

Study on the Romanian feminine portraiture painting in the 20th century

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Abstract: *Painting has been used as a medium throughout history that could encapsulate a fragment of reality, an emotion or simply the universe of one's surreal creativity. The painted portrait could hold precious information about its subject, from elements clear to the eye regarding age or emotional status, towards a more hidden meaning contained within symbols hidden in the background or chromatic choice of the garment.*

The present study brings to the reader's attention a comparative insight regarding the representation of the Romanian feminine portrait throughout painted medium in the 20th century. The article focuses on offering clarity towards the different types of feminine representations and represents a decisive point regarding the complexity of the studied artworks. Thus, can be defined under a specific type of aesthetic that is representative throughout the 20th century or a distinct pattern that can be applied to the different artistic periods.

Keywords: *portraiture painting; Romanian 20th century art; aesthetic; feminine representation; artistic interpretation;*

Introduction

Painting is an important medium used throughout the historic eras, which could encapsulate and archive the image of different eras, events, or it could represent a transposition of the artist's universe. Painting the human portrait can conserve and forever hold the image of its subject. Studying the elements contained within a painted portrait can offer an insight regarding the subject's age, emotions, social status and preoccupations. The chromatic choice can also indicate the subject's emotional state. The proposed research focuses on studying the feminine portraiture painting. Thus, it will determine a possible aesthetic that defines the image of the Romanian 20th century feminine representation or will divide into different elements that will form a representative depiction for each of the artistic periods contained within the selected century's painting scene. The timeframe will be divided into two distinct elements that will refer to the first part of the 20th century and the second or late part, each containing different artistic movements.

The purpose of the study represents an introspective overview of whose purpose is not only observing the beauty and representation of femininity throughout the history of art, but mainly regards towards a more complex and further understanding that aims to clarify the notion that puts under questioning if the aesthetic representation of the 20th century Romanian woman holds a clarity from the beginning of the century until the second half or shifts throughout. The core objective endeavors to shed light and clarify the aesthetic representation of the feminine portrait through unraveling the intricate layers within each referenced painting.

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1. Methodology

1.1. Context of the research and its components

The research is grounded in a specific timeframe of Romania's history, which offers an insight based upon the period contained between the years 1901-1999. The referenced period represents an image of time that has encountered a shift, from a state of peace towards tumultuous wars and their aftereffects. The Romanian painting scene has witnessed an evolution in the 20th century. The core of creation places the portrait into a light of resolve which creates a direct dialogue that partakes between the viewer and the intended message which was imbued into the canvas by the artist.

The elements subjected to the study were carefully chosen to represent a few selected examples of historical artistic movements within Romania's 20th century painting scene. I have proposed a selection of artworks belonging to each distinct painter which will represent a view towards portraying femininity within the mentioned timeframe and artistic movement.

1.2. Methods of the research

The methods of research are based on a comparative study of different artworks which portray the essence of the Romanian woman throughout the 20th century. The initial tendencies when researching a painted portrait have focused on two main elements which compose the painted surface, the subject and its background. This has drawn attention towards research that was set towards identifying the aesthetic elements presented on the surface of the painted canvas, the chosen color to represent the subject's garments, emotional state that can be exposed through observing facial expression and mimic and the symbolism presented within the composition. The comparative method has underlined the elements of similarity that could be found as a linked element in between different artworks belonging to the specified movements and has also brought forward distinct tendencies in the representation of female portrait. The mentioned elements have contributed towards defining a type of aesthetic presented as a uniform and definitive image of the 20th century, likewise, it can be represented by a complete dissonance that offers a specific representation regarding every artistic movement presented within the mentioned timeframe.

2. The first part of the 20th century

The ending of the 19th century has brought within the Romanian's painting scene a pictorial approach that has emphasized towards the concept of beauty, ornament and prosperity. The two main elements which proved to be an important source of inspiration for the Romanian painting scene were represented by the urban scenery, which transposed an image portraying the day-to-day life within the city, alongside the image of the traditional villages and the occupation of its inhabitants. The main artistic movements in Romania's 20th century were Impressionism, Post-impressionism, Modernism, Expressionism, Socialist realism, Neo-Avant-Garde and Post-modernism.

