



Tradition and Ethnographic Display: Defining the National Specificity at the National Art Museum in Romania (1906–1937)

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Abstract

After a long period of debates and several unfinished projects, the National Museum of Romania was founded in 1906. Under the direction of Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcas (1872–1952), the newly created institution aimed at being the expression of the Romanian civilization and a depository of local traditions. It was also intended to be a documentary basis for study and research about Romanian art and culture. This paper aims at analysing first the strategies deployed by its director for the construction of a patrimonial collection, then the way it has become more visible through the selection of the objects, the structure of permanent display and the museographic practices. The project for the *Muzeul National* developed a complex narrative that mixed antiquities as well as religious, folk and modern art in order to define a national specificity and to support the idea of unity and continuity of the Romanian culture, from pre-historical times to the present. Despite its consequent historicism, Tzigara-Samurcas' museographic conception nevertheless granted a central role to ethnography in a time when folk art unanimously appeared as an authentic production, the very expression of the 'Romanian spirit' and the main source of a new regenerated contemporary art. We intend to explore the relationship between the patrimonial practices developed at the National Museum in Romania and the dynamic and multifaceted concept of 'specificity'. Finally, we will pay attention to the National Museum exhibitions that took place in Paris during the inter-war period as the promotion of an identity profile that revisited national stereotypes, myths of origin and local authenticity. By considering several critical texts, exhibition catalogues and diverse acquisitions, we will try to understand how the foreign audience pictured Romanian 'national art' during this period.

In June 1912, the new building of the National Museum was inaugurated in Bucharest, in the presence of the Royal Family and high-ranking civil servants. The goals and program were explicit: to ‘honor our ancestors’ art with a shelter worthy of its significance, for the education of the people and the strengthening of the patriotic feeling’ and to ‘gather the art collections which are scattered at present, in order to leave for the future generations a perfect mirror of the whole artistic treasure of the Romanian land, starting from the prehistoric period until today’ (Tzigara-Samurcas, 1937: 3).

The above-mentioned decree staged a certain idea of national heritage as it contemplated the encounter of two perspectives: first, that of the heritage to be protected, then, as the souvenir to leave for posterity. The artistic treasures thus gathered in a coherent and complete ensemble had didactic value and were supposed to stimulate patriotism. However, later on, they would also come to represent a specificity found in the peasantry, as a factor of identity. Mostly based on the writings of Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcas (1872–1952), Romanian art historian and director of the new institution from 1906 to 1948, this paper offers a new approach to understanding the type of museum that was intended to be a ‘national museum’. The question is: how do the expectations that found the creation of a national museum determine the selection and exhibition of the collections? Moreover, taking the nature of its collections into account, how was the ‘national specificity’ at the National Museum in Romania imagined? This text aims at analyzing, first the strategies deployed by its director for the construction of a patrimonial collection, then the way it became more visible through the selection of its objects, the structure of permanent display and the museographic practices. Finally, we will discuss the question of tradition and local authenticity, both at the level of the national discourse conceived for a foreign audience and from the perspective of the critical response to exhibitions abroad.

The Invention of the Romanian National Museum

Historians who have studied the Romanian National Museum usually present it as an ethnographic museum, mostly composed of rural art, at the root of any form of national art (Thiesse, 2001: 215; Popescu, 2001: 289). This approach, without being wrong, needs to be qualified. Indeed, at the start, the institution, which was supposed to house the artistic treasures of the nation, did not limit its interest to folklore. Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcas, disciple of Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl and Heinrich von Brunn at the University of Munich and assistant of Wilhelm von Bode at the General Direction of Royal Museums in Berlin, imagined a complex narrative that mixed antiquities with religious, folk and modern art in order to define a national specificity and support the idea of the unity and continuity of the Romanian culture from prehistoric ages to the present.

