

## Nora Steriadi: Revisiting the Biography of a Romanian Decorative Arts Pioneer

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**Abstract:** *This paper brings into discussion a creator with an internationally renowned career, who has not benefited from a re-actualized view upon her work in recent years and was unjustly forgotten: Nora Steriadi. She worked in the first half of the 20th century, especially in the interwar period, as a decorative artist, expressing herself in old techniques such as embroidery, pottery and mosaic, which she updated in accordance with modern aesthetics, starting from local traditional bases. She was appreciated by art critics, exhibiting both in the country and abroad, in Paris, Sèvres, Barcelona, New York and Milan. The recovered view on her artistic endeavor, which lists her exhibition activity, also aims at questioning how Nora Steriadi was perceived in the epoch as a primitive, self-taught artist to fit in the Romanian national identity program. At the same time, the research helps to illustrate the condition of the decorative artist in the aforementioned space-time landmarks.*

**Keywords:** *women artists; style and specificity; Nora Steriadi; decorative and applied arts; Romanian national art; primitive; folk Art;*

### Introduction

I chose to study the biography of the artist Nora Steriadi due to the broader interest I have in the modern Romanian decorative and applied arts from the beginning of the 20th century and especially from the interwar period. In my doctoral research, I investigated how artists and theorists discussed the necessity of the emergence and subsequently created this genre of art, which would be representative for the national identity. Nora Steriadi was one of the creators who subscribed to this program, as many authors have shown during her lifetime. Wanting to learn more about her contribution to this endeavor, I discovered that in the last 40 years no article has been dedicated to her. The only author who tried to present her career exhaustively was the museographer Petre Oprea (in 1981), who only mentioned among his sources the artist's diary, whose location is unknown today<sup>2</sup>. Ten years earlier, art historian Eleonora Costescu wrote a shorter article where she presented information related to the life and work of the artist<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, these authors offered contradictory information, such as the place and year of her birth. At the same time, the exact date of her death was also unknown. I found it very odd that Nora Steriadi, a highly regarded creator, with an international career, did not receive the recognition she deserves in recent years, leading to her unjust neglect.

Therefore, this paper revisits her personal and professional biography in chronological order. The first chapter aims at updating personal data and brings new information to light regarding Nora Steriadi's place and date of birth based on archival documents, as the information

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<sup>2</sup> Petre Oprea. 1981. „Mozaicul modern în România: Nora Steriadi (1885-1948)”, *SCIA*, 28 (1): 161- 176, p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> Eleonora Costescu. 1971. „Nora Steriadi”. *Arta Plastică*, 18 (7): 30-31, p. 30.

transmitted in the past by the mentioned authors was incorrect. At the same time, I have addressed the contradictory and insufficient details related to her artistic training which will have to be further explored in the future. I have also addressed her marriage to Romanian painter Jean Steriadi.

The second chapter is denser, as it aims at updating Nora's artistic biography, listing the personal and group exhibitions she attended, describing the works of art that she created and the genres of decorative and applied art that she explored: embroidery, pottery and mosaic. Additionally, I examined the critical reception of her work, an endeavor that I analyzed deeper in the third chapter. At the same time, this investigation also sheds light on the status of decorative artists in Romania and official efforts to create a space for public exhibiting in decorative art salons. At the same time, I have presented Nora Steriadi's participation at international manifestations dedicated to decorative arts such as the Milan Triennale or other important universal exhibitions that highlight her importance as a decorative artist. My sources were international periodicals articles and exhibition catalogs.

The last chapter resumes questions related to Nora's artwork critical reception, addressing how she was often categorized as a primitive or self-taught artist, a perception shaped by Romania's national identity program. In this sense, I also investigated her self-representation approach through her personal writings showing how she actively participated in contouring the image of the artist inspired by local folk art and not the official institutions of art education. At the same time, I challenged this narrative by arguing that Nora Steriadi was in fact a cult artist. The third chapter also succinctly addresses the current lack of interest in her work and its implications.

## **1. Methodology**

This article is a historic analysis and case study of decorative artist Nora Steriadi's biography, which relies on local and international resources, such as articles published in periodicals and exhibition catalogs, as well as on archival information. Therefore, chapter one presents new personal information through archival documents, such as the true date and place of Nora Steriadi's birth, which weren't correctly noted by Costescu and Oprea. At the same time, archival documents offer insight on her marriage to Romanian painter Jean Steriadi. The chapter also shows how the two authors offered different perspectives related to Nora's artistic training, an important theme of her critical reception, as I showed in the third chapter. Because I did not find any official documents to help elucidate the enigma of her artistic education, I confronted Nora's own perspective on the subject, thus concluding that she preferred to be seen as inspired by common folk people and not as an artist trained in specialized institutions.

The main focus of the paper, chapter two, targets Nora Steriadi's exhibition activity, listing chronologically personal and group shows, describing her artworks, based on press and critic statements, as well as exhibition catalogs, to create a comprehensive picture of her entire career. The chapter also outlines some key concepts through which her work was characterized, such as the connection to local tradition or Romanian specificity. The exhaustive character of this approach is caused by the disappearance of most of Nora's artworks, as well as the fact that the remaining ones are not sufficiently valued by the museums and collectors that own them. At the same time, the intention is to emphasize her activity's uniqueness, as it was evaluated during her lifetime, as well as the importance of her innovative creative process through which she

revitalized old techniques such as embroidery, pottery and mosaic. At the same time, I tried to illustrate Nora's creation, through examples of pottery from her earlier days, kept in the Minovici Museum, where I work as a museographer. Thus, the paper contributes to the reevaluation of a once internationally recognized artist, who is now almost forgotten. Nevertheless, the analysis aimed at describing the condition of the Romanian decorative artist in general and the official efforts made to create a link between public and creators in the decorative art salons. New information related to Nora Steriadi's death is also brought to light.

The article is based on a shorter text in which I analyzed how the artist's artwork was critically received in the epoch, an aspect that I resumed in chapter three<sup>4</sup>. Thus, I showed how writings dedicated to Nora by illustrious figures such as art historians Henri Focillon or George Oprescu and so on, as well as her own writings, outlined the image of a self-taught naive creator. Their goal was to include Nora Steriadi in the program of national representation through art. I reevaluated this narrative by showing that she was in fact a cult artist, who came into contact with art schools, even if she did not complete their courses. I debated how she had a contact with the art world, being married to the appreciated painter and museum man Jean Steriadi, studying the techniques of ceramics and mosaics with craftsmen and owning a collection of pottery. Last but not least, by analyzing her writings, I demonstrated that her speech was a cultured one. As well, and I showed how her discourse can be used in the future to generate new types of interpretations, such as the feminist view. Nevertheless, I have addressed the main causes of the current lack of interest in this artist and their implications.

## **2. Chapter One. Updating Personal Information. Issues of Artistic Formation**

Although her contribution to the Romanian applied and decorative arts was noteworthy in the interwar period, Nora Steriadi has become an almost forgotten name for a long time in local art history. As Eleonora Costescu pointed out, Nora's activity was important for reviving several genres and techniques that experienced an important development in the Romanian medieval period<sup>5</sup>.

Both the life and work of Nora Steradi are very little known today, even though she was one of the most representatives figures of Romanian decorative arts. Various inaccurate and incorrect information even surround the date and place of her birth. Costescu indicated Nora's birth in 1884, in the village Cartiu, in Gorj County, while correctly calling the future artist a "descendant of an old family from Oltenia"<sup>6</sup>. Oprea, on the other hand, proposed the date and birthplace as October 23, 1889, in the Porceni village from Bumbești-Jiu, Gorj, naming her father "N. Condruș", who was a veterinarian by profession<sup>7</sup>.

Archival documents shed light on this case, clarifying the situation. According to the birth certificate from the Civil Registry for those born in Târgu-Jiu, Eleonora Condruș was born on October 16, 1882, in Târgu-Jiu city "at the house of her parents on Tudor Vladimirescu Street, the yellow suburb". She was "the daughter of Mr. Mihail Condruș, aged 32, a veterinarian by

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<sup>4</sup> Mădălina Manolache. 2025, February 8. „Nora Steriadi și continuitatea artei vechi românești”, *Cotidianul*. Retrieved April 28, 2025, from <https://www.cotidianul.ro/nora-steriadi-si-continuitatea-artei-vechi-romanesti/>.