The artists whose works will be subjected to this section of the research are Ștefan Luchian and Nicolae Vermont. The chosen painters expose a sense of duality referring to the portraying of the Romanian woman. As previously mentioned, the two main subjects that inspired the painting scene were represented by the urban scenery and the traditional approach

which portrayed the image of the village, its inhabitants and their occupations. A brief introduction has been attributed to each painter which offers information about the context of creation in which the proposed artworks were composed.

Ștefan Luchian was a Romanian painter born on the 1st of February 1868 in Ștefănești. His creative universe revolved around painting the dramatic and the subtle light shined upon the urban scenery of the capital city of Romania, București, alongside the image of the ancestral village and its traditions. The painted subjects contain a diverse display of elements. From painting sceneries, and images that enclosed elements of still life, to immortalizing depictions of time, tumultuous events and portraits. The painter has been considered to be inclined towards an aesthetic that revolves around the beautiful and delicate aspects of life. A preferred motif found within his paintings is considered to be the floral motif, which can be found in a multitude of his artworks, either as a single centered element or accompanying a painted subject.

The first two artworks that have been subjected towards the research are *Peasant woman with yellow headscarf* and *Interior(Lorica)*, both painted by Ștefan Luchian. The two referenced artworks have been subjected to a study which has defined the aesthetical manner of representing the painted portrait, the context in which the subject is placed, details regarding emotional state, garment color and symbolism contained within the details.

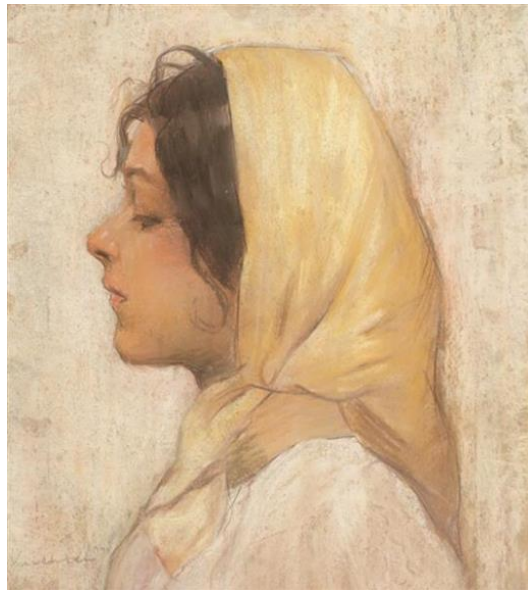


Fig. 1. Ștefan Luchian, *Peasant woman with yellow headscarf*, 1905,

Source of image: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/stefan-luchian/peasant-woman-with-yellow-headscarf-1905>.

The image contained within the referenced Figure 1, composed within the Post-impressionism art movement, presents an image of a young woman placed on a neutral-colored background that contrasts with her beauty. Regarding the manner of the chosen background, which is represented by a neutral tone, through careful study a lack of elements that could offer information about the context in which the subject was immortalized can be observed. The subject is presented in a side profile, her gaze is set downward and indicates a state in which she seems to be carried away by thoughts, indicating an emotion that can be defined as being pensive. The subtle rose coloring of the subject's cheeks indicates a healthy state of being. A

glance upon her garments will show a rather modest but clean attire, which is composed of a scarf named *basma* "referred to as *năframă*, *chișchineu*, *dermea*, *testemel*, *bariș*, *bariz*, gradually became widespread throughout the country, becoming, at end of the 19th century, a component of the Romanian folk costume"². The color of the headpiece has a yellow tint, which could only be obtained by the skilled seamstresses by dyeing the natural fibers with different plants. The role of the scarf which covers the head offers protection and resembles a sign of pioussness, which indicates a woman devoted to God, a belief carried on with pride and honor by women in the rural areas.

The next referenced artwork presents a distinct view on the representation of the Romanian feminine portraiture. Although painted by the same master, the context presents a distinctive portrayal of femininity.