Tzigara-Samurcas’ museum project, as it appears in his writings between 1906 and 1912, is linked to a first distribution, organization and appropriation of the Romanian heritage. In *Muzeul nostru national*, written in June 1906, he deplored the state of the collections of the National Museum of Antiquities, which was basically the only museum the capital hosted at the time, an institution with a varied and mixed collection where no coherent narrative was possible:

In front of the door, there is a window showing old Romanian rings, bracelets, earrings and an ivory crucifix [...] ; then the reproduction of the Vetersfelde Treasure ; and a metal clock, all of those are displayed without the slightest trace of an indication. [...] Right next to this,

stands a cupboard with 'firearms and gods from savage populations of South America', idols from China and the Batavian Republic and other curiosities all bearing very detailed labels. On the wall, over the cupboard, you can see Curtea de Arges frescoes! Another cupboard holds 'national costumes and boyar clothes' which are represented by modest and uninteresting items. [...] In the middle of the side wall hangs the Kulbach cardboard picturing the Christian persecutions under Nero. Underneath it, you can find the icon which comes from the Vieiros monastery. On its side, the collection of Romanian musical instruments given by Mr Burada is displayed [...]. I would like to stress the fact that this is one of the rooms of the *Romanian* National Museum.

He then concluded:

One could not imagine a better combination to make the thought foggier, rather than more informed. One could not be more mistaken about what the mission of a national museum should be. (Tzigara-Samurcas, 1906: 2–3)

After acquiring some experience in Berlin museums and convinced that the Romanian museum institution needed to be rebuilt, back to Bucharest, Tzigara-Samurcas pleaded for the creation of a genuinely 'Romanian' museum where the *bric-à-brac* of the Museum of Antiquities would be replaced by a carefully selected narrative built around history and tradition. He then resumed several unaccomplished projects, such as Romanian minister of Culture and Public Instruction Titu Maiorescu' (1840–1917) proposal of 1875 to create a national museum, or the one of the colonel Dimitrie Pappazoglu (1819–1891) who, in 1884, pleaded for the construction of an establishment, which gathered libraries, archives and a religious art museum. Tzigara-Samurcas imagined an ideal institution, its building designed according to the national style and uniting a museum, a picture gallery as well as a glyptothek in order to represent *all* domains of native art. These artistic institutes will only be different sections in a unique national museum. In 1907, in the periodical called *Convorbiri literare*, he explained in greater detail the plan and missions of his future museum. Tzigara-Samurcas' museography follows an organization of the collections revolving around the religious art section, hosted on the upper floor of the central part of the building, in several vaulted rooms especially designed to remind the visitor of the old churches' architecture. Thus, the most important section of the institution was conceived of a reconstitution of 'at least part of the lost splendors of ancestral churches and monasteries' (Tzigara-Samurcas, 1907: 7). Ethnographic and decorative artistic collections on one hand, prehistory and Greco-Roman sections, with their archaeology and numismatics collections and the paintings gallery, on the other would occupy both lateral parts of the building. Each section was to be organized around a reference object, loaded with a high memorial and symbolic impact and to constitute a chapter of a 'demonstrative history':

Set in such conditions and harboring all the artistic and cultural treasures of the peoples who lived on our land, from the most ancient times to today, the museum will constitute the most truthful and telling history of Romania. (Ibid.: 8)

The building was made up of an interior square courtyard surrounded by galleries that were to convey, through their structure, a monastic atmosphere. The courtyard was to have the function of accommodating a selection of stone objects [fig. 1–2].

The effort of exhibiting a whole range of art and draw lessons from it required examples from all times and all lands ever inhabited by the Romanians. These criteria for selection, similar to

those used at that time at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, included any piece that might illustrate the national history, being archaeological items, paintings, popular or decorative objects. Thus conceived, the intended display stressed the idea of a cultural continuity of the nation from prehistoric ages to the present, a crucial concept of the process of construction of Romanian identity and its affirmation in the public space. The use of history for political and moral purposes was reflected in the pedagogical aim of the institution, created as an instrument of national education. It was meant to instruct the people about the life and artistic centers of interest of their ancestors in order to create a collective awareness of the past and strengthen patriotism. However, these collections were also to raise the soul of the people, thanks to the respect of tradition. One of the principles of the institution, set out from 1906, was to get to know the heritage, systematically study it and exalt the potential power of its lessons for the public through colloquiums and demonstrative conferences organized in the rooms of the museum. It was more precisely conceived as a place where the elite could find artistic instruction and scientific tools. To this end, Tzigara-Samurcas gathered in a single place the National Museum, The Art School and a series of areas dedicated to study and research: a library, study and copy rooms as well as conference and exhibition halls.

