

Feminine Visual Motifs in the Romani an Art Scene at the Turn of the 20th Century: A National Visual Repertoire in a European Context

Miruna CĂRĂUȘU¹

Abstract: *The early 20th century marked a period of profound social, cultural, and artistic transformation in Romania, characterized by an accelerated process of modernization and alignment with Western values. In this context, art became not only a means of aesthetic expression but also a tool for reflecting on and reinterpreting emerging social dynamics. One of the essential aspects of this period was the redefinition of women's status, both in society and in artistic representations. Femininity, as a visual theme, occupies a central place in the work of Romanian artists at the beginning of the 20th century, being explored in a variety of guises—from classical and symbolist idealization to more intimate, everyday, or even introspective representations. Women are present both as objects of aesthetic contemplation and as bearers of cultural, social, and symbolic meanings. At the same time, this period also marks the beginnings of women's emergence as creative subjects, with the appearance of the first female artists who managed to carve out a place for themselves in a predominantly male artistic medium, contributing to the diversification of visual perspectives on femininity.*

Keywords: *art; femininity; cultural significance the artistic community;*

Introduction

Against the backdrop of European artistic influences – such as Impressionism, Symbolism, and Art Nouveau – Romanian artists developed their own visual language, in which the female figure became a fertile ground for stylistic and conceptual experimentation. Thus, depictions of women are not merely expressions of beauty or grace, but reflect the tensions between tradition and modernity, between conventional social roles and the new aspirations of the modern woman.

This study aims to analyze the visual dimensions of femininity in early 20th-century Romanian art, examining both how women are depicted in the works of artists such as Nicolae Grigorescu, Ștefan Luchian, and Theodor Pallady, as well as the contribution of female artists such as Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck to redefining the female image. Furthermore, the study aims to highlight the symbols, typologies, and stylistic transformations that shape a complex and nuanced image of femininity during this period. The idea of investigating how the feminine is represented visually and conceptually becomes the central focus of this research.

The extensive cultural alignment with the West, particularly with France, which exerted a major influence on the artistic and intellectual milieu, made this period one characterized by a creative effervescence driven by Romanian artists' direct contact with major European centers, such as Paris, where numerous painters completed their studies and shaped their artistic vision. Thus, Romanian art began to integrate and adapt movements such as Impressionism, Symbolism, and Art Nouveau, generating a hybrid visual language situated between tradition and modernity.

¹ Danube University, Faculty of Arts, miruna.carusu@ugal.ro.

1. Cultural and artistic context

Specialized educational institutions, such as the National School of Fine Arts in Bucharest and the one in Iași, played an essential role in shaping this artistic landscape, contributing to the professionalization of art and the training of a new generation of artists. However, women's access to these institutions was initially limited, reflecting the conservative attitudes of Romanian society at the time. On a social level, however, the early 20th century also marked the first signs of women's emancipation. Increased access to education, the emergence of publications dedicated to women, and their involvement in cultural and intellectual life contributed to redefining women's status. These transformations are gradually reflected in art as well, where the female figure begins to be represented not only as a passive object of contemplation, but also as an active subject, with her own identity and inner life.

Stylistically, Romanian artists of the period drew on a variety of influences, which they adapted to local characteristics. For example, Ștefan Luchian's works display a chromatic sensibility akin to Impressionism, combined with profound emotional expressiveness, while Theodor Pallady developed a refined aesthetic, influenced by the Parisian art scene, in which interiors and the female figure take on an intimate and contemplative dimension. Likewise, the artistic legacy of Nicolae Grigorescu continues to influence depictions of women, particularly regarding the theme of the rural woman, associated with authenticity and national identity.

