

THE ABSENCE OF ICONOLOGY IN ROMANIA. A POSSIBLE ANSWER¹

The chapter aims to be the first analysis of a specific trait of Romanian art historiography, namely that the method of iconology and has not been employed so far in texts analysing the art in Romania. This absence is very much connected to the way in which the art history canon was constructed and how processes of patrimonialisation evolved. Romanian art historiography developed, as everywhere perhaps, as a patriotic duty to discover the valuable past that could be historicised.² And again, as in many other places, this valuable past meant the Middle Ages.³ After the First World War, Romania was comprised of the territories of former Walachia and Moldova, which were supposed to have an art that continued a Byzantine tradition, because they were mostly Orthodox, and Transylvania, whose heritage was more connected to Central and Western Europe, because it belonged to Hungary since the Middle Ages.⁴ It is worth mentioning the fact that Romanian art historiography was and still is most often concentrated on the art on the territory of Romania, and that, except for some text-books and very general art histories, few art historians wrote about art outside the borders of the modern country. To clarify from the very beginning, we use the term iconology with reference mainly to Panofsky's writings, which were circulated, translated and sometimes addressed, and not to its use by Aby Warburg, whose presence in the Romanian culture has been extremely rare before his revaluation in the past three decades.

Authors were involved in a research project that explores the entanglements of art historiographies in Central and Eastern Europe, and that is articulated around the critical

¹ I wish to express my gratitude towards Cosmin Minea who was central in editing Ada Hajdu's ideas so that they could be included in a written form in this chapter. All remaining errors are my own.

² *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe. Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, ed. Matthew Rampley et al. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012). For Romania see Carmen Popescu, *Le style national Roumain. Construire une nation à travers l'architecture. 1881–1945*, Rennes and Bucharest, Presses Universitaires de Rennes and Simetria, 2004; Shona Kallestrup, *Art and Design in Romania, 1866-1927: Local and International Aspects of the Search for National Expression* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2006).

³ See for example: *Manufacturing Middle Ages: entangled history of medievalism in nineteenth-century Europe*, ed. Patrick J. Geary and Gábor Klaniczay (Leiden: Brill, 2013) and more recently *Inventing Medieval Czechoslovakia 1918–1968. Between Slavs, Germans, and Totalitarian Regimes*, ed. Ivan Foletti and Adrien Palladino Brno (Rome: Masaryk University Press and Viella, 2019) For the Romanian context see Vlad Țoca, *Art Historical Discourse in Romania. 1919–1947* (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2011).

⁴ Some authors did not deny the Western and Central European connections of the art produced in Transylvania, but tried to introduce the Eastern or local and Orthodox counterpart, as in the cases of the art historians Coriolan Petranu and Virgil Vătășianu. For Petranu see especially, Țoca, *Art Historical Discourse*, 43–76. For Vătășianu see Corina Simon, *Artă și identitate națională în opera lui Virgil Vătășianu* [Art and National Identity in the works of Virgil Vătășianu] (Cluj: Nereamia Napocae, 2002) and Țoca, *Art Historical Discourse*, 76–82.

assessment of three crucial concepts, periodisation, style and influence.⁵ Despite our inherent bias, we feel that investigating how these three concepts were used in Romanian art history could also explain why the perceived peripheral status of Romanian art and its belatedness oriented Romanian art history towards formalism, more precisely toward an overwhelming focus on style and influence that also included a general disregard for interpretation.⁶ There have been studies of iconography that go no further than identifying scenes and there have been attempts at placing art in a broader cultural context, treating this cultural context as mere background or setting. At the same time, looking at the art history written in the second half of the twentieth century, there is no scholar who applied consistently and systematically any principles of iconology, however defined, and there are no texts or fragments of texts that would engage with iconology as a method.

One cannot argue that the work of Panofsky was not known or read. Tudor Vianu, one of the most influential intellectuals of his time, who activated as an aesthetician and literary and artistic critic, published already in 1925 a short piece on Panofsky's 'Über das Verhältnis der Kunstgeschichte zur Kunsttheorie' and 'Über den Begriff des Kunstwollens', in which he related Panofsky to Riegl and Wölfflin.⁷ Vianu included Panofsky in a chapter that deals with positivism and critical approaches in art history. In Vianu's reading, Panofsky was included under the heading of 'categories of artistic intuition', in opposition to Wölfflin, whom he regarded as a positivist art historian⁸. Despite his methodological interest, Tudor Vianu never made use of later writings by Panofsky in his own work⁹. Moreover, Panofsky was present in various ways in Romanian culture, primarily through translations of his works, and he was also part of the curricula in art history departments. Therefore, we believe that avoiding iconology was motivated by the fact that it was not considered a suitable method, mainly because local art historiography had other objectives. Inventorying the national heritage seems to have been

⁵ Our project was entitled *Art Historiographies in Central and Eastern Europe. An Inquiry from the Perspective of Entangled Histories* and, besides the two of us, our team is formed by Shona Kallestrup, Magdalena Kunińska, Anna Adashinskaya and Cosmin Minea. Unfortunately, this chapter is posthumously edited by Mihnea Mihail and Cosmin Minea, since Ada Hajdu suddenly passed away in July 2020 and the project became terminated. Editors of the volume are grateful for preparing this chapter for publication.