In 1907, the Ethnographic and National Art Museum opened its door to the public with a temporary display: four rooms showing everyday life and artistic objects produced by the Romanian peasantry and only an ethnographic and an ecclesiastic section [fig. 3]. The first one, which had been recently constituted, presented several sub-sections. The most interesting artefacts were the textiles, wood pieces and ceramics. The second one was not systematically organized since it was based on the collections of the reserves of the Museum of Antiquities, along with pre-historical and Greco-Roman antiquities. Thus, the new institution, as it opened in 1907, was only the starting point of the 'large storage of Romanian culture' it was intended to become (Tzigara-Samurcas, 1910 *apud* Tzigara-Samurcas, 1987: 213). As its accomplishment depended on the whole range of its collections, in *Suntem vrednici de un muzeu national?* (1908) then in *Muzeul neamului romanesc. Ce a fost, ce este, ce ar trebui sa fie* (1910), Tzigara-Samurcas insisted on the final separation between the Romanian Museum and the Museum of Antiquities, the latter being in complete opposition to the missions and his vision of a national museum. Tzigara-Samurcas thus stressed the need for the specialization of the collections and the selection of objects to classify in the National Museum:

...that the Museum of Antiquities will keep only antiquities whereas the new Museum will exhibit all the native art (*arta pamanteana*). The former will include prehistory, the greco-roman period with the rich epigraphic treasures, as well as ancient numismatics. The Museum of National Art will be comprised of all the art of the Romanian people, from the most simple products of the peasants to the costumes of our princes, as well as the art which could be found in monasteries and churches through the country (Tzigara-Samurcas, 1908:6)

The plan and mission of his ideal museum were widely explained in his 1907 article and constantly reevaluated in the following five years, although they were to be only partially fulfilled. In 1937, the collections of the National Museum were still not gathered and the construction of the purpose-built venue had not been completed. In the preface of the *Catalogue de la section d'art paysan* published that same year, Tzigara-Samurcas reminds the reader, with the same fervor and conviction, of the constitutive act of 1912, and the role of the National Museum, and finally compares it to the current incomplete state of the project:

Following the constitutive act signed by the three kings of Romania, 'this National Museum is dedicated to gather the art collections which are scattered at present, in order to leave for the future generations a perfect mirror of the whole artistic thesaurus of the Romanian land (...)'. Before the other collections can be gathered in the new palace of the Museum, we install the section of peasantry art temporarily... (Tzigara-Samurcas, 1937: 3)

Therefore, Tzigara-Samurcas' museum project pertained to a consequent historicism, which determined the objects selected, a complex display and developed curatorial practices. The museum, conceived as *loci memoriae*, whose collections convey a strong memorial and symbolic power, was to revisit the local tradition through the strong moments of the national history.

Where Does Ethnography Belong?

In 1936, in the introduction to his *Romanian Museography*, Tzigara-Samurcas claimed that the central idea for his project was to 'give to the native art (*arta pamanteana*) - the peasant art - the place of honor that it deserved' (Tzigara-Samurcas, 1987: 163). Let us then remark first, that the creation of the National Museum mostly relied on rural art; secondly that 'native art' was exclusively limited to the creations of the Romanian peasant. We would like to analyze this change of paradigm in the museographic discourse of the time and to identify the causes of this change.

In *Muzeul nostru national*, Tzigara-Samurcas deplored the fact that official collections did not represent all aspects of the local arts, such as ceramics and popular pottery (Tzigara-Samurcas, 1906: 6). Filling this void became then one of the priorities of his new institution. This ambition can be traced back to 1874, when the National Museum of Antiquities received, through private donation, a collection of folk art, then again, at the turn of the century, when a series of fabrics and popular costumes were donated. Furthermore, through the decree promulgated in December 1875, the secretary of Culture and Public instruction of the time Titu Maiorescu (1840–1917), suggested the creation of four sections in the National Museum: industrial, historical paintings, cameo and a special section

to exhibit works on textiles, produced in the countryside : costumes, carpets, fabrics, etc. The objects are gathered geographically so that they form a complete and permanent exhibition of Romanian costumes and different regions of the country. (Nicolau, 1995: 414)