<sup>5</sup> Eleonora Costescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

profession, and Mrs. Sevastița Condruș, aged 21, both residing in the city of Tergu Jiu"<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, Nora Steriadi was not born in Cartiu or Porceni, where she probably grew up at most, although there is no such information. At the same time, Nora's mother, Sevastița Cartianu (her maiden name), came from an old Oltenian family<sup>9</sup>.

## 2. 1. Artistic Formation and Marriage to Romanian Painter Jean Steriadi

According to Oprea, the young Nora attended the Conservatory of Dramatic Art and the Faculty of Letters as well as the School of Fine Arts in Bucharest which she abandoned, disappointed by the local education system<sup>10</sup>. She then went to Paris to specialize in a branch of the decorative arts, provisionally enrolling at the La Grande-Chaumiere Academy, where she studied with the sculptor Jean Antoine Injalbert and took drawing lessons from Primet and Denis<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, Costescu states that Nora was initially attracted to sculpture and studied at the Julian Academy in Paris<sup>12</sup>. Once again, the information is contradictory. While it is possible that Nora visited both Parisian art schools, these details remain unexplored.

In turn, in 1939, the artist described an essential encounter with a peasant woman whom she called "my only teacher of decorative art"<sup>13</sup>. This woman embroidered an apron with colourful wool threads inspired by the flowers in her garden. The artist confessed that "I felt as if I were in front of the most beautiful work of art. (...) It was *my first lesson in decorative art*"<sup>14</sup> (my emphasis). We can observe how Nora Steriadi actively participated in shaping her image as an artist inspired by common folk people.

In Paris, the young student met the artist Jean Steriadi, whom she got engaged to<sup>15</sup>. As archival documents show, the marriage took place in Brăila, where the Condruș family was settled<sup>16</sup>. Although she planned to return to France for the studies she had been following for only four months, Nora did not continue her artistic training<sup>17</sup>.

## 3. Chapter Two. Updating the Artistic Biography

The earliest mention of Nora Steriadi's artistic activity was recorded on the occasion of the first exhibition of women painters, which took place at the Romanian Athenaeum in Bucharest, during the winter of 1916<sup>18</sup>. There, she presented paintings and works of decorative art. Other important women artists that were showcasing their works were Nina Arbore, Olga Greceanu, Rodica Maniu, Maria Steurer-Ciurdea, Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck etc., as well as Queen

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<sup>8</sup> ANSJB, Colecția Registre de stare civilă Târgu-Jiu, Registrul pentru născuți, 1882, f. 45.

<sup>9</sup> *Arborele Genealogic al Familiei Cartianu*. 2014, October 26. Retrieved April 16, 2025, from <https://cartianufamily.wordpress.com/2014/10/26/arbore-genealogic/>.

<sup>10</sup> Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 162.

<sup>12</sup> Eleonora Costescu, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> Nora Steriade. 1939, May 1. „Inspirații”. *Timpul*, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Idem*, „Causerie sur l'art decoratif rustique en Roumanie”, text dactilografiat în 1932, pp. 12-13 *Apud*. Eleonora Costescu, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

<sup>16</sup> ANSJB, Colecția Stare Civilă Comunală Brăila, Registrul Stării Civile pentru Căsătorii, 1907, Act de căsătorie Nr. 397, ff. 16v – 47r.

<sup>17</sup> Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

<sup>18</sup> L. I. 1916, February 10/23. „Deschiderea expoziției artistelor pictore”. *Universul*, p. 2.

Elisabeth of Romania<sup>19</sup>. Three years later, Nora opened her first personal exhibition at the Carol I Foundation in Bucharest, which consisted of artistic embroidery (the press reported embroidered curtains and tablecloths)<sup>20</sup>. The artworks were not for sale, as the artist wanted to "show the role that our women can have in the practical artistic movement" while entry proceeds were donated to the Feminist Movement Society<sup>21</sup>. Her debut was therefore made under feminist auspices, Nora Steriadi supporting the importance of the creative woman and working in a traditionally perceived feminine technique. During this times, the local press didn't offer her much attention.

Her second personal exhibition took place in 1920, in merchant Victor Boudet's gallery, located in Place Vendôme No. 8, Paris<sup>22</sup>. Coinciding with her debut in the French art world, as well as with her venture into the field of ceramics, the exhibition presented embroidery, drawings, watercolours and porcelain. The French press described the event and emphasized her connection to folk tradition: "From the warm colours and original arabesques that characterize the folk art of her country, Mrs. Nora Steriadi drew her inspiration to compose the picturesque designs of her embroidered fabrics and her decorations of pillows and draperies, which are ingenious stylizations of flowers and fruits"<sup>23</sup>. Oprea also mentioned that Nora made curtains, tablecloths, pillows in a colour reduced palette, consisting in a few shades, which were decorated with flowers, fruits, butterflies, birds, animals and exotic fish<sup>24</sup>.

In Nora's "Causerie sur l'art decoratif rustique en Roumanie", we learn that her first pottery attempts took place alongside a potter from Tg. Frumos in Roman, Moldova<sup>25</sup>. Her first vases were produced at the Ruffer Factory in Bucharest and were unanimously appreciated by the public and quickly sold at the Bucharest Sample Fair in 1921 under the initiative of Romanian art pottery Troița<sup>26</sup>. Troița was a private enterprise that created ceramic objects inspired by Romanian folk pottery, designed by artists Nicolae Vermont, Camil Ressu, Gh. Ionescu-Doru, Ion Theodorescu-Sion, Nicolae Tonitza and others workshop (Figures 1 and 2 show Troița products designed by the artists that were presented at the 1921 fair). It was the result of two years of artistic explorations but had a short life<sup>27</sup>. The Dr. Nicolae Minovici Museum preserves ceramics made by Nora Steriadi for the workshop inspired by folk art form and decorated in an innovative manner (Figures 3, 4, 5). On their bottoms, they feature both the marks of the Bucharest workshop and that of the artist.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> \*\*\*. 1919, March 26/April 8. „Expoziția de broderie artistică a d-nei Nora I. Steriade”. *Universul*, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> The Victor Boudet Manufactory was established in 1886 at 43 Boulevard des Capucines and moved from 1908 at 8 Place Vendôme, under the name Boudets Frères & Cie until 1914. Victor Boudet was one of the most important Parisian retailers of luxury furniture, bronzes, art objects and silverware. Petre Oprea, *Op. Cit.*, p. 162; *Manufacture Boudet Victor (1886-1914)*. (n. d.). Retrieved March 12, 2025, from <https://galeriehassan.com/fr/artistes/manufactures/boudet-victor/>.

<sup>23</sup> \*\*\*. 1920, July 15. „Nouvelles artistiques”. *Le liberté*, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

<sup>25</sup> Nora Steriadi, *op. cit.*, pp. 6, 11, 13-14 *Apud*. Eleonora Costescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>26</sup> Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

<sup>27</sup> \*\*\*. 1921, September 23. „Une visite a la foire d'échantillons”. *L'Indépendance Roumaine*, p. 4; *Idem*. 1929, April 3. „Ceramică și pictură”, *Epoca*, p. 2; For more details about Troița see Mădălina-Ioana Manolache. 2024. „National Art and Industry in the Interwar Period. Three Romanian Factories”, *ICC*, 10 (1): 195-217.



Fig. 1. *The Troița Workshop at the Fair Exhibition. Source: Postcards and Photographic Clichés Collection - Bucharest Municipality Museum.*



Fig 2. The Troița Workshop at the Fair Exhibition. Source: Postcards and Photographic Clichés Collection - Bucharest Municipality Museum.



Fig. 3. *Nora Steriadi's Mug for Troița, 1921, from The Nicolae Minovici Museum*



Fig 4. *Nora Steriadi's Pitcher for Troița, 1921, from The Nicolae Minovici Museum*





Fig. 3. Nora Steriadi's Pitcher for Troița, 1921, from The Nicolae Minovici Museum

Supported by the banker Aristide Blank to build a kiln for firing pottery in Sinaia, where she settled in 1922, Nora was able to create a small series of ceramics<sup>28</sup>. There, she worked alongside two Oltenian potters from Horezu, producing numerous inexpensive, functional and artistic pieces such as flower pots, vases and bowls, decorated with field flowers, tulips, clovers and briars specific to Horezu ceramics. She also designed and created stove tiles decorated with naive stylizations of animal and floral motives: roosters, peacocks, fir trees and tulips<sup>29</sup>. During this period, Nora made illustrations for the magazine *Gândirea*, one of its covers depicting a design for "Romanian Ceramics" (Figure 6).