⁶ For formalism and style in art history see Andrea Pinotti, 'Formalism and the History of Style,' in *Art History and Visual Studies*, 75–90 and *Il corpo dello stile. Storia dell'arte come storia dell'estetica a partire da Semper, Riegl, Wölfflin* (Milan: Associazione Culturale Mimesis, 2001).

⁷ Erwin Panofsky, 'Über das Verhältnis der Kunstgeschichte zur Kunsttheorie,' *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 18 (1925): 129–61 and 'Der Begriff des Kunstwollens,' *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 14 (1920): 321–39. For Vianu's comments see Tudor Vianu, *Dualismul artei* [The Dualism of Art] (Bucharest: Imprimeria Fundației Culturale Principele Carol I, 1925), 124–28.

⁸ Vianu, *Dualismul artei*, 109–16.

⁹ Out of his many publications, see Tudor Vianu, *Despre stil și artă literară* [About Style and Literary Art] (Bucharest: Ed. Tineretului, 1965) and *Studii de stilistică* [Stylistic Studies] (Bucharest: Ed. Didactică și Pedagogică, 1968).

the most urgent. By this we are not trying to impose the perspective of an authoritative art historical pattern that implies iconology as a necessary step in a projected development of the discipline. We don't believe that the absence of iconological studies in Romanian art historiography pertains to an underdevelopment of the discipline, but rather that the theoretical perspectives of the authors are shaped by the political agendas and the nature of the objects or monuments that are investigated.

Beginning with the Interwar period, the fact that art in Walachia and Moldova were supposed to continue a Byzantine tradition was unanimously accepted and the premise from where all art historians started from. As the artistic manifestation of Orthodoxy, a Byzantine 'style' was supposed to be found in all Orthodox countries, while the art historians from those countries were willing to attach the local art production to this 'style' as the only imaginable way of putting their countries on the map of European art history.¹⁰ Rationalising the historical past and its art meant identifying some 'objective' (most often, formal) general characteristics; otherwise, the architectural production of the past could not have been conceptualised as a 'style'. For Romania, 'rationalisation' was most often understood as 'nationalisation' and it consisted of 'discovering' and selecting relevant 'authentic' architectural vestiges. In addition to that, identifying formal variants and invariants and moulding them into rational schemes of 'development' in time and space was as important as establishing distinctive features and carving them out of the more encompassing '(post)-Byzantine style' they were supposed to belong to. Lastly, the mapping of various influences and the practice of establishing centres and peripheries were means through which 'local tradition' could be defined and 'outside' interventions could be recognised.¹¹ Therefore, these enterprises could only be achieved at the expense of an interest in interpretation, because focus was on style and not on meaning.

¹⁰ The notion of a 'Byzantine style' developed in the nineteenth century in connection with categories like 'Romano-Byzantine' and 'Romanesque', see Jean Nayrolles, *L'Invention de l'art roman à l'époque moderne (XVIIIe-XIXe siècles)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005). Studies on modern interpretations of Byzantium in South-Eastern Europe include Aleksandar Ignjatović, 'Byzantium Evolutionized: Architectural History and National Identity in Turn-of-the-Century Serbia,' in *Regimes of Historicity in Southeastern and Northern Europe, 1890–1945*, ed. Diana Mishkova, Balázs Trencsényi, and Marja Jalava (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 254–74; Tchavdar Marinov, Alexander Vezenkov, 'The Concept of National Revival in Balkan Historiographies', in *Entangled Histories of the Balkans. Volume Three: Shared Pasts, Disputed Legacies*, ed. Roumen Daskalov and Alexander Vezenkov (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 406–462; Bratislav Pantelić, 'Designing Identities: Reshaping the Balkans in the First Two Centuries; The Case of Serbia,' *Journal of Design History* 20 (2007): 131–44.

¹¹ For a more thorough treatment of this process see; Ada Hajdu, 'The Search for National Architectural Styles in Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria from the Mid-nineteenth Century to World War I,' in *Entangled Histories of the Balkans*, 394–439, esp. 394–96.

In Walachia, there are no monuments left before the second half of the fourteenth century. The first two monuments date from the second half of the fourteenth century, and there is only one monument that might be dating from the fifteenth century.¹² Therefore, the bulk of monuments date from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In Moldova, the first extant monuments date as well from the end of the fourteenth century, but the stars of Romanian art history are the fifteenth-century churches with exterior paintings. In addition, the eighteenth century was and still is of less importance for art historiography because of the loss of autonomy from the Ottoman Empire in both Walachia and Moldavia, making it a century of political submission, which was less appealing for an art history with nationalist aims.¹³ This situation led to an difficult relation with the Byzantine tradition that the art historians were set to identify. Art on the territory of Romania that was prone to historicisation and patrimonialisation was conceptualised as post-Byzantine, a *post-* that lasted for about three centuries and a half and was much indebted to the writings of a Romanian historian, Nicolae Iorga, who coined the concept *Byzance après Byzance* for conceptualising the culture of the Romanian Principalities.¹⁴