After several failed attempts, Tzigara-Samurcas succeeded in gathering and enriching the existing folk objects. He implemented a strategy to build a collection of national material culture based essentially on gathering items in the field. The institutionalization and growth of ethnographic collections came about in a harsh context, marked by insufficient and misused state funds. Nevertheless, the numerous donations of the King, amateurs or peasants rapidly help this fond grow. In 1907, Tzigara-Samurcas acquired, for the Museum, the peasant house of Antonie Mogos from the village of Ceauru in Oltenia [fig. 4]. Two years later, he added a wood church from Tiurea, Transylvania. By 1910, his efforts had helped the museum to acquire the makings for four rooms presenting, among other things, popular costumes and tools, wood objects and furniture and a rich collection of terra-cotta pieces. The collections and new acquisitions, carefully described in *Muzeul neamului romanesc. Ce a fost; ce este; ce ar trebui sa fie* (1910), had two functions: to offer a complete picture of the social and cultural life of the people and to bring 'our ethnic issue' to light, through the comparative study of items found in territories inhabited by the Romanians. (Tzigara-Samurcas, 1987: 221–232).

The National Museum opened at a time marked by the debate about tradition and national specificity, as Romanian society was experiencing modernization as an effect of the industrial development that was eroding native traditions and values (Demetrescu, 2010: 162). After a century of synchronism with Western cultural values, the Romanian society turned back to local heritage, and found in the world of peasants the foundations for cultural renewal. The political union of all provinces inhabited by Romanians in 1918 was to feed, once more, the patriotism based on the prominent rural civilization. The peasant then appeared not only as a 'champion of authenticity' (Cabanel, 2001: 14), but also as a real identitarian emblem. This conception of the peasantry came from the Romanian idea of the 'nation' which based its political aims for a Nation-State on the idea of a cultural nation rooted in its traditions and past. The nation, in the sense of linguistic and cultural community, which existed before the constitution and organization of the political State, this nation is, first, a matter of common origins, and then, of a common future within a united state. Thus conceived, it is defined by the irreducible singularity of a culture that gravitates around the concept of *Volksgeist*, deep-rooted in a heritage, almost a determinism of a shared memory, a common culture and even a common race – these notions are at the heart of nationalist theories in Romania (Popescu, 2004: 18–19). Historical and linguistic scriptures, social sciences, then archaeological and ethnographical studies stressed the idea of a spiritual unity of the people, the valorisation of this specificity, through the question of continuity and origins. The belief in an organic and vitalist durability of the Romanian people made the peasant the central figure of history, he was the one ensuring the continuity of a nation defined geographically on the belief that its origins were in the Daco-Roman fusion, and beyond that, in the Thracian tribes. The arts also struggled to define the unique content of the national identity, shaped from cultural values that lent authenticity by a return to roots (Demetrescu, *op. cit.*: 162). The dialog with tradition nevertheless remained complex as this notion of specificity could be put into question by the heritage of Greco-Roman influences mixed with Byzantine, Oriental and Occidental ones. Thus, to really comprehend the thread of tradition, one had to go back to the antique and prehistoric origins of the nation.

After 1918, several works dedicated to Romanian folk art were published in the country and abroad. In *L'Art populaire en Roumanie* (1923), the famous interwar historian Nicolae Iorga (1871–1940) supported the existence of a direct filiation between the Romanian peasants and the Thracians, the most remote ancestors of the nation. He claimed that the trace of the ancient Thracians' which could be found at the populations of the same race in the Balkans, survived in Romanian villages until about 1800. He built his demonstration on the comparative study of residence and primitive objects on one side, and the house, fabrics and tools of the peasant on the other. Despite the fact that the most ancient objects produced by peasants only date back to the end of the 18th century, the similarity of geometrical ornaments and linear and abstract style are witnesses of their direct relation with Neolithic productions.