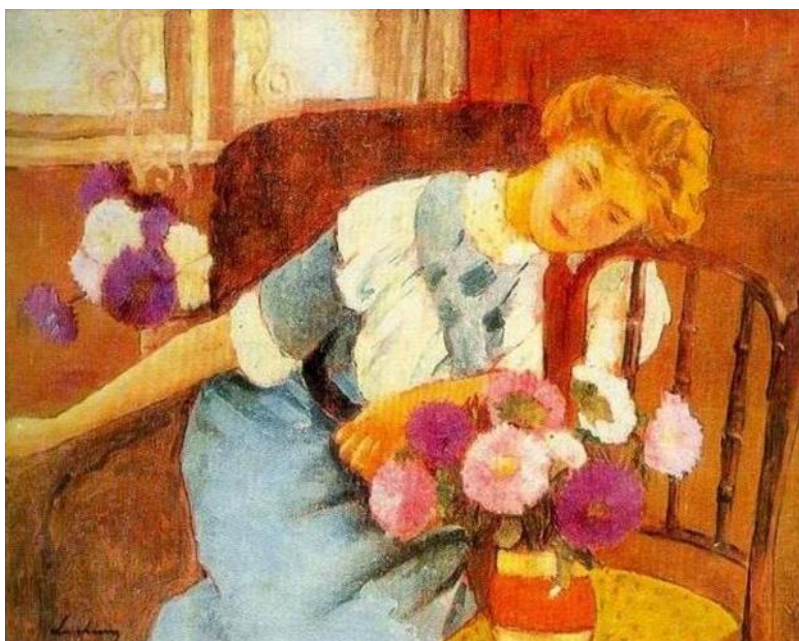


Fig. 2. Ștefan Luchian, *Interior(Lorica)*, 1913,

Source of image: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/stefan-luchian/interior-lorica-1913>

Figure 2, composed within the Post-impressionism art movement, portrays a young woman which the painter names Lorica. The positioning of the subject's body displays a sign of comfort which indicates a familiar and comfortable environment, in all probability, the subject's own house. The garments which cover the subject's body are representative for the Belle Époque era embodying a demure and feminine look. The dress is composed of fine and delicate materials, containing lace and ruffles which give a sense of preciousness and social status towards the wearer. The hair is presented in a coiffed manner which embodies a "voluminous, tightly coiled, pinned up in a bun"³ aesthetic. Thus, the portrayed subject must have been part of a middle class or higher class. The organic elements which are a specific and iconic element in Ștefan Luchian's artworks can be identified in a multitude of displays, which can be discovered

² Maria Bâtcă. 2006. *Romanian folk costume [Costumul popular românesc]*. București: Centrul Național pentru Conservarea și Promovarea Culturii Tradiționale, p. 41.

³ Adina Nanu. 1976. *Art, style, costume [Artă, stil, costum]*. București: Editura Meridiane, p. 188.

in different placements in the presented painted scene. The woman's gaze upon the floral element defines an affinity towards this specific motif, which is imbued with daintiness and femininity. The floral symbol represents the feminine virtues which embody grace and patience. The emotional state which can be identified within the referenced artwork is serenity.

Nicolae Vermont was a Romanian painter born on the 10th of October 1866 in Bacău. His artworks are considered a manifestation of "sincere and clear"⁴ portrayal of ordinary life. In the beginning of the 20th century his artistic output reached a peak. His attention towards encapsulating the depth of the painted subject and its vital elements and subtle details contributes towards his finesse as an intricate painter. From painting the beauty of Romania's Belle Époque delights and fine ornaments towards framing the depiction of the rural scenery and portraying an image of the simple peasant and its adversities in life, the painter's complex approach towards a multitude of subjects contribute to his eminence. A preferred motif of creation pivots towards immortalizing the human figure and its multifariousness. The selected artworks subjected towards the expansion of the research are *Lectura* and *Seaming wench*, both painted by Nicolae Vermont.



Fig. 3. Nicolae Vermont, *Reading*, 1919,

Source of image: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicolae_Vermont_-_Lectura.jpg.

In a similar matter, the following artwork referenced through Figure 3, composed within the Modernism art movement, reveals a composition that withholds an image almost mirrored towards the second given reference, Figure 2. The subject represents a young woman, who gazes upon an element, in this specific case an open book. The positioning of the body indicates a relaxed posture, natural and not posed. The scene indicates a personal abode in which the

⁴ Angela Vrancea. 1956. *N. Vermont*. București: Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, p. 7.

immortalized subject is indulging into a personal preference for literature indicating a specific level of education, and the possibility of being part of a middle class or an upper-class family. The garments are rather simple and indicate a modest aesthetic. A symbolic element is also present on the table on which the subject is resting her elbow. The historical placement of creation of the artwork offers a sublime explanation towards a shift regarding the complexity of the ornaments contained within the garment. As being a scene immortalized one year after the ending of the first world war, the garments take a more modest approach, in comparison to the fashion exhibited during the Belle Époque era. After thoughtful consideration, the elements contained within the present referenced artwork indicate that the subject is found in a state of melancholy.