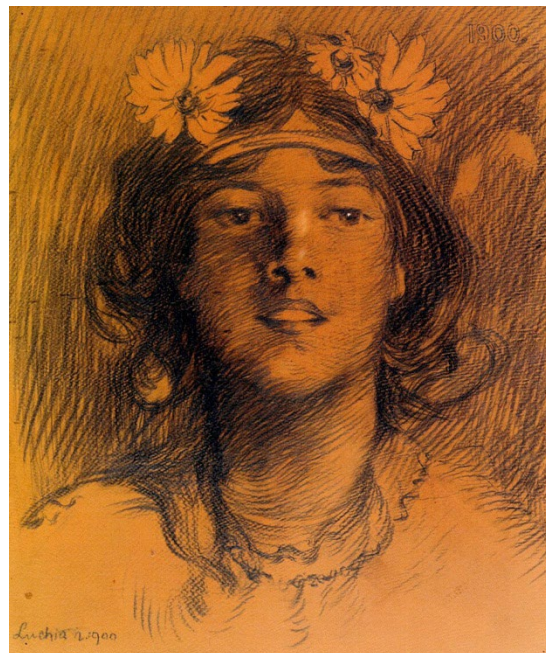


Fig. 1. Drawing by Ștefan Luchian ²

The image of women thus takes on multiple dimensions, forming a diverse typology situated at the intersection of tradition and modernity. One of the most enduring portrayals is that of the idealized woman, constructed in accordance with classical aesthetic canons and Symbolist influences. In this representation, the woman is associated with beauty, harmony, and grace,

² Ștefan Luchian.jpg, Retrieved May 5, 2026, from https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fi%C8%99ier:Ștefan_Luchian_luchian_young_woman_cover_illustration_for_Ileana_magazine.jpg

often depicted in elegant poses, with a certain distance from everyday reality. Theodor Pallady's works are relevant in this regard, through their compositional refinement and intimate atmosphere, in which the female figure becomes an element of visual balance and contemplation. The woman is no longer merely a model, but a symbol of a sophisticated inner world, suggested through discreet gestures and subtle color. In Pallady's painting, for example, the objects surrounding the female figure (furniture, textiles, mirrors) contribute to creating an atmosphere of introspection and suggesting a complex identity.

2. Women as an artistic subject

Women are thus placed within a world of their own, one that reflects both their social status and their inner world. In this context, artists such as Theodor Pallady, who trained in the Parisian art scene, introduced a modern vision of composition and subject matter into Romanian art. In his works, the female figure is no longer treated exclusively as an aesthetic object but becomes part of an intimate universe, where the relationship between space, object, and character takes on a special significance. This approach reflects a paradigm shift: from external, descriptive representation to the exploration of interiority and atmosphere. For example, in the artist's work, the female nude is not ostentatious but integrated into an intimate setting, where the emphasis lies on atmosphere and the relationship between form and space. In this context, artists such as Theodor Pallady, trained in the Parisian art scene, introduced a modern vision of composition and subject matter into Romanian art. The female figure, in his works, is no longer treated exclusively as an aesthetic object, but becomes part of an intimate universe, in which the relationship between space, object, and character takes on a special significance. This approach reflects a paradigm shift: from external, descriptive representation to the exploration of interiority and atmosphere.



Fig. 2. Work by Theodor Pallady ³

³ *PORTRET: Theodor Pallady, „pictorul conștiinței stilului” – 150 de ani de la naștere*. Retrieved May 6, 2026, from <https://www.rador.ro/2021/04/11/Portrait-of-Theodor-Pallady-The-Painter-of-Consciousness-and-Style-150-Years-Since-His-Birth>.

Another important theme is the depiction of women in the domestic sphere, where they are shown in everyday situations—reading, sewing, resting, or caring for their families. These images reflect the traditional roles assigned to women, yet at the same time introduce an intimate and psychological dimension. In Ștefan Luchian's works, female portraits go beyond mere physical depiction and capture complex emotional states, suggesting fragility, melancholy, or introspection. Thus, the interior becomes not just a setting, but a space of feminine identity. In contrast to these images, there also emerges the archetype of the *femme fatale* or the mysterious woman, influenced by European Symbolism. This representation emphasizes ambiguity, seduction, and latent power, with the woman perceived as an enigmatic, sometimes even dangerous presence. Although less common in Romanian art than in Western art, this portrayal nonetheless reflects the artists' openness to modern themes and to exploring female psychology beyond traditional conventions.

Nicolae Grigorescu's work gives a special place to the rural woman, who appears particularly in his works inspired by the traditional Romanian environment. In his paintings, she is depicted with a unique sensitivity, associated with naturalness, authenticity, and purity. The rural woman becomes a symbol of national identity, integrated into a harmonious landscape where man and nature coexist in an idealized balance. This image also responds to a need for cultural definition in a context of rapid modernization. Another symbol frequently associated with femininity is flowers, which often appear in compositions alongside the female figure. They may suggest fragility, transience, or beauty, but also the natural cycles of life. Nature, in general, is linked to femininity within a broader symbolic tradition, in which women are perceived as an embodiment of generative and regenerative power.