The display of the National Museum in the interwar period resumed this ideological construction imagined around the folk object, which emphasized a Romanian multi-secular tradition. For the ceramics section, Tzigara-Samurcas imagined a scenography that placed at the center of the room various folk objects around a large Roman piece from Niculitel, an archaeological site situated in Dobroudja, in the East of Romania. All around them, he placed Neolithic vases from the sites of Sipeinit and Monteoru as well as contemporary peasant pottery

'hardly recognisable from the ancient pieces' (Tzigara-Samurcas, 1937: 25). The windows standing against the walls showed 'characteristic specimens' of the contemporary pottery from the regions of Oltenia, Muntenia, Moldavia, Bucovina and Transylvania, as well as Neolithic ceramics and figurines from the village of Ariusd [fig. 5]. By presenting 'primitive' items next to contemporary ones, he illustrated the desire to link formal and decorative resemblances in order to prove at once the high antiquity of the Romanian culture and its survival in peasant handcrafts (Tzigara-Samurcas, 1938, 'Izvoade de arta taraneasca': 97–99). Furthermore, the interwar writings of Tzigara-Samurcas repeatedly resumed the idea of an ideal continuity between folklore and modern culture through rich illustrative material where Neolithic vases and figurines were presented next to contemporary folk pottery [fig. 6–7].

In the context of the radicalisation of the discourse on tradition and national specificity of the 1930s, Tzigara-Samurcas and museum curator of the time Francisc Sirato (1877–1953) defined the specificity and character of Romanian national arts through the scientific study of ethnographic collections. In *Muzeul de arta nationala* (1932), Francisc Sirato claimed that the mission of a national art museum was to present 'the synthesis of elements of style, shape and color to highlight the necessarily typical elements in the establishment of the plastic character of artistic expression of national ethnic groups' (Sirato, 1932: 75–76). Tzigara-Samurcas supported this claim, as he believed that 'any museum with a national characteristic was supposed to set establish the artistic specific' (Tzigara-Samurcas, 1930: 4). To accomplish this mission, one must begin by gathering materials from all regions of the unified country and from all periods of time, that were necessary to the comparative and analytic study of the traditional material civilization. This step was followed by a selection of originals, 'typical' elements from those coming from elsewhere ; once the selection was made, and the originals were identified, one could finally proceed to the study of the ethnic character in art (Sirato, *op. cit.*: 75–76).

Exposing local art in all its forms is the same idea as in 1906; at this time, the museum was supposed to show the course of history through a group of strong pieces of the national heritage. However, in the 1930s, these collections became 'ethnic referents'. The interwar period also gave a new significance to the concept of 'native art' (*arta pamanteana*). At the start, the National Museum was meant to show 'all native art'; it gathered the artistic productions created on territories inhabited by Romanians and referred to any object that showed the country's culture and civilization. In 1925, in *L'Art du peuple roumain*, the distinction between the art of Romania and the art of the Romanian people appeared for the first time. The former stood for the art of the populations that inhabited or passed through the land defined by the political borders of the Nation-State, whereas the later was the one made by the people - the peasants, and that was 'the only one that can be called national art' (Tzigara-Samurcas, 1925: 3–4). This new definition implied a shift towards the ethnic group. The writings of Samurcas at the time kept highlighting the concept of 'purely Romanian' as applicable to an object created by a peasant in his solitude and intimacy, sheltered from all influences, hence 'its originality', 'its clear personality' and 'its specific character' (Ibid.: 1–2).

Peasant art, which was a genuine depository of local tradition, became the model to follow and the foundation for a new national art [fig. 8]. Since its creation, the National Museum had a practical purpose: supplying artists with models to inspire modern creation, and more specifically, the applied arts. As it encouraged the return to 'good tradition' (Tzigara-Samurcas, 1987: 229),