As the inheritance of a Byzantine tradition was at stake, art historians tended to focus on continuity rather than difference.¹⁵ In conjunction with the fact that Byzantine art was supposed to be rather traditionalist and static, fixed in a kind of atemporal medievalness, there seemed to be enough to postulate that the wall paintings in Walachia and Moldova follow a

¹² The monastery church of Curtea de Argeş was considered the most important monument of Wallachian architecture, being the first monument restored by Lecomte de Noüy and used as a model for Romanian pavilions at the Universal Exhibitions. See Cosmin Minea, 'The Monastery of Curtea de Argeş and Romanian Architectural Heritage in the Late 19th Century,' *sITA* 4 (2016): 181–201. For the Romanian pavilions at Universal Exhibitions see Hajdu 'The pavilions of Greece, Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria at the 1900 'Exposition Universelle' in Paris,' in *Balkan heritages*, ed. Maria Couroucli and Tchavdar Marinov (Farnham: Routledge, 2015), 47–75.

¹³ Oriental influences were in this case less appealing, while Viennese architects formulated the distinctiveness of architectural styles in the Balkans using forms that were considered oriental, see Maximilian Hartmuth, 'Insufficiently Oriental? An Early Episode in the Study and Preservation of the Ottoman Architectural Heritage in the Balkans,' in *Monuments, Patrons, Contexts: Papers on Ottoman Europe Presented to Machiel Kiel*, ed. Maximilian Hartmuth and Ayse Dilsiz (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2010), 171–84 and Maximilian Hartmuth, 'Vienna and the Art Historical 'Discovery' of the Balkans,' in *Orientalismen in Oostmitteleuropa. Diskurse, Akteure und Disziplinen vom 19. Jahrhundert bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. Robert Born and Sarah Lemmen (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014), 106–117.

¹⁴ Nicolae Iorga, *Byzance après Byzance. Continuation de l'histoire de la vie byzantine* (Bucharest: Institut d'Études Byzantines, 1935). For Iorga's approach to old Romanian art, see Țoca, *Art Historical Discourse*, 36–8.

¹⁵ For various myths about continuity of the Romanian culture see Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2001). For the myth of the continuity of a nation in the Serbian context, see Bratislav Pantelić, 'Memories of a time forgotten: the myth of the perennial nation,' *Nations and Nationalism* 17, vol 2 (2011): 443–64.

‘Byzantine iconography’.¹⁶ There are also rather few written sources that might be relevant for art historians. Since paintings followed what was considered a rather strict canon of Byzantine art, their sources are mostly the Bible and in general sources that have already been identified for Byzantine art. They did not seem to include any symbolism and they were certainly not realistic. Only recently there has been attention paid to its possible meanings, or to the deviations from a supposed canon that might be telling for a larger cultural context and they overwhelmingly dealt with the exterior paintings of Moldavian churches.¹⁷

Since art that was relevant for analysing chronological changes was conceptualised as post-Byzantine, art history developed with a sense of belatedness and of lack. Because of the influential Marxist periodisation of history, that stated that modernity started in Romania in 1821 (the year of a large peasant revolt), and because of the acute sense that there is no panel painting in Romania before the nineteenth century, the perception of belatedness became normative and in turn it allowed conceptualising a medieval art that lasted until the second decade of the eighteenth century.¹⁸ As such, art in Romania was best studied with the intellectual instruments of the medievalists that deal with Byzantine art.

What might also be specific to the Romanian context is the almost exclusive focus on formalist issues like style. The penchant for formalism has multiple explanations. Despite being a socialist country, Marxist-derived academic studies were never very present in Romanian humanities, with the notable exception of periodisation. Especially criticism of all arts (literature, visual arts, architecture, film) was almost exclusively formalist.¹⁹

The overwhelming disregard for all the concerns of social historians were justified by the Romanian intellectuals by suggesting that artistic expression was a form of ‘resistance through culture’. When freedom in real life was limited by the political regime, they say, it was important to maintain as much freedom as possible in the arts, and therefore art should have

¹⁶ Ion D. Ștefănescu, *L'évolution de la peinture religieuse en Bucovine et en Moldavie depuis les origines jusqu'au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Geuthner, 1928); id., *L'évolution de la peinture religieuse en Bucovine et en Moldavie depuis les origines jusqu'au XIXe siècle. Nouvelles recherches. Étude iconographique* (Paris: Geuthner, 1929); his: *La peinture religieuse en Valachie et en Transylvanie depuis les origines jusqu'au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Geuthner, 1930–32).

¹⁷ As an example, see Vlad Bedros, “‘Approchez avec crainte de Dieu, foi et amour’: le programme iconographique de la travée occidentale de l'abside en moldavie (XVe–XVIe siècles),’ *Revue Roumaine d'histoire de l'Art* 52 (2015): 77–94; For the concern with liturgical space, see Vlad Bedros, Elisabetta Scirocco, ‘Liturgical screens: East and West. Liminality and Spiritual Experience,’ *Convivium* (2019): 68–89.

¹⁸ For a general discussion of socialist art history, see Krista Kodres, Kristina Jõekalda and Michaela Marek (eds.), *A Socialist Realist History? Writing Art History in the Post-War Decades* (Vienna and Cologne: Böhlau, 2019).

