

The Exotic Model in Romanian Interwar Art, The Queen and her Love for Balchik

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Abstract: *The muses of artists began to become more and more diverse, through diversity meaning an increasing acceptance for what is foreign or different. This trend appears in fine arts, but also in literature, especially in the romantic model, which imposes a real fascination for the views, habits and expressive portraits of the inhabitants of the countries of the Far East. The Orient is seen as exotic, colorful and sensual, and the motif of the odalisques confirms the idea of lasciviousness and visual spectacle, offering through the representation of female forms an erotic variant of the Orient. The phenomenon of Balchik, represented by the works of interwar artists, definitively conquered by the undulating landscapes and by the expressiveness and exoticism of the odalisques, represents one of the best moments of modern Romanian painting. The magical universe of the Silver Coast, as well as the typical oriental figures, give the inhabitants and the landscape the possibility to become the favorite subject of the painters. Balchik and the oriental motifs discovered here offered for the interwar Romanian artists, almost exclusively, painting subjects. At the Art Museum of Constanța, as well as at the Dinu and Sevasta Vintilă Museum in Toplau, there are some of the most important works with this theme.*

Keywords: *Oriental Art; Balchik; Silver Coast; Interwar Romanian Painting; Oriental Motifs; Constanța Art Museum;*

1. Introduction

Artists has always tried to represent the beauty of the human face and body in different ways, and for this, he sought in the figure of the ethnic those traits that capture a way of life, a culture, a type of sensuality capable of fueling his creativity. Thus, the artists' travels were motivated by the desire to find an earthly paradise, populated by characters full of exoticism and beauty.

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2. The Silver Coast - The artists are inspired by ancient symbols

Originally called Cruni (Kruni, Crunos, Crunoi, Crunon) and consecrated after the ancient foundation of Dionysos, god of wine and partying, vegetation, divine inspiration, exaltation and purification, thanks to a statue thrown by the waves on the shore, attribution taken in toponymy together with the term polis (city-state in ancient Greece), so Dionysopolis, a theophoric fortress, Balchik of modern times manages to achieve after 1913, when it is included in the territory of Romania, an unrepeatabe performance; considered “a window open to the enchantments of the Orient, the window through which so far only our painters and artists have seen such a subtle understanding of the beauties of nature... Her

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² Gelan Cristina, Pîrvan Rus Lelia. (coord). 2016. *Manual pentru educație interculturală*, Bucharest: Eikon Publishing House, p. 33.

Majesty the Queen" (Maria), in the vision of the geographer Gheorghe Vâlsan³, received under siege of the ruthless sun "with its southern light", by I. Simionescu⁴, suspected by Mihail Sebastian that "it has nothing Mediterranean", described by Gala Galaction as "a splendid place of biblical meditation"⁵, considered by Gheorghe Murgu "an earthly spectacle with faces and appearances from the patriarchal beauty of the Old Testament"⁶ and endowed with the "most evangelical" donkeys, the city - "of a tragedy that terrifies you", according to Tonitza, but which "this pious and humble iconographer of the coast

"He paints it wrapped in a transparent and transparent light - he created in art, according to Emanoil Bucuța, his exegete and according to today's certainties," a real current with power close to sheet"⁷, so that, quoting Camil Petrescu, the entire "Romanian painting at one point had only one subject: Balchik"⁸.

Balchik and the oriental motifs discovered here offered for the interwar Romanian artists, almost exclusively, painting subjects. At the Art Museum of Constanța, as well as at the Dinu and Sevasta Vintilă Museum in Toplau, there are some of the most important works with this theme. Nicolae Tonitza, Iosif Iser, Ștefan Dimitrescu, Ștefan Popescu, are definitely linked to the history and cultural richness of that area, through paintings that feature characters such as Mamut or Ismail, Afize or Luftie. Queen Maria loved this land very much, and the influence that the local population, but also the architecture of oriental origin had on her, are evident in her clothes, but also in architectural elements, visible especially at her castle, which she takes added a minaret.⁹

The muffled face of "Ahmet Ali", painted by Jean Alexandru Steriadi, smiles at us from the Dinu Museum and Sevasta Vintilă in Topalu, and Mamut's presence is only suspected in the cafe that Nicolae Tonitza paints in Balchik, fascinated by the silence he it can be cleared by a corner forgotten by the world and bathed in the silver light of the sea shore. We find the same absence in Osman's Gate painting. The work, located at the Constanța Art Museum, takes us to Tonitza's universe, in its very intimate core, where, from very few touches of ochre, blue and green, a world, a sensation, a masterpiece is recreated.