The elements of common ground include a similarity in which the accepted aesthetic portraiture of the Romanian woman is based on a beautifying approach. The beautiful aesthetic is also graced with symbolic elements that have taken shape through the floral motifs present in both of the referenced works. The feminine yet delicate symbolism contained within this element portrays the woman in the same manner, fragile and delicate.



Fig. 4. Nicolae Vermont, *Seaming wench*, 1929,

Source of image: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/nicolae-vermont/seaming-wench-1929>.

The reference offered within the Figure 4, composed within the Expressionism art movement, presents a rather similar image to the previous reference made, Figure 1. The subject portrays an image of a young woman gazing down whilst performing a domestic task, seaming. Seaming and weaving were essential occupations in Romania's rural community. The portrayed woman can be seen wearing a traditional attire, composed of a blouse called *ie*, representing one of the most important pieces of the Romanian folk feminine costume, "of rare diversity of forms,

with a multifarious and rich decor”⁵. The garment was usually made by the wearer herself, which possessed meticulous stitching and sewing skills. The ornament sewn into the garment would represent a distinct indicative towards belonging to a specific geographical region, distinguished by symbol and color. The subject’s head is also modestly covered by a scarf, which differentiates from the previous given reference. The headpiece contained within the present artwork is named *maramă* which is a type of head covering garment made out of gossamer raw silk and is a specific element of the Romanian folk costume in the following regions: Oltenia, Muntenia, South of Transylvania and Moldova. This specific head ornament could be an indicator that the painted subject belonged to one of the mentioned rural regions. The simple and hardworking peasant presents a delicate yet sturdy portrayal of femininity, which in the referenced artwork indicates an emotional state of calm.

Both referenced artists have taken inspiration in idealist sceneries and also in the reality that portrays the Romanian village and its people. The simple yet hard working woman is now portrayed in such a manner which will emphasize the beauty and natural elements of the rural scenery. The image of the peasant, such an inspirational and ancestral symbol that constructed our lands past, will always remain a beacon of light which will shine upon the traditions and times far forgotten. The beauty and simplicity used whilst painting the image of the Romanian peasant imbues the canvas with their wiseness and purity.

Although a different approach was taken towards immortalizing the painted subject, the aesthetics contained within the four referenced artworks lean towards a beautiful aesthetic.

3. The second part of the 20th century

The second part of the 20th century brings forward an awakening of the social conscience. The artistic locus now wears the signs and influence of the two world wars which left a mark upon Romania’s society. The trying times that arose after the two wars, mark a change within the painted subjects and the manner in which reality is depicted. After the second world war, the Romanian painting scene has shifted towards a continuous search that imbues within the painting “emotion and a powerful expression, based on the human content”⁶. The elements which now compose the painted artworks focus on highlighting the higher morals or the fight for freedom of the Romanian nation. “The face of new man unravels and is precise with his exemplary moral traits”⁷.

The artists whose works have been subjected to this section of the research are Corneliu Baba and Angela Popa Brădean. The chosen painters expose an overview on the village’s life representation. Although utilizing a very distinct painting style and technique they both represented images of the Romanian feminine portrait from mid to late 20th century. After the trying times that have overshadowed Romania between the two devastating world wars, poignant themes now present the reconstruction of the land, reviving what was lost during the conflicts. Another theme focuses on the return to motherhood, on rebuilding society towards rebecoming a prosperous country. There is a noticeable change in the approach towards portraiture painting, starting from the representation of the human portrait and emotional state towards the careful placement of color and symbol.

⁵ Nicolae Alexandru Mironescu. 1969. *Romanian folk art [Arta populară Românească]*. București: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, p. 297.

⁶ Marin Nicolau-Golfin. 1970. *History of art [Istoria artei] Vol.II*. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, p. 323.

⁷ Ioan Frunzetti. 1974. *Contemporary Romanian painting [Pictură contemporană românească]*. București: Editura Meridiane, p. 8.

Corneliu Baba was a Romanian painter born on the 18th of November 1906 in Craiova. He is one of the most important artists of Romania's 20th century. The artist mastered various painting techniques, which include mediums such as oil painting, watercolor and tempera. His affinity towards immortalizing the human portrait was remarkable, "Facial features, and the feelings and emotions visible in and on them, made immediate impressions on the mind of this painter"⁸. The painter is considered to be inclined towards the representation of the human figure, historical events, and elements of still life. His artistry is characterized by a strong sense of realism and attention to detail.