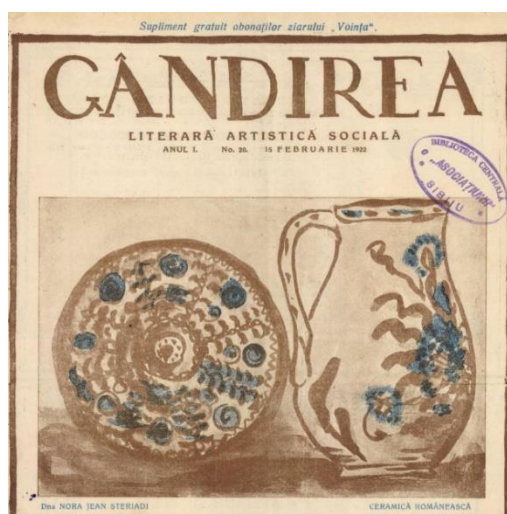


Fig. 6. "Romanian Ceramics" design by Nora Steriadi. Cover of *Gândirea Literară, artistică, socială*, February 15, 1922, Year I, No. 20.

<sup>28</sup> Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-164.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 164.

In May 1924, the artist organized her third personal exhibition at the La Maison des Français in Lahovari Square, Bucharest, where she showed ceramics and embroidery<sup>30</sup>. In December, she displayed her pottery at the Military Circle in Bucharest, under the patronage of the Prince Mircea Charity Society<sup>31</sup>. On this occasion, the writer Adrian Maniu wrote that the artist "... spent a fortune to build a kiln, broke hundreds of pots to obtain a certain shade of enamel, worked hard and sacrificed her whole soul, like any artist, for her faith. And behold, on the chest of the vases that came out of her hands, a holy spark of life and Romanian art flickers"<sup>32</sup>. We can already see how her work was perceived as specific for Romanian culture.

Competition, low profitability and the seriousness with which she treated her craft, by throwing away objects with insignificant flaws, led to Blank's credit withdrawal after only two years<sup>33</sup>. In 1925, the artist joined another relatively new pottery workshop, the new enterprise bearing the associate and Nora's names: Bucur-Steriade, and the enterprise exhibited its products at the Mozart Gallery in Bucharest the same year<sup>34</sup>. During summertime, she participated with ceramics, fabrics and rugs in a national art exhibition organized in Sinaia<sup>35</sup>. At the beginning of 1926, in a new women's salon, where Nina Arbore, Risa Kraid, Maria Brateș Pillat, Olga Greceanu and many others were present, the public could see Nora's pottery creations<sup>36</sup>.

### 3.1. A Series of International Manifestations. The State of Romanian Decorative Arts

In 1928, Nora was invited to exhibit ceramics at the Sèvres Porcelain Factory<sup>37</sup>. The French art critic Henri Focillon, former director of the Lyon Museum and professor at the Faculty of Letters in Paris, together with Louis Metman, curator of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris, recommended Nora to Georges Lechevallier-Chevignard, the factory's director<sup>38</sup>. It was one of the most notable moments of her career, as she acknowledged in her diary: "In my country, everyone admired me without appreciating me and without daring to say *that what I do is art: I was a potter, an embroiderer*. This man consecrated me as an *artist*"<sup>39</sup> (my emphasis). This quote also helps us understand the isolated and misunderstood condition of the decorative artist in Romania.

The Sèvres exhibition included vases, bowls and stove tiles decorated in traditional Romanian style with subtle Persian influences, as Focillon noted<sup>40</sup>. The art historian dedicated a laudatory article to Nora, describing her creation both as true to her origins and as a form of worthy Western art: "It has all the peasant charm and all its sensitivity, it also has the ancient style and instinctive youth, finally it is also Western art because of the naturalistic conception, it

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<sup>30</sup> \*\*\*. 1924, May 16. „Mișcarea culturală și artistică”. *Lupta*, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Adrian Maniu. 1924, December 8. „Nora Steriade”. *Cuvântul*, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>33</sup> Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

<sup>34</sup> About Bucur Pottery, see Mădălina-Ioana Manolache. 2023. *Identitate, stil și specific național în arta și industria românească: Muzeul de Artă Națională Prof. Dr. Nicolae Minovici între tradiție și modernitate*, Teză de doctorat. București: Universitatea Națională de Arte din București, p. 193. \*\*\*. 1925, January 14. „Expoziții”. *Adeverul*, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> \*\*\*. 1925, August 18. „Conferința Micei Antante a presei la Sinaia”. *Adeverul*, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Henri Blazian. 1926, January 24. „Plastica femenină”. *Adevărul Literar și Artistic*, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> \*\*\*. 1928, May 11. „O expoziție de ceramică românească la Sèvres”. *Argus*, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> Henri Focillon. 1928, June 22. „Expoziția d-nei Nora I. Steriade la Muzeul Național din Sèvres”. *Rampa*, p. 1.

also has this vitality the spontaneity of stylization and ornamentation"<sup>41</sup>. The French press also depicted the exhibition: "Distributed with taste, the vases, plates, mugs, jugs and pots offer a variety of shapes and decorations in a range of robust colors. The rustic inspiration serves here an intelligent personality whose fidelity to tradition does not exclude personal fantasy. The ensemble, which also includes some very interesting stove tiles and is completed with skillful and highly decorative embroideries, is of agreeable taste"<sup>42</sup>. Both Lechevallier-Chevignard and Metman retained objects for their museums<sup>43</sup>. In 1929, Nora also donated traditional Transylvanian and Moldavian pottery from her personal collection to the Sèvres Museum<sup>44</sup>.

During this time, the Romanian press lamented the inferior state of Romanian decorative arts, despite some private initiatives, such as those of Nora Steriadi or the Troița workshop<sup>45</sup>. The state was criticized for not training specialists in this important field and the lack of acquisitions for museum collections<sup>46</sup>. In this context, the first *Official Salon of Architecture and Decorative Arts* was organized in 1929. In its catalog, we identify two embroideries, one decorated with red flowers, the other with dolphins, two cushions with tulips and autumn flowers, a tissue with a yellow background with blue flowers, two white ceramic vases decorated with blue and three plates in harmonies of yellow and green, blue-yellow and blue-green – that were created by Nora<sup>47</sup>. Figure 7 shows the tissue serving as a background for a cushion with tulips, a vase decorated in relief with an oversized stylized floral motif, as well as a plate painted with flowers in a naive design<sup>48</sup>. Nora was among the award-winning artists, receiving 15,000 lei for her participation<sup>49</sup>. That same year, she exhibited pottery at an exhibition of old Romanian art organized by the National League of Romanian Women in Bucharest<sup>50</sup>. In 1929, she was selected to show her ceramics and embroidery in the decorative arts section of the Romanian Pavilion at the Universal Exhibition in Barcelona<sup>51</sup>.

According to Oprea, Nora exhibited ceramics and embroidery at the 1930 *French Salon of Decorative Arts*<sup>52</sup>. Her presence in 1932 at the *Salon of French Artists* at the Grand Palais is of great interest, as it marked the critically acclaimed result of two years' hard work. Nora had created an embroidery inspired by a fresco from the Horezu Monastery which depicted the XVIII ct. Romanian ruler Constantin Brâncoveanu with his family. Both the design and execution of the large-scale piece (10 ½ by 5 ½ meters) belonged entirely to the artist<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>42</sup> \*\*\*. 1928, May 9. „Une exposition roumaine au Musée de ceramique de Sèvres”. *Le Matin*, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> At Sèvres, of the 15 donated objects, Oprea recorded the existence of 7 pieces in 1981, the rest having been destroyed in the bombings of 1942. Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

<sup>44</sup> G. Haumont. 1930. „Musée ceramique de Sèvres”. *Bulletin des musées de France*, 2 (12): p. 279.

<sup>45</sup> \*\*\*. 1929, April 3. „Ceramică și pictură”, *Epoca*, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> i. v. 1929, May 4. „Salonul Oficial. Arhitectura și arta decorativă”. *Epoca*, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> In 1929, Nora's address was at Strada Renașterii No. 2, Bucharest. Ministerul Artelor. 1929. *Salonul oficial arhitectură artă decorativă*, București: 1929, cat. 276-284, pp. 18, 22.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 39.