In Iser Iosif, the female model, whether she appears inside or in the landscape, has the same majestic attitude, carved as if in stone, and in works with a suggestive title "Odalisque" (Constanța Art Museum) "Tatar Girls" (Constanța), "Tatar Girls at rest" (Dinu Museum and Sevasta Vintilă Toplau), "Tatar woman la Silistra" (Toplau), he does not look for the easy exoticism of embroideries, clothes, external aspects, but captures the calm and monumentality of the human character.

For Nicolae Tonitza, the female model represents a mixture of grace and seduction, and the works at the museum in Toplau: "Tatar with a child", "Tatar's head" or "Tatar in blue", come to confirm this. Rendered in vibrant colors, the Turks and Tatars from Balchik and the Dobrogea coast, in general, appear to us as a standard of beauty, untouchable, frozen as if in time by their attitudes and static positions.

„Discovered by Alexandru Satmary, Iosif Iser, Gheorghe Petrașcu, Ion Theodorescu-Sion and Ipolit Strâmbu [lescu] almost simultaneously, but independently of each other, since 1913, Dobrogea established itself in Romanian art only at the beginning and during the interwar period - through the monotonous or spectacular relief, through the structure of its settlements with characters and objects figured under the stillness of a hallucinatory light, reflected by rebellious geological layers and the sea - to redefine itself through a south of it.

³ Vâlsan, Gheorghe. 1930. *The Silver Coast of Romania*, Bucharest: Carageale Publishing House, pp. 4-5.

⁴ Simionescu, Ion. 1928. „Balchik”, in *Silver Coast*, I, no.6, July 1, p. 43.

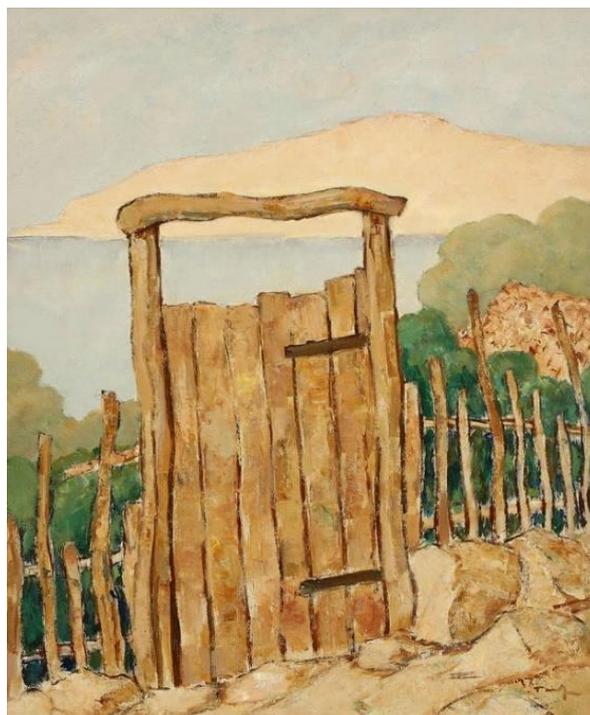
⁵ Galaction, Gala. 1928. „Capul Caliacra”, Almanac of *Adevarul and Dimineața*, Bucharest, p. 47.

⁶ Murgu, Gheorghe. 1928. *Two Cities. Mangalia and Balchik*, Lumea Turistică collection, Bucharest, p. 10.