Fig. 5. Corneliu Baba, *Field rest*, 1954,

Source of image: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/corneliu-baba/field-rest-1954>.

Within the referenced Figure 5, composed within the Socialist realism art movement, portrays an older woman who is accompanied by her infant and spouse. The positioning of the subject's body displays a sign of a weary state, the name of the referenced artwork clarifies with precision the events that the subjects have partaken in, which refer to resting after working the fields. The subjects that accompany the main character are in a state of deep sleep, yet the mother figure is watching upon them, offering protection. The facial expression determines a state of despair, fatigue or possible hopelessness. "The roles of women in the rural area did not limit to household activities, crafts and other non-agricultural traditional activities"⁹. The mother figure is represented in a manner of a sacrificial force towards protecting her loved ones, "woman, through her nature, is the symbol of birth and death"¹⁰. Her face wears the signs of

⁸ Corneliu Baba. 2017. *Confessions [Confesiuni]*. Timișoara, Editura: Muzeul de artă Timișoara, p.19.

⁹ O. Ilovan, A. Muntean, I. Ciupe. 2022. „Representations of women and of their roles in the world of the Romanian village. Picture postcards from the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century”. *Territorial Identity and Development*, 7, 100. Retrieved June 1, 2024, from https://territorial-identity.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/5_Ilovan-Ciupe-Muntean_TID-2-2022.pdf.

¹⁰ A., Lazăr, O., Mureșan, M., Păcurar, C., Iuhas, C. 2022. „The role of woman in society past-present-future”. *Antropologia mileniului III*. Retrieved June 1, 2024, from

time, of hard work under the burning sun. A gaze upon the garments of the subject, can determine the fact that she belonged to a modest environment. The head is covered by a white scarf which is a sign of modesty and piousness, which hold a close resemblance within the orthodox beliefs in which a woman must cover her head.

Angela Popa Brădean was a Romanian painter born on the 3rd of August 1934 in Iași. She is the daughter of the painter Nicolae Popa and the wife of the graphic artist Traian Brădean. Her subject of inspiration can be found within the portrayal of Romania's villages, "the people and their traditions"¹¹. The attention to detail which is contained within the traditional attire can be found as a motif within her artworks, alongside events that portray the vivacity of the village.



Fig. 6. Angela Popa Brădean, *Bride*, 1993,

Source of image: <https://www.artnet.com/artists/angela-popa-bradean/mireas%C4%83-bYbbGnmdBzqtp52osDx7Fw2>

The referenced artwork, Figure 6, composed within the Post-modernism art movement, portrays a young woman on her wedding day. Her gaze is set downwards and can be seen in a contemplative state. Her complexion is represented through pale nuances which emphasize her daintiness. The environment in which the character is placed shows a rather modest abode. A gaze upon the subject's garments provides an insight on the event that was ongoing at the specific life stage. The woman is wearing a traditional bridal costume, with ornate gold elements that form the necklace which is composed of a multitude of gold coins. The head is covered by a scarf alongside an ornament which contains a decorative element named *fes* specific to the Romanian folk garment belonging to the geographical region of Dobrogea. The Dobrogea region

http://www.researchgate.net/publication/348381769_rolul_femeii_in_societate_trecut-prezent-viitor_the_role_of_woman_in_society_past-present-future.

¹¹ Mircea Grozdea. 1984. *Contemporary painters [Pictori contemporani]*. București: Editura Meridiane, p. 41.

folk costume holds a Balkan-Oriental influence and is composed of certain distinct elements such as "fes, turkish coin adornments (icuşari, mahmudele)"¹². The subject's emotional state can be defined as calm, contemplative.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to determine a specific aesthetical representation of the Romanian 20th century woman immortalized through painted medium. The elements discovered have created an equal view on the aesthetical features present in the first half of the 20th century which has portrayed the woman as delicate, feminine and demure figure. The other half of the 20th century has known a discrepant shift in the representation of women. The challenging and constant changing times that occurred after the two world wars have shaped and changed the depiction of femininity towards a more resilient portrayal of the woman who bears the gift of being a mother, the woman who will build a better future.

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¹² Maria Bâtcă. 2006. *Romanian folk costume [Costumul popular românesc]*. București: Centrul Național pentru Conservarea și Promovarea Culturii Tradiționale, p. 156.

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