¹⁹ In addition to the works of Vianu cited above, see also George Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* [The History of Romanian Literature from its origins to the Present] (Bucharest: Ed. Fundațiilor Regale, 1941).

been an ‘art for art’s sake’. As a consequence, those who wrote about it were supposed to appreciate those qualities that made art autonomous of any exterior interference, not subject to worldly rules but to its own inner logic.²⁰ The recourse to formalism as an analysis that is objective because it deals with obvious features and therefore eludes any ideological interpretation, continued after 1989 and has never been touched upon explicitly and critically. As a consequence, art that is marked by some ideology is rather seen as tainted, and also, the analyses that take into consideration other things besides forms and techniques are seen as altered by an ideology.

The epistemic optimism of the objective art historian who relies on formalism went hand in hand with another sense of lack, that of a proper knowledge of art on the territory of Romania. Before being interpreted, it is still commonly held that art on Romania’s territory should first be properly recorded, listed, and described. The need for inventories and research as tools in order to investigate and constitute the patrimony of the modern country was already an objective of the Commission for Historical Monuments, established at Bucharest in 1892, and its Bulletin.²¹ From this point of view, investigating meaning is frequently something that only some future generations of scholars should engage with. Consequently, for most of the art historians writing in the second half of the twentieth century, inventory and formal description was what national art needed and what was appropriate for its study. Since interpretation in general was rather not intended, using iconology as a method was excluded.

Additional reasons for the lack of iconological perspectives in Romanian art historiography can be forwarded when focusing on the relationship between the monuments from Transylvania and the canon of art history.²² In a sense, it could be maintained that frustrations generated by the tension between centre and periphery marked the ways in which

²⁰ For a discussion of historiography and art historiography in Communist Romania, see Ileana Burnichioiu, ‘Concepts Distorted by Ideologies. A View on Medieval ‘Romanian’ Art (1945–1989),’ *Convivium* 4, no 1 (2017): 104–28 and Vladimir Ivanovici, ‘The Prison of the Mind. Growing up with Myths in Communist Romania,’ *Convivium* 4, no 1 (2017): 128–42.

²¹ *Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice*, (Bucharest, 1892). See Țoca, *Art Historical Discourse*, 11–5. For the protection of monuments and archeological research in the context of the First World War, see also Robert Born, ‘Von Besatzern zu Besetzten. Kunstschutz und Archäologie in Rumänien zwischen 1916 und 1918,’ in *Apologeten der Vernichtung oder “Kunstschützer”?* *Kunsthistoriker der Mittelmächte im Ersten Weltkrieg*, ed. Robert Born and Beate Störckuhl (Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau, 2017), 215–55.

²² For different aspects of the art historical canon(s) see special section ‘Rethinking the Canon: A Range of Critical Perspectives,’ *The Art Bulletin* 78 (June 1996): 198–217; Gregor Langfeld, ‘The canon in art history: concepts and approaches,’ *Journal of Art Historiography* 19 (December 2018). We are here referring to a more widespread and discipline based canon of art history, and not to particular canons like the one formulated in the Soviet era, see Krista Kodres, ‘Introductory remarks to socialist art history: on formulating the Soviet canon,’ in *A Socialist Realist History?*, 11–35.

Transylvania was instrumentalised in the twentieth century.²³ The relevance of the medieval monuments from the eastern part of the Hungarian Kingdom for the newly created Romanian state, coupled with research tools that were shaped for investigating and inventorying medieval art, prevented almost any reference to Panofsky's methodology in the Romanian art historiography dealing with Transylvania. For the purpose of this demonstration, the works of two of the most important art historians of the second half of the twentieth century will be discussed. Virgil Vătăşianu and Vasile Drăguţ, the two scholars on which this section concentrates, have both written syntheses that were dedicated to medieval art in Romania. Both of them were quite prolific authors, but most of their articles that engage with medieval art are studies that either accompany the work of restorers or that are mainly concerned with dating, establishing stylistic connections and identifying iconographic themes. So, the works that will be analysed are those that include some methodological concerns regarding the study of medieval art in Romania, or that propose an all-encompassing perspective on the national heritage.

It is not an overstatement to say that even in current literature the medieval heritage of Transylvania overshadows the visual productions from other periods in the region, like the Renaissance and Baroque heritage. Academic publications and the research interests of scholars prove that, while a few of them are concerned with the problem of the Renaissance and Baroque art in Transylvania, the focus is mostly on the medieval heritage of the region.²⁴ One can immediately bring to mind the Saxon fortified churches or the vast late Gothic hall churches, but most probably fewer would consider the Renaissance Lázó chapel in Alba-Iulia or the sixteenth-century wall paintings decorating private houses as characteristic for Transylvania.²⁵ The Hunyadi castle enjoys greater popularity, but its prominence is largely due to its most famous owner, Matthias Corvinus and his local roots, while the Renaissance elements of the castle are later additions to the medieval core of the monument. In fact, the

²³ For a perceptive general account of the centre-periphery problem, see Foteini Vlachou, 'Why Spatial? Time and the Periphery,' *Visual Resources* 32, nos 1–2 (2016): 9–24.