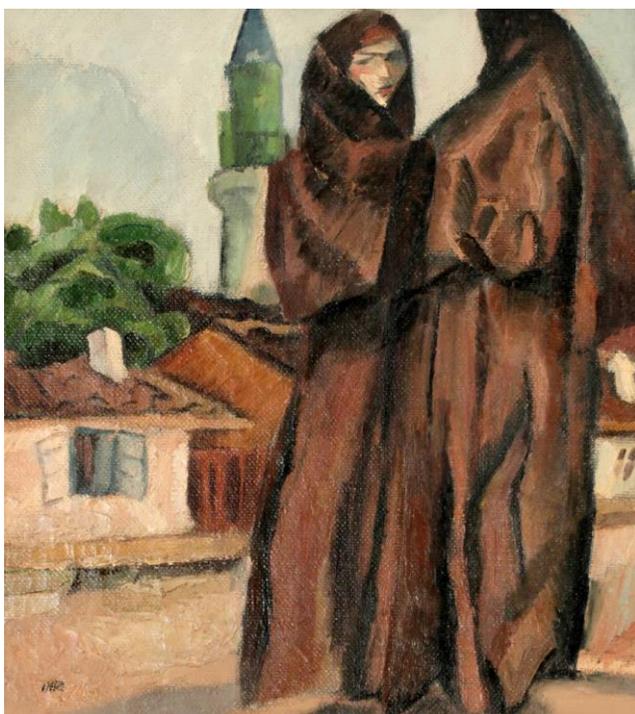
⁷ Bucuța, Emanoil. 1931. *Romanian cities and places of art, Balchik*. Craiova: Apollo collection, p. 14.

⁸ Petrescu, Camil. 1928. „Balchik”, *Silver Coast*, I, no.3, April 23, p. 2.

⁹ Gelan, Cristina, Pîrvan Rus, Lelia. 2016. *Manual pentru educație interculturală*, Bucharest: Eikon Publishing House, pp 34-35.



1. Jean Alexandru Steriadi, Ahmet-Ali 2. Nicolae Tonitza, Osman's Gate
Photo source: <http://miras.gov.ro/1/expoziție-temporară/>



3. Iosif Iser-Tatar women at Silistra 4. Nicolae Tonitza- Head of Tatar Girl
Photo source: <http://miras.gov.ro/1/expoziție-temporară/>

The palimpsest of cultures and civilizations, with a fabulous past and settlement, Balchik has allowed any approach, in the name of modernity or tradition, as a temptation of the recovered

West or the East finally found, in a limited and probably unrepeatable time. in the name of history, certainly original and unique in the name of painting.¹⁰

The article *On the White Shore of the Black Sea*, published by Adrian Maniu (brother of the painter Rodica Maniu Mützner) in 1928, gives an account, in appropriate metaphors and thoughts, of the tireless fascination that Balchik can inspire and maintain: "It seems that the ages also have places resting in the world, as well as migratory birds. How else to interpret the mystery of the city, which for thousands of years, desolate and torn down by wars and invasions, is tirelessly rising to a new life for it?"

On the white shore of the Black Sea, where painters and poets gather today and seek inspiration, and where the mourning of Her Majesty Queen Mary seeks her sad relief, there have been poets and painters in other ages, some brought from exile, others for the sake of this land. miraculously and royal steps passed on the same Dobrogean expanse. There are meetings and spaces of thoughts and events that revive. This is told to us to this day by the Chronicle of the Byzantine Porphyrogenites and the organs of the Scythian kings. This earth must be loved. The hour will come, of course, when the church will remember that on the white shore were the first glorious Christian basilicas of the good will. ”¹¹

"Later," says Balmanik's exegetical Emanoil Bucuta in 1930, "artists turned it into a great workshop. On all the cracks and at all the crossings, with the blue and moving horizon in the background or the mysterious minaret, you met them, from dawn to dusk, drawing lines and putting colors. A turquoise with a tassel-free fez on the back of its neck and a bare chest from the open ilicum seemed to come out of a canvas of theirs and set among the ruins of clay, like the first inhabitant of a new city, built only by imagination. Since November, Balchik has been moving to Bucharest or other gloomy parts of the country, through exhibition halls. It was the time of the traveling Balchik who left the world, from its scattered coast, to show himself and call ”¹².