the peasant objects were to contribute to the rebirth of a 'splendid national art' (Ibid.: 242), which was to find its place in the museum as well. This new national art was, as Ioana Popescu argued, the purely intellectual construction of the elites and laid in a careful selection of 'typically Romanian' elements (Popescu, 1995: 400–402). Its success was due to the propaganda made through albums of 'national' decorative motives, catalogues of the peasant art section and the diffusion of the productions of the craft industry. The promotion of peasant art and the aim to advertise the collections of the National Museum abroad are illustrated by the numerous participations of this institution to exhibitions, international colloquiums and by the various publications. Contrarily to his pre-war production, between 1925 and 1937, Tzigara-Samurcas mostly published books that were accessible to a foreign readership: in 1925 and 1928, at the exhibitions of Romanian art in Geneva and of carpets in Paris, he published respectively *L'Art du peuple roumain*, *Tapis roumains* and, in *L'Art vivant*, a study of folk art in Romania; three years later, appeared the album that illustrated the temporary sections of the National Art Museum, with a title in French. In 1937, still in French, the catalogue of the peasant art section was published in Bucharest: it included a meticulous description of the collections and a long introductory text. At this level of our analysis, the question is : how was this art perceived from abroad? Did its voluntarily specific character convince the foreign audience?

The *Muzeul National* at the Exhibitions in Paris

Between 1906 and 1937, the National Museum participated in twelve exhibitions organized in several European capitals, three being in Paris: the ancient and modern Romanian art exhibition housed by the Jeu de Paume Museum (1925), a carpet exhibition dedicated to Eastern and Northern Europe organised by the Decorative Arts Museum (1927) and the World Fair of 1937. This chapter will analyze these participations in terms of the official promotion of an identity that revisited national stereotypes, myths of origin and local authenticity. Besides, through several critical texts, exhibition catalogues and diverse acquisitions, we will try to understand how the French audience pictures Romanian cultural specificity during this period.

On May 24th, 1925, *Le Temps* announced the opening, at the Jeu de Paume Museum, of an exhibition about Romanian art. It was the fourth and last exhibition of foreign art programmed by Léonce Bénédict after the war 'and which let us enter so deeply in the character and the soul of races' (Thiebault-Sisson, 1925: 4). Clearly retrospective, it offered a comprehensive look at the Romanian artistic scene 'from the *primitive schools* (icon paintings, frescoes, sculptures, decorative arts, goldsmith's trade, fabrics, carpets, etc.) to the 19th century artists and a selection of contemporaries' (Anon., 1925: 3). The National Museum was presented in the first room of the exhibition with tapestries, fabrics, embroideries, costumes and ceramics coming from all Romanian provinces, dating mostly from the second half of the 19th century.

Critics were very enthusiastic about the richness of 'antique' treasures - rustic objects - but also about religious art which monopolized most of the papers written about the Romanian exhibition. Embroideries destined for religious services, icons and shrouds with portraits of the Valachian princes were noticed by Louis de Meurville, Henri Focillon, Thiebault-Sisson and reproduced in *L'Art vivant*, *L'Illustration* and *Le Figaro* [fig. 9]. However, the break between ancient art, of Byzantine influence, and 'the modern western school' (Dezzarois, 1925: 579) made it

difficult to define the specific character of the Romanian school and to seize the thread of tradition:

Will we find, amidst the current works of Romania, the continuity of this mystic and resonant art, of this realism in impression that is so serious and yet so picturesque! Yes, in popular works, in these delicate embroideries where the geometrical rigor of the motives is mitigated by the harmonious simplicity of the tones and fabrics used. (...) Yes, in the rustic approach of the ceramics. No, not in painting itself. There, you will find no prolongation, no point of transition... (R. R.; 1925: 739)

Facing this real diversity of orientations, the Romanian elite tried to push forward the elements, which could best show local tradition and its specificity. It was described as a kind of popular sensitivity, a unity of feeling thanks to which the Romanian school managed to keep its own physiognomy through the centuries (Cantacuzène, 1925: 65). The answers from the French critics were again diverse. To the columnist of *Europe nouvelle*, the characteristic Romanian art was its religious art, which finds its continuity in the simplicity, charm and rusticity of popular creation. Other critics questioned the specific character of the whole Romanian school. In his account of the exhibition, Louis de Meurville wondered : 'Has there ever been such a thing as a Romanian art ?' and lingered a long time on the numerous Byzantine, Eastern, Venetian, Russian and Western influences it underwent through the centuries. As for the folk art, it was 'not less typical, borrowing from all its neighbors and building itself an entity of harmonious colors and various drawings' (Meurville, 1925: 4). Pierre Courthion also noticed a carpet from the region of Bucovin for its Eastern influences (Courthion, 1925: 29). In this sense the exhibition was interesting to both critics: for its richness in 'antique' treasures, these were nevertheless not specific, as they were the product of a heterogeneous cultural space.