<sup>49</sup> \*\*\*. 1929, May 15. „Arhitecți premiați la Salonul Oficial”. *Universul*, p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> *Idem*. 1929, June 23. „Expoziția de artă veche românească”. *Universul*, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> Gh. 1929, October 22. „O vizită în pavilionul român de la Barcelona”. *Cuventul*, p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Her works weren't included in the catalog as they were accepted after the jury had examined the other proposals. Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

<sup>53</sup> The embroidery depicted Brâncoveanu with his sons, Constantin, Ștefan, Radu and Matei on the left, near the Horezu church, and on the right his wife, Doamna Maria, surrounded by the seven daughters. The couple holds the miniature churches of Mogoșoia and Doicești in their hands while the composition is closed on one side and the other by the Archangels Michael and Gabriel. Two smaller characters lay crowns above the family members. \*\*\*. 1932, May 28. „Succesul unei românce la Salon des Artistes français”. *Cuventul*, p. 2; Principesa Bibescu. 1932, September 18. „Nora Steriadi”. *Adevărul literar și artistic*, p. 1.



Fig. 7. *Nora Steriadi's artworks displayed at the Official Salon of Architecture and Decorative Arts, 1929; Ministerul Artelor. 1929. Salonul oficial arhitectură artă decorativă, București: 1929, p. 39.*

Princess Marta Bibescu had commissioned the artwork for the great hall of the Mogoșoaia Palace near Bucharest, which she had recently restored. The Princess, an acclaimed writer, recalled her first meeting with Nora, whom she portrayed as a divinity among clay creatures, as well as the collaboration between the two: "From her works, I had already seen drawings, embroideries, icons, artistic crafted stoves, carpets, animals sculpted from clay, and I had always felt, in these very special works, that somehow *naive, fresh, sincere, scholarly and clumsy at the same time, which is the infallible sign of a popular genius* [my emphasis]. Now I was allowed to meet her. I saw a frail, elegant woman, whose face, always energetic and delicate, bore the seal of those who must create to live (...)"<sup>54</sup>. From this extensive quote, we can also observe how Princess Bibescu contributed to shaping Nora's "popular genius" woman-artist portrait.

### 3.2. Mosaic. The 1935 Solo Show

At the end of 1932, in December, Nora Steriadi integrated a new medium into her artistic approach: the mosaic. For this new chapter of her career, she went to Venice, helped by the architect Luigi Maragoni, restorer of the Basilica of San Marco's mosaics<sup>55</sup>. There, she took lessons from a craftsman in the Giannes brothers' factory, executing the composition *St. George*<sup>56</sup>. At the same time, she created the *Portrait of Constantin Brâncoveanu's* which, alongside *St. George*, re-established the connection with the religious local tradition, as the

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>55</sup> Eleonora Costescu, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>56</sup> Today, the work is applied to the facade of her former home in Sinaia, at Cuza Vodă Street no. 16 (formerly no. 10). Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, pp. 167-169.

writer Adrian Maniu noted<sup>57</sup>. The two artworks were exhibited at the 1933 Paris Salon, the press recording the naive drawing and Nora's merit in refreshing an old art<sup>58</sup>. Regarding the technique, Nora emphasized in her diary the importance of being guided by intuition and of respecting the materials: "In mosaic, you have to know that you have pebbles in your hand. That's why I don't allow painted cardboard, just an outline. The shape of the stone tells itself where it should be placed, the color too"<sup>59</sup>.

After a brief return to Romania, the artist came back to Venice in December 1933 to purchase some materials, during which time she created the compositions *The Family of Paisie Vodă*, *Portrait of Stephen the Great's Wife* and *Radu the Great with his wife, Smărăndița*<sup>60</sup>. In 1934, she created in Bucharest and Sinaia the triptych *The Royal Hunt*, *Madonna* (located at the Maria Stănculeanu tomb in Buzău), *Archangel (The Righteousness of the Law)*, *St. George*, *Stephen the Great with the Lady* (as a pendant to the *Family of Paisie*), *The Annunciation*, *Cocoons* (2 portraits of children after the votive fresco from Ostrov), *Brâncoveanu Family*, *The Bishop*, *Cocoon*, *St. Anne* and *The Paradise* triptych<sup>61</sup>.

The following year, she completed the work on *St. Anthony* and *The Annunciation* (applied on the facade of the church of the Parish House of St. Anthony's Church in Bucharest), *Christ* and *Madonna* (for the Church in Porceni, Gorj County), *Pieta*, *The Annunciation II*, *Cave Canem*, *Virgin Mary* and a *Still Life* after a painting by Theodor Pallady and *Infanta* (portrait of Mica Banu) after a painting of her husband, Jean Al. Steriadi<sup>62</sup>. St. Anthony's Parish House's mosaics were inspired by *St. Anthony* as depicted by Gabriel Millet from Mount Athos and *The Annunciation* fresco from Sucevița Monastery<sup>63</sup>. The execution idea belonged to Nora Steriadi, who, in December 1934, offered to create and mount the venetian mosaic panels for 40.000 lei in term of 5 months after she would receive half of the sum<sup>64</sup>. As we can see, Nora continued to draw inspiration from local sources, such as old church paintings and their votive portraits depicting Romanian rulers and their families, as well as saints and biblical scenes. She also ventured in transposition of works of fine art in mosaic and created personal compositions, such as *The Royal Hunt*, which we will return to.

Another defining moment of the artist's career was the 1935 personal exhibition held at the Dalles Gallery in Bucharest, where the artist displayed embroidery, ceramics and mosaics. The art critic Ionel Jianu stated in his chronicle that Nora Steriade had a great reputation even though her work was known only to a privileged people<sup>65</sup>. Cornelia Emilian welcomed the exhibition of decorative art which went "beyond the ordinary" through a form of art that was "completely personal and of a charming lyricism"<sup>66</sup>. This manifestation summed up "The result of several years of work and research, in the field of embroidery, ceramics and mosaics" wrote another chronicler<sup>67</sup>. Considered by Oprea as the first exhibition of its kind in the country, it had

<sup>57</sup> Adrian Maniu. 1933, May 4. „Mozaicuri românești”. *Universul*, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> \*\*\*. 1933, June 11. „Pictorii români la „Salonul” 1933 din Paris”. *Adevărul Literar și Artistic*, p. 7.

<sup>59</sup> Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 170.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 170-171.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 171.

<sup>63</sup> Ioan Opreș. 1993-1994. „Restaurarea monumentelor din București între 1850 și 1950”. *RMI* 62-63 (1-2): 64-77, p. 73.

<sup>64</sup> *CMI*, Dosar 674 „Biserica Curtea Veche-Sf. Anton, Buna Vestire”, str. Franceză nr. 33, vol. VI, pp. 211, 213-214.

<sup>65</sup> Ionel Jianu. 1935, June 15. „Expoziția d-nei Nora Steriadi la Fundația Dalles”. *Rampa*, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> Cornelia Emilian. 1935, May 30. „Expoziția Doamnei Nora Steriadi”. *Adevărul Literar și Artistic*, p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> B. L. 1935, June 20. „Expoziția d-nei Nora Steriadi”. *Îndreptarea*, pp. 1-2.

a resounding success, as collectors purchased and requested special orders<sup>68</sup>. The press descriptions are very generous and helpful in outlining the image of the event:

The public could see "primitive", "perfectly colored" embroideries, related at the same time to old oriental embroideries<sup>69</sup>. The attention was drawn by a large-scale embroidery on satin support representing flowers, peacocks and Japanese fish<sup>70</sup>. The embroideries were characterized as follows: "bold and bizarre accords of stridently and ostentatiously paired colors, peacocks and salamanders, red roses blushing like fire, yellow peacocks, blue fish and other such digressions"<sup>71</sup>. Among the exhibited embroideries, press articles also mentioned the works *Flowers* (from Queen Marie's collection), *The Yellow Peacock* and *The Red Roses*<sup>72</sup>.

The masterpiece of the genre was unequivocally *The Brâncoveanu Family*, the composition inspired by the Horezu fresco<sup>73</sup>. Jianu appreciated the artwork both for its technical, qualities, coloring and composition „in which the Italianizing elements are united with the Byzantine ones, both characteristic of the Brancovanian style"<sup>74</sup>. Thus, he was connecting Nora's creation to the medieval style from Brâncoveanu's reign. He continued: to praise the „free fantasy that is sometimes manifested in details of an admirable sensitivity"<sup>75</sup>. It is worth remembering that Nora and her contemporaries largely used the term tapestry for her works improperly, as they were, in fact, a type of embroidery, as Costescu showed<sup>76</sup>.