²⁴ Actually, the work of Jolán Balogh is still one of the few synthesis that deal with Renaissance art in Transylvania, alongside the work of Gheorghe Sebestyén, *Arhitectura Renaşterii în Transilvania* [Renaissance Architecture in Transylvania] (Bucharest: Editura Tehnică, 1963). For Balogh see Gyöngyi Török, 'Jolán Balogh: The Founder of Research into the Hungarian Renaissance,' in *Italy & Hungary. Humanism and Art in the Early Renaissance*, ed. Péter Farbaky and Louis A. Waldman (Milan: Officina Libraria, 2011), 55–73. Baroque art in Transylvania is definitely an underresearched topic which can be mainly grasped through the writings of Nicolae Sabău, *Metamorfoze ale barocului transilvan* [Metamorphoses of Transylvanian Baroque] (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 2002).

²⁵ For this later aspect see Dana Jenei, *Renaşterea transilvăneană – Identitate culturală în context european* [Transylvanian Renaissance – Cultural identity in the European context] (Editura Muzeului Naţional al Literaturii Române, 2013) (available online: http://www.istoria-artei.ro/resources/files/Dana_Jenei_RENASTEREA_TRANSILVANEANA_2013.pdf).

second half of the fifteenth century has an ambiguous position characteristic of the various forms of Renaissance art outside of Italy, being situated between the Middle Ages and the novel Italian forms.²⁶

Returning to the problem of historiography and to the Romanian need of conceptualising a tradition that could fit into the Grand Narrative of art history, it is relevant to mention that architecture always played one of the most important roles in attesting a sort of specificity of Romanian art, and medieval architecture especially. At the same time, Panofsky's iconological method has been mainly conceptualised as a means to analyse Renaissance paintings and their content, reinforcing the normative position of Italian Renaissance in art history through the coupling of the art objects produced in this time and period with more elaborate theoretical and methodological approaches.²⁷ So, it might be that ignoring iconology was a secondary effect of art historical discourses focused mainly on architectural monuments in order to prove originality or novelty of local art. In this sense it is telling that, as Robert Born argued, one of the first writings that tries to establish the existence of Romanian architecture in Transylvania is Virgil Vătășianu's study dedicated to the stone churches in the county of Hunedoara, published in 1929.²⁸ The research was almost entirely based on his dissertation defended in Vienna, under Strzygowski's supervision, two years prior to its publication. Vătășianu's focus on the stone churches from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in the Hațeg region favoured the theory that they were based on older forms of local wooden

²⁶ This also seems to be implied by the inclusion of a chapter of Renaissance art at the court of Matthias Corvinus in a recent volume dedicated to medieval art in the Hungarian Kingdom, see Árpád Mikó, 'A Renaissance Dream: Arts in the Court of King Matthias,' in *The Art of Medieval Hungary*, ed. Xavier Barral I Altet, Pál Lővei, Vinni Lucherini and Imre Takács (Rome: Viella, 2018), 319–33. For a historiographic approach to the Renaissance studies in Hungary see Robert Born, 'Die Renaissance in Ungarn und Italien aus marxistischer und nationaler Perspektive: Beobachtungen zur Situation in Ungarn vor und nach 1945,' *Ars* 48, no 2 (2015): 160–78.

²⁷ Elina Räsänen argues that in medieval studies Panofsky's method didn't have the same impact, because in this field theoretical and historiographical questions tended to be downplayed, see 'Panopticon of Art History: Some Notes on Iconology, Interpretation and Fears,' in *The Locus of Meaning in Medieval Art. Iconography, Iconology, and Interpreting Visual Imagery of the Middle Ages*, ed. Lena Liepe (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2018), 46–7. For the normative character of Renaissance art see Christopher Wood, 'Art History's normative Renaissance,' in *The Italian Renaissance in the twentieth century*, eds. Allen J. Grieco, Michael Rocke and Fiorella Gioffredi Superbi (Florence: Olschki, 2002), 65–92. For the importance of Panofsky's experience as a scholar of the Renaissance in shaping the concept of iconology, see Keith Moxey, 'Panofsky's Concept of "Iconology" and the Problem of Interpretation in the History of Art,' *New Literary History* 17, no 2 (Winter 1986): 268–69.

²⁸ Robert Born, 'Die Kunsthistoriographie in Siebenbürgen und die Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte von 1850 bis 1945,' in *Die Etablierung und Entwicklung des Faches Kunstgeschichte in Deutschland, Polen und Mitteleuropa*, ed. Wojciech Bałus and Joanna Wolańska (Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2010), 365–66; Virgil Vătășianu, 'Vechile biserici de piatră românești din județul Hunedoara,' [Old Romanian stone churches in Hunedoara county] *Anuarul Comisiei Monumentelor Istorice, Secția pentru Transilvania* 2 (1929): 1–222.

architecture, thus taking on a supposed centuries-long tradition. By taking into account mainly technical architectural issues, Virgil Vătășianu followed Gottfried Semper's ideas and eluded the question of the meaning of the monuments or of the paintings that were preserved in some of these churches.²⁹

In the same year, Vătășianu published a short article dedicated to art history and its new methodological problems which presented his scholarly interests as being shaped by positivist notions of scientific research and objectivity.³⁰ In some respect, this approach might be a continuation of the method proposed by Coriolan Petranu, the first academically trained art historian in Transylvania, who, as Vătășianu, was a disciple of Strzygowski.³¹ Petranu was the driving force behind the organising of the art history department in Cluj, as well as an ardent supporter of cataloguing national heritage, an urgent need in the context of post-war Romania³².