The geologist Gh. Munteanu-Murgoci, on the deck of a ship near Balchik in 1913, launches the name of the coast that "looks like advertising, although so far (1925 nn) there are no Palaces, no Casinos, no games of chance justify it "(the important scientist built a villa" with a porch of a Greek temple ”¹³, oriental echoes and the proper sea view - it still exists today - and the grateful city erected a statue of him in 1938¹⁴ on the terrace in front of the gymnasium - today an art gallery with museum status. "Our Silver Coast compared to the French Cote d'Azur", says Gh. Vâlsan, professor at the University of Bucharest and member of the Romanian Academy, But if you look at it from the more modest point of view of our country and if you compare it with the much praised Constanta, the "pearl of the Black Sea", then you have to confess that it is much more than you expected... It is our only coastal region, which rises i mountainous heights, on which stretch shady forests full of springs, on which you can enjoy unexpected views, from the slopes with harmonious lines like a swan's neck - from Ecrene, to the landslide suggesting a terrestrial cataclysm - from Balchik - and up to the right precipice wall between Cavarna and Caliacra, a hundred meters high and a whiteness visible from afar, like an escape and shelter for the ships of the stormiest sea.

The phenomenon of Balchik, represented by the works of interwar artists, definitively conquered by the undulating landscapes and by the expressiveness and exoticism of the odalisques, represents one of the best moments of modern Romanian painting. The magical universe of the Silver Coast, as well as the typical oriental figures, give the inhabitants and the landscape the possibility to become the favorite subject of the painters.

¹⁰ Păuleanu, Doina. 2003. *Balchik in Romanian painting*. Bucharest: Arc 2000 Publishing House, pp. 32-33.

¹¹ Păuleanu, Doina. 2003. *Balchik in Romanian painting*, Bucharest: Arc 2000 Publishing House. p. 105.

¹² Bucuța, Emanoil.1930. „Free University of Balchik”, in *Wheat Grains*, I, no.6, August 6, pp. 373-374.

¹³ Măciucă Balcica, 2001. *Balcic*. Bucharest: Semne Publishing House. p.34.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 33.



5. Nicolae Tonitza, Tatar Girl with child

6. Vasile Popescu, Turkish Woman (on the Fountain)

Photo source: <https://muzeuldeartaconstanta.ro/muzeul-topalu.html>



6. Ștefan Popescu, Turkish Man

8. Nicolae Tonitza, Little Coffeshop

Photo source: <https://muzeuldeartaconstanta.ro/muzeul-topalu.html>

These white ravines, glistening in the sun, between the faded blue of the sky and the deep blue of the sea, made a passenger on a ship once whisper the words "Silver Coast ." Murgoci (quoted by Vâlsan without enthusiasm, n.n.) heard and consecrated the expression. We receive it... but let's not forget that only in part this coast is made of "silver" - that is, of whitewashed marl, grayish white and crumbly. At Caliacra, the coast is bloody red, due to the clay called terra-rosa, and towards Ecrene it is green, being covered by forests. So, if we were to keep Murgoci's hyperbolic style, we should be talking not about one, but about three coasts: the bead coast, the silver coast and the emerald coast. Each of them has its own

nuances, which destroy the monotony characteristic of the rest of the Romanian coast, but all together they represent a single harmonic unit, about which we can talk together »¹⁵.

For scientists, says Camil Petrescu, "The Silver Coast is a climatic intercalation, a Mediterranean corner lost and preserved in continental lands, like an atavistic heritage, inexplicably rising over many generations, like, if you will, a precious vessel buried and kept for hundreds of years in the deep layers of an arable land."¹⁶

Iosif Iser had in Bucharest on December 1913, a large exhibition totaling 216 pieces and the point of attraction was representing images from Cadrilater.