The pottery displayed in 1935, created in Sèvres and Romania, was appreciated for its rich variety of traditional motifs<sup>77</sup>, harmonious proportions and the fineness of the modeling<sup>78</sup>. The exhibit was indeed a generous presentation of her work: plates, vases, cups, stove tiles and birds decorated with floral motifs, religious scenes and allegories<sup>79</sup>. The bird series was appreciated for the "undulations that evoke the suppleness of feathers"<sup>80</sup>. At the same time, the evolution from the so-called "interpreted copies" of the Oltenian plates to the "delicate Sèvres vases" could be traced<sup>81</sup>.

As for mosaic, the creator's contribution to the old technique's revitalization continued to be emphasized<sup>82</sup>. Jianu's description of the triptych *The Royal Hunt* is of great interest for highlighting the character of so-called Romanian specificity: "From the water that runs through the middle of the scene, golden, reddish fish with scalloped scales rise. Squirrels fearfully climb trees, wild boars – with what deliciously primitive details, these wild boars are treated! – run through the forests, deer raise their heads, sniffing the sound of hooves, and the entire forest senses the hunt that is about to begin. The scene is described with a humor and sensitivity that recalls Peter Breughel the Elder. But it has a local character, a specificity that shows that it

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<sup>68</sup> Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

<sup>69</sup> B. L., *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>70</sup> N. I. Lazăr-Nyl, 1935, June 7. „Expoziția d-nei Nora Steriadi”. *Neamul Românesc*, p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> A. Mihai, 1935, June 14. „Expoziția d-nei Nora Steriadi de la Sala Dalles”. *Gazeta*, p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> \*\*\*. 1935, July 3. „Expoziția Nora Steriadi”. *Ilustrațiunea Română*, p. 9.

<sup>73</sup> N. I. Lazăr-Nyl, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> Ionel Jianu, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>76</sup> Eleonora Costescu, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>77</sup> A. Mihai, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> Ionel Jianu *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>79</sup> A. Mihai, *pp. cit.*, p. 3

<sup>80</sup> Cornelia Emilian, *op. cit.*, p. 3

<sup>81</sup> B. L., *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>82</sup> N. I. Lazăr-Nyl, *op. cit.*, p. 3; Adrian Maniu, 1935, June 9. „Icoane de pietricele”. *Universul*, p. 3.

belongs to our forests, our past, our legends"<sup>83</sup>.

Finally, Jianu appreciated the fact that Nora inaugurated a "Romanian tapestry", reviving at the same time the ancient art of mosaic<sup>84</sup>. Another chronicler pointed out Nora's merit in having managed to express herself in "art genres that have not yet succeeded in making proselytes in our country"<sup>85</sup>. A critic condemned the superficial treatment of the pottery, stating that Nora's experimentations led to "hybrid and unaesthetic combinations of tones and colors" and "a mixture of Oltenian motifs with Persian influences" that was wrongfully consecrated by the art critic as national ceramic<sup>86</sup>. In turn, writer Eugen Crăciun appraised the works of Nora Steriadi as more than imitations of old models, as the artist knew how "to make personal artworks by resurrecting motifs from another time, with means that are her own"<sup>87</sup>.

We end the chapter dedicated to the 1935 personal exhibition with a remark made by a female writer: "And in the middle of this formidable work for which a man should have several lives, stands, thin, frail, almost immaterial, a woman, Nora Steriadi, the illuminated"<sup>88</sup>. In conclusion, the critical reception of the 1935 personal exhibition consecrated Nora's image as an artist who manifested a national specificity in a modern way through her own sensitivity and approach, through fantasy and imagination, drawing inspiration from the local culture of folklore (ceramics, legends, myths) and religious art (church painting, icons on glass).

### 3.3. Romanian, International and Universal Exhibitions. The Last Years of Activity

This manifestation of great proportions opened the artist's path to participate at the most important group exhibitions in Romania. Thus, in 1936, Nora exhibited mosaics at *The Artistic Youth*<sup>89</sup>. More importantly, the year 1937 marked the completion of another project: the mosaics representing the fairy tale of *Ileana Cosânzeana* and the triptych *Paradise* for the side facades of the Romanian Pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition, designed by architect Duiliu Marcu<sup>90</sup>. The artist was awarded the Grand Prize for the Marble, Ceramics and Mosaic category<sup>91</sup>. The next year, Nora exhibited again mosaics at *The Artistic Youth*<sup>92</sup>, and for two years, she began work on the *Octavian Goga Mausoleum* mosaic, which was commissioned by his wife, Veturia Goga, who gave up the collaboration due to the high cost<sup>93</sup>.

For Romania's participation in the 1939 World's Fair in New York, architect Doicescu built a Romanian House decorated with traditional motifs to illustrate how the modern artist can

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<sup>83</sup> Ionel Jianu, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>85</sup> A. Mihai, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>87</sup> Eugen Crăciun. 1936, January 3. „Plastica în 1935”. *Adevărul*, p. 19.

<sup>88</sup> Fulmen. 1935, June 17. „Note de Artă”. *Dimineața*, p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> Take Nicolceanu. 1936, May 18. „Tinerimea Artistică”. *Românul*, p. 2.

<sup>90</sup> Other sources also mentioned *The Royal Hunt*, *The Righteousness of the Law* and other princely figures. Ionel Jianu. 1937, September 16. „Plastica română la Expoziția din Paris”. *Rampa*, p. 4; \*\*\*. 1937. „Revista revistelor”. *Revista Fundațiilor Regale*, 4 (9): 716-718, p. 716; S. Alex. 1937, August 25. „Folklorul românesc la expoziția internațională din Paris”. *Timpu*, p. 3; \*\*\*. 1938, March 5. „Arta mozaicului”. *Cuvântul*, p. 2; Costescu, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>91</sup> \*\*\*. 1939, January 29. „Recompensele obținute de pictorii și sculptorii români la expoziția internațională din Paris din 1937”. *Universul*, p. 5.

<sup>92</sup> Ionel Jianu. 1938, April 24. „Cronica Plastică”. *Rampa*, p. 10.

<sup>93</sup> V. Goga purchased the Last Supper mosaic from Steriadi for the sum of 250,000 lei. Ecaterina Oproiu. 1973, November 16. „Condiția femeii”. *Contemporanul*, p. 8.

use the local cultural heritage in a modern way<sup>94</sup>. Nora's *Brâncoveanu Family* mosaic was displayed in the Romanian House living room's<sup>95</sup>. Made in the tradition of the Byzantine style, in gold, turquoise, bronze, ruby red and black, it was later donated to the University of Pittsburgh<sup>96</sup>. She also exhibited *Prahova Valley in Winter*<sup>97</sup>. The same year was present at *The Artistic Youth* manifestation<sup>98</sup>.

After previous editions had given priority to architecture, the Milan Triennale of Decorative Arts in 1940 focused on applied arts inspired by tradition under the theme of the art of serving the table and the arrangement of the dining room. The Romanian section was organized by the art historian Alexandru Busuioceanu and focused on decorative arts inspired by folk art<sup>99</sup>. Nora exhibited embroideries, including the *Brâncoveanu Family*, as well as ceramics in a dining room designed by O. Doicescu, furnished with modern furniture inspired by the old forms of the so-called Brancovanian style of the 18th century<sup>100</sup>. The Romanian exhibition was awarded Grand Prize<sup>101</sup> and Nora Steriadi the Grand Prize for embroideries and a Gold Medal for ceramics<sup>102</sup>. At the same time, in 1940, the Romanian state awarded her the Second Class Medal - Order of Cultural Merit for Art<sup>103</sup>.

The mosaic exhibited by the artist at the Romanian *Official Salon of Painting and Sculpture* in 1943 was hailed by the artist Lucia Dem. Bălăcescu for its "primitive, admirable sense directly related to our icons and country carpets"<sup>104</sup>. Her work continued to be critically perceived in continuation with traditional culture, in the programmatic attempt of Romanian intellectuals to determine the specificity of modern artists' creation. Dem. Bălăcescu also noted that Nora was the first modern Romanian creator to use mosaic and that was more appreciated abroad than in the country, where she wasn't receiving orders<sup>105</sup>. Chronicler Petru Comarnescu also saw in *Inferno* she exhibited a representation based on local folklore: "The work at the Salon is in line with the more hieratic and symbolic imagination and beliefs of Romanian spirituality"<sup>106</sup>. At the same time, Nora also used the technique to create portraits, such as the portrait of a certain Mrs. Bilianu<sup>107</sup>.