Some decades later, Vătășianu published his monumental work entitled *Istoria artei feudale în Țările române* [The History of Feudal Art in the Romanian Countries], the first art historical synthesis in Romanian historiography.³³ His ambition with this massive volume was to centralise previous isolated studies into a unified structure that was to explore the evolutionary system of Romanian art. In the book's foreword Vătășianu deplored the lack of interest for Transylvanian art in Hungarian and German historiographies, and criticised their biased interest in linking Transylvanian monuments with western examples. However, the author points to a difference between Romanian art (made by Romanians) and the art of other ethnies (Saxons and Hungarians), emphasising that in order to better understand Romanian monuments one has to know the Catholic architecture in Transylvania. Thus, architecture is the main point of interest in Transylvania for Vătășianu, although wall paintings, winged altarpieces and sculptures are also included to a lesser extent. His focus on monuments led to a rather unimportant part for iconography in dealing with medieval wall paintings, which are mainly analysed in order for him to establish stylistic connections. But looking backwards to studies that concentrated on wall paintings, one can observe that an iconographic approach that went beyond thematic recognitions wasn't considered mandatory. Ion D. Ștefănescu's

²⁹ Born, 'Die Kunsthistoriographie,' 367.

³⁰ Țoca, *Art Historical Discourse*, 76. Vătășianu's advocacy for an objective and monuments oriented methodological approach to art history was later continued in a book titled *Metodica cercetării în istoria artei* [Research methods in art history] (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1974).

³¹ In addition to Țoca, see Born, 'Die Kunsthistoriographie,' 362–67 and Matthew Rampley, 'The Strzygowski school of Cluj. An episode in interwar Romanian cultural politics,' *Journal of Art Historiography* 8 (June 2013) (<https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/rampley.pdf>). (accessed: 20 October 2020).

³² Țoca, *Art Historical Discourse*, 43–7.

³³ Virgil Vătășianu, *Istoria artei feudale în Țările Române* (Bucharest: Ed. Academiei, 1959). See also Simon, *Artă și identitate*, 81–95.

publications on murals from Romania were subjected to the same needs of cataloguing and contributing to the lack of local historiography. As previously noticed, iconography wasn't considered especially relevant because it couldn't be as useful as style in periodisation.³⁴ Indeed, Ion D. Ștefănescu and Vătășianu were following from this perspective earlier writings of art historians who also focused on documentation, cataloguing and formalism in analysing the built heritage of Romania.³⁵

Another landmark for Romanian historiography was a book written by Vasile Drăguț that was dedicated to Gothic art in the country.³⁶ Drăguț played a central role for the Art History department of the Fine Arts University in Bucharest, but he was also instrumental in preserving heritage through his involvement in the protection of monuments.³⁷ His writings about medieval art in Transylvania are still a sort of starting point for any student who engages with this subject. Nonetheless, Vasile Drăguț's aim with this publication was rather different than Vătășianu's, and his focus on Gothic art proves that he considered it to be the most relevant aspect of Transylvanian art production, and one that also impacted the evolution of art in Moldova and Wallachia. Although treating with equal interest architecture, wall paintings, and other forms of visual production, the author states quite bluntly that the fortified churches in Transylvania have no equivalent in the history of medieval architecture, hinting again to the idea that if one wanted to find the uniqueness of the art in this region, one has to look at architectural monuments. Compared to Vătășianu, Drăguț was more concerned with iconography, and in his chapter devoted to wall paintings he sometimes tried to investigate iconographic traditions and the way that various themes and motives arrived in Transylvania. But even though Drăguț published studies dedicated to the medieval iconography of wall paintings on several occasions, his analysis usually consisted of identifying themes and cataloguing the extant scenes.³⁸

While iconography was used as a research tool for images from the Middle Ages during most of the twentieth century, this art historical method had little to do with Panofsky's iconology. Recently, the possibility of delineating iconography from iconology has been

³⁴ Țoca, *Art Historical Discourse*, 32–4.

³⁵ Ludwig Reissenberger, *Die Kerzer Abtei* (Sibiu: Michaelis, 1894); Karl Romstorfer, 'Die Architektur im ehemaligen Fürstentum Moldau,' *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Architektur* 5 (1912): 81–94. See also the contributions of Nicolae Ghika-Budești and Gheorghe Balș in *Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice* between 1927 and 1936.

³⁶ Vasile Drăguț, *Arta gotică în România* [Gothic Art in Romania] (Bucharest: Ed. Meridiane, 1979).

³⁷ Christoph Machat, 'Vasile Drăguț und die Konzeption des rumänischen Denkmalmantes vor 1977,' *Ars Transilvaniae* 8-9 (1998-1999): 17–20.

