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd.
- Cioran, Emil. 1994. *The Fall in Time* [*Căderea în timp*]. București: Editura Humanitas.

- Katzenellenbogen, Adolf. 1989. *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Medieval Art: From Early Christian Times to the Thirteenth Century*. Toronto, Buffalo, Londra: University of Toronto Press and Medieval Academy of America, (the first edition in 1939, Londra: Warburg Institute).
 - Platon. 2003. *Gorgias*. București: Paideia.
 - Seneca, Lucius Annaeus. 2013. *Letters to Lucilius [Scrisori către Lucilius]*, vol. 1. București: Editura Seneca Lucius Annaeus.
 - Wayne, L. Summer. 1999. *Welfare, happiness, and ethics*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Clarendon Press.
 - Wenley, Robert M. 2009. *Socrate and Christos*. București: Editura Herald.
 - Tatarkiewicz, Władysław. 1976. *Analysis of happiness*. Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers Martinus Nijhoff.
- **Articles (from books)**
 - Epicur. 2021. "The Letter to Menoiceus". In *Epicurus and Ancient Epicureanism [Epicur și epicureismul antic]*, ed. by Andrei Cornea. București: Humanitas, pp. 263–274.
 - Nugent, Georgia S. 2000. "Virtus or Virgo? The Female Personifications of Prudentius's *Psychomachia*". In *Virtue and Vice. The Personifications in the Index of Christian Art*, ed. by Column Hourihane, 13–28, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University.
 - **Articles (from journals)**
 - Gelan, Victor E. 2020. "Happiness and Contemplation in Aristotle". *Revue Roumaine de Philosophie*, 64, 1: 117–124

Electronic sources

- **Internet article based on a print source (with exact formatting of original)**
 - McMahon, Darrin M. 2005. "The Quest for Happiness" [Electronic version]. *The Wilson Quarterly*, 29 (1): 62–71.
 - Haybron, Daniel M. 2012. "Review: Nicholas White, A Brief History of Happiness" [Electronic version]. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 85 (3): 729–732.
 - Cieślak, Mark. 2015. "Not Smiling but Frowning: Sociology and the Problem of Happiness" [Electronic version]. *Sociology*, 49 (3): 422–437.
 - Diener, Edward. 1984. "Subjective well-being" [Electronic version]. *Psychological Bulletin*, 95: 542–575.
 - Diener, Edward. 2000. "Subjective well-being: The science of happiness and a proposal for a national index" [Electronic version]. *American Psychologist*, 55: 34–43.
 - Hsee, Christopher K. & Xu, Fei & Tang, Ningyu. 2008. "Two Recommendations on the Pursuit of Happiness" [Electronic version]. *The Journal of Legal Studies*, 37 (S2), "Legal Implications of the New Research on Happiness. A Conference

Sponsored by the John M. Olin Program in Law and Economics at the University of Chicago Law School": 115–132.

- Judge, Timothy A., Kammeyer-Mueller, John D. 2011. "Happiness as a Societal Value" [Electronic version]. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 25 (1): 30–41.
 - Kekes, John. 1982. "Happiness" [Electronic version]. *Mind*, 91 (363): 358–376.
 - Kesebir, Pelin & Diener, Edward. 2008. "In Pursuit of Happiness: Empirical Answers to Philosophical Questions" [Electronic version]. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Vol. 3, No. 2, *From Philosophical Thinking to Psychological Empiricism*, Part II: 117–125.
 - King, Laura A. & Napa Christie K. 1998. "What makes a life good? " [Electronic version]. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75: 156–165.
 - King, Laura A. & Hicks, Joshua A. & Krull, Jennifer L. & Del Gaiso, Amber K. 2006. "Positive affect and the experience of meaning in life" [Electronic version]. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90: 179–196.
 - Marchese, Francis T. 2013. "Virtues and Vices: Examples of Medieval Knowledge Visualization" [Electronic version], *Proceedings of 17th International Conference on Information Visualisation*, Londra: 359–365.
 - Nandy, Ashis. 2012. "The Idea of Happiness" [Electronic version], *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47 (2): 45–48.
 - Ryff, Carol D. & Singer, Burton. 1996. "Psychological well-being: Meaning, measurement, and implications for psychotherapy research" [Electronic version]. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 65: 14–23.
 - Tiberius, Valerie. 2006. "Well-being: Psychological research for philosophers" [Electronic version]. *Philosophy Compass*, 1: 493–505.
 - Wasselynck, René. 1969. "La présence des Moralia de S. Grégoire le Grand dans les ouvrages de morale du XII^e siècle. Deuxième partie: Essai de synthèse" [Electronic version]. *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale*, 36: 31–45.
- **Article in an Internet-only newsletter**
 - Popa Buluc, Magdalena. 2023, February. "Exhibition Event at the Constanța Art Museum: Roman Tolici. Approximations, distortions and limits, in a disturbing visual vocabulary". Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://jurnalul.ro/cultura/arte-vizuale/muzeul-de-arta-din-constantia-expozitie-roman-tolici-924404.html>.
 - **Stand-alone Internet document, no author identified, no date**
 - *Biography Roman Tolici*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 20, 2023, from <https://romantolici.ro/about/>.
 - "Roman Tolici about the Exhibition *Pursuit of Happiness*". (n.d.). Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8W9n9fWijM>.