Of particular importance was the initiative of architect Petre Antonescu, who founded the *Salon of Decorative Arts* in 1943 to encourage production of Romanian decorative art and to help tying relations between creators, state authorities and public<sup>108</sup>. Unfortunately, the connection of modern artists with local traditional arts and techniques was poorly represented,

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<sup>94</sup> Al. Bădăuță. 1939, July 5. „Arta românească în America”. *România*, p. 2.

<sup>95</sup> \*\*\*. 1939, June 21. „Interior în Casa Românească de la Expoziția Internațională New-York”. *Curentul*, p. 7; Olga Greceanu. 1939, July 19. „Expoziția de la New-York Pavilionul și Casa României”. *Universul*, p. 5.

<sup>96</sup> Ruth Crawford Mitchells. 1944. *The Romanian Classroom in the Cathedral of Learning*. Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, pp. 6-7.

<sup>97</sup> Eleonora Costescu, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>98</sup> \*\*\*. 1939, April 4. „A 39-a expoziție a societății Tinerimea Artistică”. *România*, p. 12.

<sup>99</sup> Apriliana Medianu. 1940, April 4. „D. Prof Al. Busuioceanu ne vorbește despre participarea României la Expoziția Triennale din Milano”. *România*, p. 4.

<sup>100</sup> \*\*\*. 1940, April 10. „Cum se prezintă Pavilionul României la Expoziția Triennale de la Milano”. *România*, p. 15.

<sup>101</sup> *Idem*. 1940, June 27. „România distinsă cu Marele Premiu la Expoziția Triennale de la Milano”. *Capitala*, p. 3.

<sup>102</sup> *Idem*. 1940, June 24. „România a obținut marele premiu la expoziția trienală de la Milano”. *Argus*, p. 5.

<sup>103</sup> *Monitorul Oficial*, Partea 1, 108 (131): p. 115.

<sup>104</sup> Lucia Dem. Bălăcescu. 1943, May 20. „Salonul Oficial II”. *Universul Literar*, p. 3.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>106</sup> Petru Comarnescu. 1943, May 25. „Pictura Salonului Oficial”, *Viața*, p. 2.

<sup>107</sup> Lucia Dem. Bălăcescu, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>108</sup> \*\*\*. 1942, June 20. „Organizarea Salonului de Arte Decorative la Ateneul Român”. *Curentul*, p. 6.



while education in decorative arts was at a mediocre level<sup>109</sup>. Nora Steriadi exhibited within the icons section, respectively pottery and ceramics section<sup>110</sup> while her participation was considered *hors concours* by the jury<sup>111</sup>. Her presence at the Salon seemed therefore rather honorary, as an example to follow for young creators.

In 1943, when a church was built in the village of Porceni, Gorj, Nora contributed with a couple of mosaics<sup>112</sup>. The *Official Salon of Painting and Sculpture* of 1944, where she presented the mosaic *The Burial of Jesus*, symbolically marked one of Nora's last public appearances<sup>113</sup>. The monumental artwork was made in an "archaic style, according to our artistic tradition", through a "severe, even harsh, with deliberate naivety", colored "soberly, reduced to a few tones, in which, however, the brilliance inherent in the mosaic brings a festive touch" according to Oprescu<sup>114</sup>.

A year before her disappearance, in 1947, Nora was decorated with the Second Class Order of Cultural Merit in the rank of officer<sup>115</sup>. The press did not record the artist's death or funeral, and only a few people reminded of her passing away<sup>116</sup>. Thus, for a long time, the only thing we knew about her death was the year it happened: 1948. In my recent research I have found that she chose cremation<sup>117</sup> and, following the investigation into the cremation registers, it appears that Steriade Eleonora was cremated at the Cenușa Crematorium in Bucharest on March 29, 1948<sup>118</sup>.

#### **4. Chapter Three. Critical Reception of Nora Steriadi's work, Self-Representation and Current Lack of Interest**

This chapter presents an analysis of Nora Steriadi's artwork's critical reception during her lifetime. In the second part, I have also addressed the current lack of interest for this artist and its main causes.

##### **4.1. Critical Reception**

As we have already seen, notable figures have written about Nora Steriadi's work, such as the historians and art critics Henri Focillon or George Oprescu, as well as artists like Ștefan Popescu or Lucia Dem. Bălăcescu. The presentation of Nora's exhibition activity has already introduced us to the main interpretation keys in which her art was received at the time through concepts such as the naive, primitive, archaic and even popular character of her works. These

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<sup>109</sup> Petru Comarnescu. 1943, November 16. „Salonul de artă decorativă”, *Viața*, p. 2.

<sup>110</sup> Interim. 1943, November 27. „Salonul de arte decorative”. *Universul*, p. 7.

<sup>111</sup> Petre Comarnescu, *op. cit.*, p. 2; \*\*\*. 1943, November 18. „Concururile de arte decorative ale Ateneului Român”. *Curentul*, p. 2.

<sup>112</sup> \*\*\*. 1943, December 24. „Pentru biserica din Porceni”. *Universul*, p. 4.

<sup>113</sup> Nora's address at that time was Str. Prof. Dr. Sion, 2, at the Kalinderu Museum. Ministerul Național al Culturii și al Cultelor. 1944. *Salonul oficial de pictură și sculptură*. București: Fundația Dalles, pp. 27, 45, cat. 247.

<sup>114</sup> George Oprescu. 1944, June 1. „Salonul Oficial IV”. *Universul*, p. 3.

<sup>115</sup> \*\*\*. 1947, August 21. „Scriitori, artiști și ziariști decorați cu «Meritul Cultural»”. *Ultima Oră*, p. 3.

<sup>116</sup> George Oprescu. 1948, May 13. „Nora Steriadi”. *Universul*, p. 2; Eugen Crăciun. 1948, 31 March. „Trei morți”. *Semnalul*, p. 1.

<sup>117</sup> Marius Rotar, 2011. *Eternitate prin cenușă. O istorie a crematoriilor și incinerărilor umane în România secolelor XIX-XXI*. Iași: Institutul European, p. 614.

<sup>118</sup> Her daughter, Steriade Mia (Maria) was also cremated, on 14.09.1977, based on cremation certificates no. 2266 and no. 1107. *CGMB, ACCU*, Act. 4016/07.05.2025.

characteristics were in turn generated by the so-called lack of artistic education in a specialized institution, as we will see in this chapter. Thus, she was creating art according to her own inspiration and fantasy, in a free manner. At the same time, this model of creativity corresponded to Romanian folk craftsmanship, thus Nora was maintaining a vivid connection with the authentic national art. Along with the close connection with the folk art, Nora Steriadi's work was appreciated for the revival of old techniques such as embroidery, pottery and mosaic and its link with medieval art. Nevertheless, the art critics reiterated the importance of her activity within the field of decorative and applied arts. Further, we will explore these concepts, by analyzing the critical reception of Nora's artistic production during her lifetime.

Regarding her contribution in the field of Romanian decorative and applied arts, George Oprescu saw Nora Steriadi as endowed with a strong personality both in execution and achievement<sup>119</sup>. Costescu drew attention to the fact that she was the first Romanian artist to dedicate entirely to art forms considered until then as simple artisanal activities<sup>120</sup>. In addition, Minulescu emphasized that Nora was responsible for introducing the mosaic technique in the modern period in our country, thus paving the way for its use by artists such as Nina Arbore, Milița Pătrașcu, Olga Greceanu<sup>121</sup>.

We have already noted that numerous international voices have welcomed the creative expressions that Nora gave shape to, as the artist was known and appreciated abroad more than in her country<sup>122</sup>. Likewise, Léon Thévenin praised her dedication to research, as well as her imagination and fantasy of forms and colors<sup>123</sup>. Nevertheless, the artist André Villeboeuf saw in the "admirable" artist's mosaics the most beautiful achievements in Europe at that time along with those of the Italian artist Gino Severini<sup>124</sup>.