³⁸ See especially Vasile Drăguț, 'Iconografia picturilor murale gotice din Transilvania,' [The iconography of Gothic wall paintings in Transylvania] *Pagini de veche artă românească* 2 (1972): 7–83.

questioned and art historians have drawn attention to the fact that even in the cases of Warburg and Panofsky the two terms are sometimes interchangeable.³⁹ At the same time, the development of iconography has been analysed from the perspective of a threefold orientation, with Panofsky, and more generally the Warburg circle, being only one methodological possibility alongside the approaches forwarded by Émile Mâle and Max Dvořák.⁴⁰ For Vătăşianu and Drăguţ, but they were by no means singular, what Panofsky has been for iconology, Émile Mâle was for medieval iconography. In this case, it doesn't come as a surprise that although Vătăşianu mentions Aby Warburg in a chapter devoted to the genesis of the discipline, he includes the Hamburg art historian alongside Mâle and Gabriel Millet, all three under the general heading of improvements in iconographic studies.⁴¹ However, it is worth noticing that the reception of Mâle's iconographic studies was selective, and he was mostly used for identifying iconographic themes and motifs, disregarding what was methodologically at stake in his writings. While Mâle's fundamental study of thirteenth-century religious art in France used written sources that are contemporary to the objects of study as a methodology, Romanian art historians rarely used texts.⁴²

Systematic approaches were available through broad iconographic surveys, like the dictionary-like *Ikonoğrafie der Cristlichen Kunst* published by Karl Künstle.⁴³ Both Virgil Vătăşianu and Vasile Drăguţ refer to Künstle as a broader iconographic study, besides regional studies that were used for dating monuments or gathering historical data. In addition to this, Drăguţ also cites Louis Réau's *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, published beginning with 1955, which is similar to Künstle in scope and content.⁴⁴ When reading the works of Vătăşianu and Drăguţ, it seems rather clear that iconography is used for identifying subjects, without delving further into the more profound meaning or function that iconographic themes might disclose. The focus on style and the formal aspects was a way to connect Transylvanian art with artistic schools or regions that were considered more prestigious. It was an attempt to de-peripheralise the artistic heritage of Transylvania and at the same time to inscribe it in a grand narrative of

³⁹ Lena Liepe, 'Introduction,' in *The Locus of Meaning*, 1–4. Indeed, the first time when a conceptual articulation for both terms was presented as necessary was in Godfridus Johannes Hoogewerff, 'L'iconologie et son importance pour l'étude systématique de l'art chrétien,' *Rivista di archeologia cristiana* 8 (1931): 53–82.

⁴⁰ Lena Liepe, 'The Study of Iconography and Iconology of Medieval Art: A Historiographic Survey,' in *The Locus of Meaning*, 18–9.

⁴¹ Simon, *Artă și identitate*, 129.

⁴² Out of the numerous studies dedicated to Émile Mâle, see for his relevance in medieval studies Jérôme Baschet, 'L'iconographie médiévale. L'oeuvre fondatrice d'Émile Mâle et le monument actuel,' in *Émile Mâle (1862-1954) la construction de l'oeuvre. Rome et l'Italie* (Rome: École française de Rome, 2005), 273–88.

⁴³ Karl Künstle, *Ikonoğrafie der christlichen Kunst* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1928–29).

⁴⁴ Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955-1960).

European art. The only mention of Erwin Panofsky in the two works under scrutiny here is made by Drăguț in his book on Gothic art in Romania, where he cites *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* in the 1967 French translation by Pierre Bourdieu when addressing the case of fourteenth-century hall churches.⁴⁵

Obviously, the absence of iconology in local historiography doesn't imply a difference in the development of the discipline by placing it in a lower position when compared to other traditions. Nevertheless, the lack of engagement with this methodology is surprising when judged against the background of translations of Panofsky's work in Romanian.⁴⁶ In addition to that, works by Panofsky were present in various libraries, including the library of the Institute of Art History and of the Romanian Academy of Sciences, in various languages (German, English, French and Italian). While most art historians were able to read in at least three foreign languages, it is difficult to determine for sure what literature was available to them if they do not cite it explicitly. In any case, starting with the 1970s Panofsky was translated at the Romanian publishing house Meridiane, at a time when Vasile Drăguț was the editor of the section devoted to Romanian art, and Vătășianu wrote the preface to the translation of Udo Kultermann's *Geschichte der Kunstgeschichte*.⁴⁷ Meridiane was a publishing house founded in 1961 and specialised in art history books, its catalogue consisting of quite numerous translations of works by various authors, from Dvořák to Gombrich and from Białostocki to Bourdieu, including Wittkower or Sedlmayr. Panofsky's *Renaissance and Renaissances in Western Art* was translated in 1974, followed by his *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, translated in 1980⁴⁸. Although *Studies in Iconology* was never translated into Romanian, Jan Białostocki's book on the history of art theories became available in Romanian in 1977, including a whole chapter that treated at length Panofsky's iconological method.⁴⁹ Therefore, Panofsky was by no means unpopular in the second half of the twentieth century, nor was the concept of iconology unknown in art historical circles in Romania.

In conclusion, and to return to the question placed at the beginning of this inquiry, how can one explain the absence of iconology in Romanian historiography? We believe that the

⁴⁵ Drăguț, *Arta gotică*, 64, n. 47.