Fig. 3. Nicolae Grigorescu, "Peasant Woman from Muscel" (1874)⁴

In this regard, Nicolae Grigorescu's artistic legacy remains relevant through the harmonious integration of the female figure into the natural landscape. Interior space is also a

⁴ Nicolae Grigorescu (1838 – 1907). Retrieved May 6, 2026, from <https://www.unitischimbam.ro/nicolae-grigorescu/>.

defining element in depictions of women. Interiors – rooms, salons, studios – are not mere backdrops, but symbolic spaces of intimacy and reflection. Furthermore, Nicolae Grigorescu's artistic legacy remains relevant, though it is reinterpreted in light of new trends. While in Grigorescu's work the rural woman was a symbol of authenticity and tradition, in the art of the next generation this image is nuanced, and at times even problematized, depending on the social context and artistic intent. Likewise, Nicolae Grigorescu's artistic legacy remains relevant, yet it is reinterpreted in light of new trends. While in Grigorescu's work the rural woman symbolized authenticity and tradition, in the art of the next generation this image is nuanced – and at times even problematized – depending on the social context and artistic intent.

Today, his work is synonymous with our national spirit. This truth – expressed through an artistic image that is perfect in both emotion and reason, belonging to a space and atmosphere of life, light, and human beauty – was rendered by Grigorescu in a unique way. He was a master of every thematic genre of easel painting, leaving us wonderful works of art that any museum in the world would be proud to exhibit⁵.

Stylistically, these depictions vary significantly, ranging from realistic approaches to decorative or symbolist interpretations. Color, light, and composition are used to highlight different aspects of femininity: delicacy, mystery, vitality, or introspection. Furthermore, details such as clothing, posture, or facial expression contribute to the construction of a complex visual identity, in which every element holds significant value. Overall, the woman as an artistic subject during this period can no longer be reduced to a single image or function. She becomes a dynamic visual construct, reflecting both male projections onto femininity and real changes in society. The diversity of these representations indicates not only the richness of artistic language but also the beginning of a profound reevaluation of the role of women in modern Romanian culture.

3. Women as Artists

The gradual emergence of women as creative agents, capable of actively shaping visual discourse, also began at this time, at the start of the 20th century. This transformation took place within a social context still dominated by patriarchal norms, in which women's access to art education and professional recognition was limited. In this context, many female artists chose to continue their studies abroad, particularly in Paris, where the artistic milieu was more open to experimentation and diversity. Among the leading figures of this period is the artist Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck, a prominent figure in Romanian art. She became the first female professor at an art academy in Europe, marking a turning point in the professional recognition of female artists. Her work is characterized by a monumental and symbolist vision, in which femininity is often associated with creative force, vital energy, and the spiritual dimension. Through her teaching and artistic work, Cuțescu-Storck contributed to legitimizing the presence of women in the art world.

A key aspect of this paradigm shift is the emergence of the female artist, who brings a different perspective on femininity. Through the contributions of figures such as Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck, the image of women begins to be constructed from within, rather than merely projected from the outside. This transformation marks the transition from an art dominated by the male gaze to one in which the female experience becomes a legitimate source of creation. Overall, the paradigm shifts of this period can be summarized in several major directions: the

⁵ Alexandru Cebuc. 2008. *Grigorescu*. Bucharest: Ed. Official Gazette, p. 5.

transition from tradition to modernity, from the exterior to the interior, from fixed typology to fluid identity, and from object to subject. These transformations are not sudden but occur gradually, through the overlap and dialogue between Western influences and local specificity.



Fig. 5. Gypsy Woman, by Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck ⁶

Another important figure is Olga Greceanu, known for her religiously inspired works and her involvement in mural painting. In a field traditionally considered male-dominated, Greceanu has succeeded in establishing her own style and addressing themes of profound spiritual depth, demonstrating that feminine sensibility can give rise to highly complex forms of artistic expression.