A leitmotif found in the writings dedicated to Nora was the primitive character of her work, generated by the lack of institutional artistic education. On the occasion of her personal exhibition in 1935, the painter Ștefan Popescu praised the artist's "temperament which without school or apprenticeship came shining to light" and "the sure instinct that guides her and prevents her from making gross mistakes of taste, as you often find in those whose artistic sense was deformed by the bad schools they followed"<sup>125</sup>. Popescu exaggerated the primitive and intuitive character of her creation, similar to Romanian folk art, characterized as imperfect and clumsy. French art historian Léon Thévenin and Lucia Dem. Bălăcescu reiterated the self-taught dimension of her enterprise in 1935 and 1943<sup>126</sup> and a chronicler characterized her works as primitive in colors and tones<sup>127</sup>. The artist was perceived as being endowed "with a rich imagination", "creative power" and a "spontaneous expression of an intense sensitivity"<sup>128</sup> which in turn generated her creations. For Mioara Minulescu, "Nora's art was popular" bearing "a poetic soul, a delightful color and rustic design"<sup>129</sup>. She was also perceived as a continuator in

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<sup>119</sup> George Oprescu. 1935. *Roumanian Art From 1800 to our days*. Malmö: Landy & Laundgrens Bocktryckeri, p. 54.

<sup>120</sup> Eleonora Costescu, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>121</sup> Mioara Minulescu. 1947. „Despre mozaic pretutindeni și la noi”. *Almanahul Femeii*, p. 178.

<sup>122</sup> George Oprescu. „Nora Steriadi”, p. 2.

<sup>123</sup> Léon Thévenin, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>124</sup> André Villeboeuf. 1938. „L' Art Roumain”. *Arta și tehnică grafică*, 4-5 (1): 161-162, p. 162.

<sup>125</sup> Ștefan Popescu. 1935, July-August. „Cronica artistică”. *Viața Românească*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>126</sup> Léon Thévenin. 1935, June 12. „Nora Steriadi”. *L'Indépendance Roumaine*, pp. 1-2; Lucia Dem. Bălăcescu, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>127</sup> B. L., *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>128</sup> Cornelia Emilian, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>129</sup> Mioara Minulescu. 1948, April 12. „Nora”. *Universul*, p. 7.

the field of Romanian religious art, as her works depicted saints, which, however, went beyond archaism by "interpreting them" with a more contemporary, "lyrical" spirit<sup>130</sup>.

We have already seen, however, that Nora had contact with both the Romanian school of art, as well as with the Parisian one, although she did not complete her studies. Moreover, she was married to Jean Steriadi, an exponent of the Romanian school of painting, who became a museum director and professor at the School of Fine Arts in Bucharest<sup>131</sup>. The fine arts were therefore not foreign to her. At the same time, she did not only research folk art, but also created a collection of Oltenian and Moldavian pottery, as she recounted herself: "I collected dishes, I looked for them in the most remote villages in Gorj County, going from house to house"<sup>132</sup>. Some of these were exhibited in the former Toma Stelian Museum; a section dedicated to Romanian art, her embroidery and ceramics, which she donated were also displayed<sup>133</sup>.

Even Nora's speech was a cultured one, as evidenced by the analysis carried out on the previously mentioned peasant apron, in which she used terms such as stylization, light contrast and composition: "I would never have thought that seeing it, I would have the same thrill that I felt in front of *true works of art* [my emphasis]. How did the peasant woman know how to stylize, how did she know about the light contrast? How did she not make any compositional mistakes?"<sup>134</sup>. We can also see that she judged the apron as if it was a true work of art. In addition, in her reflections on art and pottery, Nora considered that not every object could be a work of art and that the desire to bring new forms could create damage as pottery "demands a unity and respect for its material"<sup>135</sup>.

## 4.2. Self-Representation

Let us look further at Nora's self-representative discourse, analyzing her writings and those dedicated to her. We have already seen that certain elements of her artistic biography can be viewed from a feminist perspective, a method scarcely explored by art criticism. Her work can be viewed from feminist positions, through the genre of embroidery, practiced by her at the beginning of her career, as well as through the association with women painters, which cannot be viewed as a simple coincidence. We also recall the fact that Ecaterina Raicoviceanu, under the pseudonym Fulmen, mentioned in 1935 that Nora liked to call herself "the housewife"<sup>136</sup>.

The dimension occupied by the religious element of her work should not be overlooked. In this context, it is worth mentioning that in 1938 Nora published an article about the *Oxford Group*, which she characterized as "a spiritual movement whose primary goal is the creation of a general human peace based on the most real principles: «On the Doctrine of Christ»"<sup>137</sup>. The artist also wrote, on another occasion, that "The great artists were the inspired ones, they allowed themselves to be guided by the divine spirit without resisting it, listening to the inner voice ...

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<sup>130</sup> Cornelia Emilian, *op. cit.*, p. 3; \*\*\*. 1938, March 5. „Arta mozaicului”. *Cuvântul*, p. 2.

<sup>131</sup> Călin Dan. 1988. *Jean Al. Steriadi*, București: Editura Meridiane, pp. 18, 24, 27, 34.

<sup>132</sup> Nora Steriade, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>133</sup> G. S. 1938, February 14. „Muzeul Toma Stelian”. *Cuventul*, p. 10; Peasant rugs and vases from the Steriadi family collection are reproduced in George Oprescu, Henri Focillon. 1937. *L'Art du paysan roumain*. Bucharest: Académie Roumaine, pl. XCIII, CVI, CXVII, CXXXI, CLII-CLIX, CLXV.

<sup>134</sup> Nora Steriade, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>135</sup> *Idem*. 1939, May 15. „Istoricul și arta ceramicii”, *Timpul*, p. 6.

<sup>136</sup> Fulmen, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>137</sup> Nora Steriadi. 1938 October 24. „Oxford Group”. *Timpul*, p. 5.

They are the ones who understand the teaching of the Gospel: «While you have the light among you, believe in the light, so that you may be sons of light»<sup>138</sup>.

Furthermore, speaking about the *Brâncoveanu Family* embroidery, she evoked her creative process as follows: "Working, I felt as if driven by something unseen, I worked humbly but a force supported me. And I finished it as no one believed I would. It was a power that few people know, rather simple people and children can work under that holy command, they are not yet darkened by imposed knowledge and are ready to execute an inspiration without hesitation"<sup>139</sup>. Thus, the creative process meant for Nora a sort of a divine guiding, an inspiring force that could only be felt and used by the "simple people" and children, by those who were not perverted. Who were these simple people? The peasants who were creating a folk art without being artistically trained, by carrying out a tradition, under the impulse of their own imagination. Once again, Nora participated in shaping her link to the masses.

In her notes from 1936, as published by Oprea, the artist wrote that she wanted to create "a modern work in mosaic", characterizing herself as "the first *impressionist* in this art"; she also declared "I am a *modern, an impressionist*"<sup>140</sup> (my emphasis). The statement is surprising in the context in which her entire art was perceived under entirely different concepts, as we have seen so far. Let's not forget that her husband was appreciated for his impressionist paintings<sup>141</sup>. What did the artist mean by calling herself an impressionist? As we know, she wasn't painting at the time – or ever – but created mosaics. Maybe she was referring to the way she simplified shapes and abandoned volumes, creating two-dimensional images with the help of colored stones which resembled the visible brushstrokes of the impressionists.

All these perspectives we have explored so far have served in creating Nora Steriadi's profile as a modern Romanian artist, whose mission was to represent the national soul through artistic creations, in consensus with the spirit of the era<sup>142</sup>. These appear in both local and foreign criticism, while Nora has also actively participated in this endeavor.

### 4.3. Causes of the Lack of Interest and Their Implications

Among the causes that determined the recent lack of interest in Nora Steriadi's art, we mention, first of all, the disappearance of some works that were stored in the former Kalinderu Museum in Bucharest (where the Steriadi couple lived), during the World War II bombing, as well as the precarious state of conservation in which the surviving cultural assets are kept<sup>143</sup>. Secondly, this situation is generated by the insufficient knowledge of private and even museum collections as well as the general disinterest in Romanian decorative arts history. A possible solution may be the long-term process of classifying cultural assets in the legal categories of Fond or Treasury.

As a result, an honest assessment, carried out from critical positions, of Nora Steriadi's lifetime work is a difficult undertaking to achieve at this time, partly due to the fact that many of her works were lost and those that survive are insufficiently known, presented or valued by

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<sup>138</sup> *Idem*, „Inspirații”, p. 6.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>140</sup> Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>141</sup> Călin Dan, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>142</sup> Mădălina-Ioana Manolache, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-151.