⁴⁶ For the different neighbouring historiographic tradition in regard to iconology, see Ingrid Ciulisová, 'Notes on the history of Renaissance scholarship in Central Europe: Białostocki, Schlosse, and Panofsky,' in *Renaissance?: perceptions of continuity and discontinuity in Europe, c. 1300-c. 1550*, ed. Alexander Lee, Pit Péporté and Harry Schnitker (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 349–57.

⁴⁷ Udo Kultermann, *Istoria istoriei artei*, trans. Gheorghe Székely (Bucharest: Ed. Meridiane, 1977).

⁴⁸ Erwin Panofsky, *Renastere și renașteri în arta occidentală*, trans. Sorin Mărculescu (Bucharest: Ed. Meridiane, 1974); Panofsky, *Artă și semnificație*, trans. Ștefan Stoenescu (Bucharest: Ed. Meridiane, 1980).

⁴⁹ Jan Białostocki, *O istorie a teoriilor despre artă (sec. XV-XX)*, trans. Anca Irina Ionescu (Bucharest: Ed. Meridiane, 1977).

answer might be twofold. First of all, because we had no Renaissance, not even in Transylvania, or at least not a Renaissance that could compete with the courtly Renaissance of Central-European art centres in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. As mentioned above, Romanian art historians rarely ventured into studying the Renaissance in Transylvania, and most certainly not to the extent to which they researched its medieval heritage. The canonicity of certain types of artworks could have played a significant role in matching monuments and visual production with specific research tools and methods. As Keith Moxey argued, the judgment that artworks have an intrinsic significance, whose accomplishment resides in the perfect fusion between form and content, was based on Panofsky's experience as an art historian of the Renaissance.⁵⁰ The shift from his 1932 article dedicated to the conundrums of analysing artworks to the opening chapter of *Studies in Iconology*, eloquently subtitled 'Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance', was marked by circumscribing the methodological focus solely on Renaissance art.⁵¹ Elsner and Lorenz argued that while his 1932 German article proposed a universal method of art historical interpretation that was defined as a response to the concept of *Kunstwollen*, the theoretical formalism of the Viennese school and Heidegger's reading of Kant, his first publication after moving to Princeton presents iconology as the intellectual tool for interpreting the art and culture of the Renaissance.⁵² For Panofsky, the perfect match between form and content became one of the means by which he establishes the differences between the medieval Renaissance and the canonical one. Thus, it might be that what is at stake here is not the reluctance towards Panofsky's iconology, but rather its reception as a tool for interpreting Renaissance art.

The second reason for the absence of iconology in Romanian historiography is connected to what mattered more for Romanian art historians dealing with the Middle Ages. There is a sense of urgency identifiable in their writings. Medieval heritage in Romania was being demolished even before being listed and documented, and the post-1919 situation made the redefining of national heritage mandatory for recovering and forwarding claims for art

⁵⁰ Moxey, 'Panofsky's Concept,' 268–70. Moxey also pointed to the fact that most of the examples chosen by Panofsky belong to the Grand Narrative of art history as it was already produced in the nineteenth century. For the impact of Renaissance art in the shaping of Panofsky's iconology, see also Jás Elsner, Katharina Lorenz, 'The Genesis of Iconology,' *Critical Inquiry* 38, no 3 (2012): 497–98.

⁵¹ Erwin Panofsky, 'Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst,' *Logos. Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kulture* 21 (1932): 103–19; id., *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939).

⁵² Elsner, Lorenz, 'The Genesis of Iconology,' 497–502. For Panofsky's earlier essays see also Allister Neher, 'The Concept of *Kunstwollen*', neo-Kantianism, and Erwin Panofsky's early art theoretical essays,' *Word & Image* 20, no 1 (2004): 41–51.

objects⁵³. Therefore, the need for repertoires was more acute than the problem of how to interpret that heritage. Vătăşianu's book was the first to map out the medieval heritage of all three historical provinces of Romania. A few years later, Drăguţ starts an essential campaign of inventorying, publishing a repertory of Transylvanian medieval wall paintings, followed by a larger project of listing all the medieval murals on the territory of Romania⁵⁴. Although this was only completed in part, the research team that Drăguţ gathered is quite telling for the main purpose of this initiative, for he was joined not only by art historians, but also by epigraphists, archaeologists and restorers. His aim was clearly that of collecting information and not that of interpreting. Since conceiving an art historical tradition that could compete with the Grand Narrative of Western art often meant reinforcing the central role of Romania's medieval heritage, we believe that avoiding iconology was motivated by the fact that it was not considered a suitable method for analysing the heritage that was significant for Romanian historiography. At the same time, focusing on formalist issues provided a gateway of escaping the ideological underpinnings that could have limited other types of art-historical interpretation. Transversely, the avoidance of Romanian art historians to adopt or adapt iconology might also point towards the limits and limitations of iconology as a method.

⁵³ In this case Coriolan Petranu's writings are the most insistent on this matter. For an analysis of his writings see Țoca, *Art Historical Discourse*, 54–76.

⁵⁴ Some of the results were published in Vasile Drăguţ, 'Repertoriul picturilor murale medievale din România,' [Repertory of medieval wall paintings in Romania] *Pagini de veche artă românească* (1985).