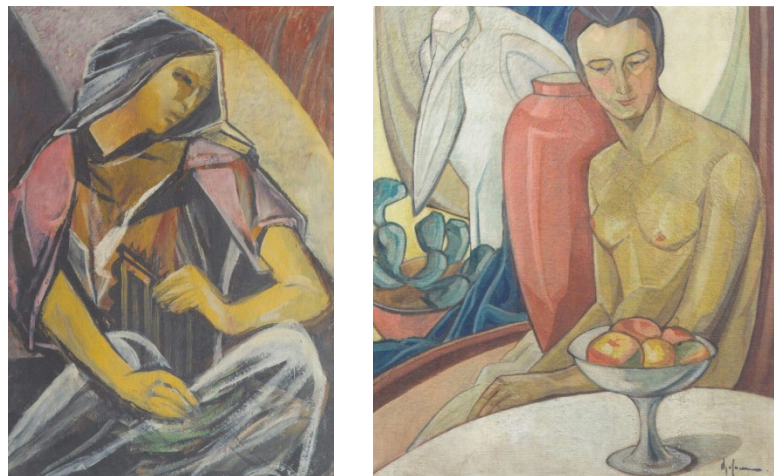


Fig. 6, Fig. 7, Works by Olga Greceanu ⁷

After studying chemistry at the University of Liège, Olga Greceanu developed a passion for fresco painting; she continued her studies in this field, first in Paris at the French Baudouin Institute from 1911 to 1914, and later in Florence from 1919 to 1922.... More so than other

⁶ Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck, *artist portrait*. Retrieved May 8, 2026, from <https://jupanesele.ro/cecilia-cutescu-storck-artist-portrait/>.

⁷ Olga Greceanu (I). Retrieved May 10, 2026, from <https://jupanesele.ro/olga-greceanu-i/>.

painters interested in mural decoration, Olga Greceanu succeeded in leaving behind several works emblematic of the era's taste, whether they be the frescoes at the Faculty of Architecture, Banu Manta City Hall, the Cula in Măldărești, or those decorating the building of the "Nicolae Iorga" Institute of History.⁸



Fig. 8, Work by Nina Arbore⁹

Nina Arbore is also known for her modern paintings, influenced by European art movements, in which color and expressiveness play a central role. Her works reflect a focus on inner life and the exploration of identity, often through portraiture.

Nina Arbore's presence in Bucharest's artistic life—since the painter had works on display at the exhibition of the Society of Fine Arts of Bessarabia—was remarkable in every respect, yet also fraught with dilemmas. The second daughter of the tumultuous, cultured, and rebellious hetman Zamfir Ralli Arbore, Nina, born in Bucharest in 1889, studied painting in Romania and in Munich, and later in Paris, in Matisse's studio-school. Together with Olga Greceanu and Cecilia Cușescu Stork, Nina Arbore laid the foundations of a close friendship which, in reference to the famous "Group of Four" (Han, Tonitza, Sirato, Stefan Dumitrescu), we might retroactively call the "Group of Three Ladies."¹⁰

What significantly distinguishes the work of these female artists from male artists' depictions of women is their perspective on the subject. While in male painting women often appear as objects of contemplation or idealization, in the works created by female artists they take on a more authentic and complex dimension. Women are no longer merely "looked at," but express themselves, define themselves, and represent themselves from within. This shift in perspective can be interpreted as a first step toward a feminine artistic consciousness, in which personal experience, sensitivity, and reflection on one's own identity become legitimate sources of creation. Even though the term "feminist art" is not yet directly applicable to this period, the seeds of such an approach can be identified in the way female artists claim their place in the artistic field and propose new ways of representing femininity.

⁸ Ioana Vlasu. 2000. *The 1920s: Tradition and Romanian Painting*, [Anii 20 Tradiția și pictura românească]. Bucharest: Meridiane Publishing, p. 31.

⁹ File: *Nina Arbore – Scriitoarea Stefania Zotoviceanu Rusu.png*. Retrieved May 10, 2026, from, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nina_Arbore_-_Scriitoarea_Stefania_Zotoviceanu_Rusu.png.

¹⁰ Tudor Octavian. 2003. *Forgotten Romanian Painters* [Pictori români uitați]. Bucharest: NOI media print, p. 106.

The shifts in artistic taste at the turn of the century marked a resurgence of interest in folk art, a trend that was, in fact, in line with the changing tastes taking place across Europe.¹¹

An analysis of representations of women in early 20th-century Romanian art cannot be conducted without paying close attention to the visual language and symbolic system through which femininity is constructed and conveyed. Beyond the themes addressed, artists employ a range of artistic means – color, light, composition, gesture, and setting – to imbue the female image with multiple, often subtle and layered meanings.

One of the central elements of this language is the female body, treated differently depending on stylistic orientation and artistic intent. In works with academic or symbolist influences, the body is often idealized, proportions are harmonized, and imperfections are eliminated, suggesting an ideal of timeless beauty. In contrast, in modern painting, a tendency toward realism can be observed, in which the body becomes a space for individual expression and vulnerability.