He paints a watercolor representing the mosque in Dobrich and the old Tatar, Ismail. He paints in a very personal style, charged as harsh, angular, as if his painting were not addressed to the viewer. Arghezi states of Iser that "he handles the usual material of the profession with rage and impertinence, insulting lines intersect in his drawing or established lines. like the spur"¹⁷

As a first impression, the queen likes the location and sees its potential. She will describe it in *My Country* - a book she will write during the war - with the intention of making Romania known in the world:

"Balchik is a picturesque fairground that you would think is rolling in waves. In dirty groups, its Turkish houses climb fast slopes, as if they were sliding slowly, attracted by the waters below. I've only been there once, but I have a vivid memory of his unusual appearance, of the crowds of girls from all over, of his small homes, lovely suites at each other's heads, so that they seemed to be supported with weight only on such ribs. of rapeseed and broken".¹⁸

An old Turk is a friend with her at the moment - about her in her intimate oath the queen will say "She did not speak a word of any language to understand, but she had assumed the role of master of ceremonies and had, definitely, a sense of humor "He was an absolutely quaint and unusual companion."¹⁹

Balcica Maciucă is a writer and art historian, the daughter of Octavian Mosescu, the mayor of Balchik, and in 2001 she published an extraordinary and unusual monograph on Balchik. About the picturesque place she notes:

"You could find the fountains everywhere and they were imposing through their construction, similar to high gates from which the mouths of water came out.

Waiting for the Turkish woman to fill their vessels seemed like a ritual in a procession dedicated to the god of water. This image, which twins the archaic with the present, is found transfigured in many of the works of painters obsessed with exploring, beyond the picturesque, the mysteries of this world which, as you think you understand it, addresses other challenges and invites you to explore spiritual paths."²⁰

In the chapter "Sultana and the Holy Balchik", Balcica Maciucă is the one who describes the presence of Queen Maria in Balchik.

"*My dream homes*":

"On a walk through Dobrogea, I suddenly approached a piece of land by the sea, which aroused in me a very special thrill; I had the feeling that this place was always waiting for me, or I had always lived in I didn't think I'd come here for the first time.

*I was part of the place, and the place was part of me. I had to become the master of this corner of the earth - I needed it. Then I found a heart here that would make my dream come true and that, working with me, came to love the place so much that I named it "Saint Balchik"*²¹

¹⁵ Vâlsan, Gheorghe. 1930. *The Silver Coast of Romania*, Bucharest: Caragiale Publishing House, pp. 5-6.

¹⁶ Păuleanu, Doina. 2003. *Balcicul în pictura românească*, Bucharest: Arc 2000 Publishing House. p. 107.

¹⁷ Arghezi, Tudor, „Iser Exhibition on the evening of December 14”, 1913 reproduced in *Opere*, vol. III Publicistica 1896-1913.

¹⁸ Maria, Queen of Romania, *My country* - translated from English by N. Iorga, edition III Sibiu 1919, pp.186-189.

¹⁹ Boia, Lucian. 2014. *Balchik. The little paradise of Greater Romania*. Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House, p. 55.

²⁰ Măciucă Balcica. 2001. *Balcic*. Bucharest: Publishing House Semne, p. 61.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 38.

At this point we understand that the soul of Queen Maria from all that Romania represented for her was Balchik.

"With my body I will rest at Curtea de Arges next to my beloved husband King Ferdinand, but I want my heart to be placed under the slabs of the church I built. During a long life so many came to my heart that, even dead, I would I want to be able to come to her along the path with lilies that was my pride and joy, I want to rest there in the middle of the beauties I made, in the middle of the flowers I planted, And now there is my heart, I do not want it to be a place of mourning, but on the contrary, of charm and life as it was when I was alive.

*And now I say goodbye forever: from now on I will not be able to send you any signs, but above all remember, my people, that I have loved you and I bless you with the last breath "*²²

3. Conclusion

The Orient is seen as exotic, colorful and sensual and the motif of the odalisques confirms the idea of lasciviousness and visual spectacle, offering through the representation of female forms an erotic variant of the Orient. The magical universe of the Silver Coast, as well as the typical oriental figures, give the inhabitants and the landscape the possibility to become the favorite subject of the painters. Balchik and the oriental motifs discovered here offered for the interwar Romanian artists, almost exclusively, painting subjects. At the Art Museum of Constanța, as well as at the Dinu and Sevasta Vintilă Museum in Toplau, there are some of the most important works with this theme.

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²² Ibidem, p. 210.