<sup>143</sup> Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

specialists. A mapping of the collections in which the artist's works are kept remains to be carried out, as it is an undertaking that requires the work of several museum workers. A series of mosaics created by Nora Steriadi were preserved in the 1960s in the garden of the former Barbu Slătineanu Museum of Comparative Art on Dr. Obedenaru Street no. 3, having been donated by her husband in 1956<sup>144</sup>. These were later transferred to Bucharest City History Museum (the current Bucharest Municipality Museum)<sup>145</sup>, but today they are no longer kept in its collections<sup>146</sup>.

## 5. Conclusions

Despite the fact that Nora Steriadi was one of the most important Romanian female artists who worked in the field of decorative arts since the second decade of the 20th century, both in the country and abroad, today she remains an almost forgotten artist. The information related to her personal life was presented briefly and in some cases, even wrongly. For example, in this paper, we were able to correct an essential information regarding the date and place of her birth, incorrectly communicated by the two authors who dealt with her biography, Petre Oprea and Eleonora Costescu. Therefore, Eleonora Condruș was born on October 16, 1882 in the city of Târgu Jiu, as the daughter of the veterinarian Mihail Condruș and Sevastița, née Cartianu. Moreover, another contribution of this paper related to important data of Nora's life is the bringing to light an overlooked detail about her passing away. Nora Steriadi chose to be cremated at the Cenușa Crematorium in Bucharest. The event took place on March 29, 1948. Therefore, her death probably occurred around March 26, an aspect that has not been recorded so far in the bibliography that I have consulted. At her death, the artist seems to have already been withdrawn and forgotten, despite her prolific activity.

Even the information related to her artistic training was contradictory in the literature that I have listed, and this aspect remains to be investigated in the future. It is notable that Nora fueled the myth generated around her persona, as well as her formative and creative process, declaring that her first and only decorative art teacher was a peasant. The idea was taken up at the time by numerous authors, who attributed her creation, perceived as primitive, archaic and popular, to lack of artistic education. The aspect was a positive one, helping to include her art in the country's identity program. However, even if her studies in an artistic education institution were not completed, they took place, even for a short period, both in the country and abroad. Labeled as self-taught, Nora actually learned the pottery technique from a Moldavian craftsman, as she stated, and that of mosaic at a factory in Venice. Of course, the artist campaigned for an art guided by her own fantasy and not pure technique. In addition, her husband was an important Romanian painter, museum director and professor at the Bucharest School of Arts. As well, her speech was a cultured one, as Nora Steriadi was, in fact, a cult artist who claimed her creation from the common people.

The broadest aspect of the paper was given by the interest in revisiting Steriadi's entire exhibition activity, based on the literature mentioned in the introduction and methodology. If details related to her artistic approach were also offered by Oprea, this was done without

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<sup>144</sup> Petru Comarnescu, 1967, August 30. „Necesitatea picturilor murale istorice”. *Informația Bucureștiului*, pp. 1-2; Eleonora Costescu, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>145</sup> Petre Oprea, *op. cit.*, pp. 167, 171, 175.

<sup>146</sup> As my colleague Ortansa Constatin, Head of the Patrimony Department informed me.

references to a bibliography. In contrast, my work was supported by the research of press articles and exhibition catalogs. The presentation of her national and international, personal and group exhibitions, had the role of configuring a comprehensive portrait of Nora Steriadi, by exploring the techniques she preferred: pottery, embroidery and mosaic. At the same time, I tried to recall as many of her works as possible, in order to outline her portfolio and to bring them back to the attention of researchers, in the desire to create a working tool for the future study of her activity.

Her debut was linked to a specific female art: embroidery, Nora also taking part in the exhibitions of female artists. Through this approach, the artist wanted to highlight the role of women in the arts that she called "practical". Decorated with flowers and fantastic animals, in strong colors, her embroideries were appreciated by art critics and the press. The artist created models for pillows, tablecloths or curtains, which belong more to applied art. At the same time, she also created monumental works of decorative art, with a modern breath and inspired by religious paintings and icons or votive portraits, such as the masterpiece *The Brâncoveanu Family*.

Further, Nora chose to dedicate herself to ceramics, drawing inspiration from the forms and ornamentation of Romanian folk art, particularly preferring Oltenian and Moldavian pottery. Her approach was also inclined towards an exercise of collecting and research, for a deep understanding of the artistic technique. As was the case with the fabrics with oriental influences, reminiscences of Persian art could also be identified in her pottery, although it was nevertheless perceived as a specifically Romanian modern art. This creative stage also marked the reception of her art as specifically national. More than simple copies of traditional pottery, her works demonstrated a unique fantasy, while also having a modern touch.

In the field of mosaic, Nora focused on large-scale works, suitable for interior and exterior architecture, drawing even more inspiration from local history, legends and mural paintings depicting the ancient rulers of the Romanian Countries and their families. The artist also produced images of saints, transposed works of fine art into mosaics and created her own compositions, such as *The Royal Hunt* or portraits.

At the same time, Nora Steriadi's career helps us to follow and understand the situation of the decorative artist in Romania from the beginning of the 20th century to the interwar period, along with the more or less official efforts that attempted to create a link between the state, public and creators. The emergence of the *Official Salon of Architecture and Decorative Art* in 1929 and the *Salon of Decorative Art* in 1943 offered artists the chance to exhibit their works to a wide audience, in the hope of attracting both commissions and the attention of the state on the importance of applied arts for culture and the economy. If Nora was appreciated and awarded at her first participation in 1929, and in 1943 her contribution was seen as *hors concours*, the general situation was somewhat ominous. Creating a decorative art that would be representative of the program of modern national culture represented a difficulty for most. Maintaining a relationship with ancient forms of art, both secular and religious, was difficult to accomplish.

At the same time, the decorative arts were not fully appreciated or understood in the country. For example, Nora was considered a simple embroiderer and ceramist, while in 1928, at Sèvres she was finally appreciated as an artist, as she identified herself. Her main problems seemed to be financial. Pottery, a difficult and expensive technique, requiring materials and a workshop equipped with special kilns for firing, proved to be an financially unsatisfying endeavor, so much so that the banker Aristide Blank rapidly withdrew his support. In the field of mosaic, the artist distinguished herself by creating panels for the Romanian Pavilion at the 1937

Paris Exhibition, while the order for the mosaic that would decorate the *Octavian Goga Mausoleum* was abandoned due to high costs. It seems that Nora Steriadi received few orders, but this subject is worth exploring in more depth in the future.

Despite the generally weak development of decorative arts in our country, Nora Steriadi stood out through her exhibitions, organized both in the country and abroad. Two of her personal shows took place in France, in Paris and Sèvres, where her works attracted the attention of personalities such as Henri Focillon, Louis Metman and Georges Lechevallier-Chevignard. Nora also exhibited at the Parisian salons and at the 1937 International Exhibition, which brought her a Grand Prize. In 1929, the artist displayed ceramics and embroidery at the Universal Exhibition in Barcelona, and in 1939, embroidery and mosaic at the Universal Exhibition in New York. Her participation in the Milan Triennale of Decorative Arts in 1940 was awarded the Grand Prize for embroideries and the Gold Medal for ceramics. Among the causes that determined the lack of interest in Nora Steriadi, we identified the disappearance of her artworks and the poor state of conservation in which they are kept in some collections, as well as the lack of interest in the history of decorative arts in the country.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my colleagues from Bucharest Municipality Museum, Silvia Iordache, head of the Urban Anthropology Department, Ortansa Constatin, head of the Patrimony Department and Ana Iacob, museographer, from the Photographs, Postcards and Photographic Clichés Collection for helping and supporting me conducting this research. I would also like to thank the personal of the Administration of Cemeteries and Human Crematoriums, Director Emil Iana, Alin Stănculescu, coordinator of Communication and Information Compartment and Insp. Sp. Mirela Ionescu for their openness and help in locating the cremation certificates of Nora and Mia Steriadi.

### **6. References**

#### **• Abbreviations**

- *ANSJB* = Arhivele Naționale - Serviciul Județean Brăila.
- *ANSJG* = Arhivele Naționale - Serviciul Județean Gorj.
- *CGMB, ACCU* = Consiliul General al Municipiului București, Administrația Cimitirelor și Crematoriilor umane.
- *CMI* = Comisiunea Monumentelor Istorice.

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- *ANSJG*, Colecția Registre de stare civilă Târgu-Jiu, Registrul pentru nașcuți, 1882.
- *CGMB*, *Administrația Cimitirelor și Crematoriilor umane*, Act. 4016/07.05.2025.
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