Clothing and accessories represent another important visual code. They indicate not only social or cultural affiliation, but also the way in which femininity is constructed and perceived. Elegant dresses, inspired by Western fashion, can suggest modernity and emancipation, while traditional costumes evoke national identity and rural values. This duality reflects the tension between tradition and modernity, characteristic of the entire period.

Last but not least, the posture and expression of the female figure play a decisive role in conveying meaning. A direct gaze may suggest autonomy and self-awareness, while a withdrawn or contemplative attitude may indicate introspection or vulnerability. Thus, femininity is not merely represented but visually “constructed” through a complex network of signs and symbols.

Another key factor is the social transformation that characterized this period. The modernization of Romanian society led to a reevaluation of women’s roles, as they began to participate more actively in public and cultural life. Access to education, the development of the press, and the emergence of open intellectual circles contribute to shaping a new image of women – that of an autonomous individual with her own aspirations and identity. These changes are inevitably reflected in art as well, where representations of women become more varied and complex. At the same time, there is a shift from a traditional view, in which women were associated with fixed archetypes (mother, wife, peasant woman, muse), to a modern approach, in which female identity is fluid and open to reinterpretation. In the works of Ștefan Luchian, for example, female portraits take on a pronounced psychological dimension, suggesting complex inner states and transcending mere physical representation. This focus on interiority marks a departure from academic conventions and a move toward modern sensibilities.

Thus, the early 20th century emerges as a pivotal moment of transition, during which Romanian art redefined not only its means of expression but also its understanding and representation of femininity, paving the way for subsequent developments in modern art. An analysis of the visual dimensions of femininity in early 20th-century Romanian art highlights the complexity and dynamism of a concept in the midst of transformation. Far from being a uniform or rigidly defined category, femininity emerges as a multifaceted cultural and artistic construct, shaped by the social context, European influences, and the individual vision of the artists.

Female representations from this period reflect a constant tension between tradition and modernity. On the one hand, the image of the idealized woman persists, associated with beauty, grace, and conventional roles, as can be observed in the works of artists such as Nicolae Grigorescu. On the other hand, more nuanced and introspective depictions emerge, in which

¹¹ Ioana Vlasiu, *op.cit.*, p. 30.

women are captured in everyday or contemplative poses, reflecting a complex inner world, as seen in the works of Ștefan Luchian or Theodor Pallady.

Overall, the early 20th century can be considered a pivotal moment of transition for the representation of femininity in Romanian art. It is the period when women began to break free from their status as mere objects of the gaze and became active subjects, both artistically and symbolically. This transformation paved the way for subsequent developments in modern and contemporary art, in which female identity would be explored from increasingly diverse perspectives. Consequently, the visual dimensions of femininity during this period do not merely reflect a recurring artistic theme but serve as a significant indicator of profound changes in Romanian society, offering a unique perspective on how art contributes to the construction and redefinition of cultural identities.

4. Conclusions

Thus, this marks a pivotal moment of transition, in which Romanian art redefines not only its means of expression but also its approach to understanding and representing femininity, paving the way for the subsequent developments of modern art. Overall, the visual language of femininity in early 20th-century Romanian art proves to be rich and nuanced, in which every visual element contributes to the articulation of a multifaceted image. This complexity reflects not only the stylistic diversity of the era but also the profound transformations in women's status in society, captured and reinterpreted through art. In this complex context, art becomes a space for negotiation between traditional values and new modern trends. Femininity is one of the central themes of this negotiation, being represented in a variety of forms and meanings. Thus, the cultural and artistic context of the early 20th century not only fosters the diversification of female representations but also lays the groundwork for the emergence of an authentic female perspective in art, alongside the rise of the first female artists.

Of course, the presence of nature in European art is not always tinged with melancholy. The landscape is not always an expression of the tragic tension between a guilty humanity and an aloof nature. There is the rich category of the classical "idyllic" landscape and that of the "picturesque"¹².

For Romanian art, the early 20th century marked a period of profound redefinition of aesthetic values and the approach to traditional themes, including the representation of femininity. This transformation was largely driven by direct contact with major European artistic centers, particularly Paris, where many Romanian artists pursued their studies and encountered new aesthetic movements. The influences of Impressionism, Symbolism, and Post-Impressionism contributed to a shift in visual language and a diversification of ways to represent reality.

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¹² Andrei Pleșu. 2010. *Picturesque and Melancholy: An Analysis of the Sense of Nature in European Culture* [*Pitoresc și Melancolie: o analiză a sentimentului naturii în cultura europeană*]. Bucharest: Humanitas, p. 41.

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