Thiebault-Sisson also pointed out, that Asian and Mediterranean influences could be found in rural art but, contrary to Meurville and Courthion, he considered that they were 'incorporated in the Romanian sensitivity and disciplined by it...' (Thiebault-Sisson, *op. cit.*: 4). Furthermore, he put forward the idea of continuity between the peasant pottery and fabrics and contemporary creation:

Modern and ancient, all these pieces are treated in the same spirit and ruled by the same formula. The present respectfully and naively follows the path of the past. (Ibid.)

In the catalogue of the exhibition, Tzigara-Samurcas insisted on the idea that the exposed items, despite the recent dating, reproduced far more ancient models. Moreover, books published in Paris in the 1920s resumed the same clichés about the remnants of 'high antiquity' that characterised the folk fabrics and 'pottery adorned with spirals which still survive in our peasant pottery' (Tzigara-Samurcas, 1928, *Tapis roumains*: 34). Those were pieces that bear a clearly distinct identity, as it was indeed made by the peasant 'according to local tradition', they transmitted 'the poetry of its soul' (Ibid.). Thus an effective tool for propaganda was born and taken up by the Western press that launched the image of folk art as faithful to a several-thousand-year-old tradition, conscientiously granting the recognition of continuity:

In the history of this Romania, which was open to so many exchanges, influences, popular art represents the major agreement, the strengths and charms which, throughout time, have the least changed. (Focillon, 1925, 'L'Exposition de l'art roumain au Jeu de Paume': 167)

To Henri Focillon who, besides, knew of the recent work by Nicolae Iorga on this matter, popular creations presented in Paris were 'as ancient as the tribes settled in the Transylvanian regions in times past'; as one studies them, 'sometimes on the splash of a jar, in the hollow of a plate, one can recognize the turn or the rose of ancient Hellenic civilizations' (Focillon, 1925, 'L'exposition d'art roumain': 16). Thus, the peasant was the element of continuity between the past and the present and carried the 'genius' of the people. In the magazine *Revue de deux mondes*, Focillon blessed the 'ingenuity' and the 'primitivism' of popular art. It bore witness to a patriarchal society, which had preserved ancient themes, techniques and inspiration for centuries. In the intimacy of its universe, the peasant created his objects spontaneously, his only landmark being his artistic feeling, hence the purity, originality and freshness of his artistic productions. Thus, the exhibition organized at the Jeu de Paume testified 'not only to the richness of the antique treasure but also to the continuity of this creative energy, the charm of a refined and robust sensitivity' (Ibid.). Despite the cultural, political and social diversity of the Romanian countries, Focillon claimed the existence of a unique 'Romanian spirit', as well as a unitarian thought characterized by a 'native charm', a 'refined sensitivity' (Ibid.), an 'air nostalgia' and a 'dreamy subtlety' and of a Romanian art which expresses it through the centuries (Focillon, 1925, 'L'Art et l'histoire en Roumanie': 19). The Romanian soul, which could be detected in the artistic productions of the peasant, became the argument of a specificity, the specificity of the race.

In 1937, the rural world was valorized as a major unitarian and identitarian factor and the ethnic soul as a fundamental component of the national specificity. The artistic continuity and the fusion between popular civilization and orthodox culture were the main elements of the identity image, which promoted a 'profound and organic Romania' (Vlad, 2007: 199). The peasant products exhibited in Paris were numerous: in the Romanian pavilion, sociologist and general curator of the exhibition Dimitrie Gusti (1880–1955), offered two reconstitutions of the inside of a peasant house from Transylvania; then, at the exhibition of rural housing at the Porte Maillot, Henri Stahl (1901–1991), Romanian cultural anthropologist, ethnographer and sociologist, presented the results of the monographic campaigns of Gusti in the Romanian villages and the model of the Village Museum, which opened in 1936 in Bucharest. Finally, in the international pavilion, Tzigara-Samurcas organized, with different objects from the three sections of the National Museum, an exhibition about peasant art. He wanted to 'give a summarizing character' and offer 'a synthesis of peasant art' (Tzigara-Samurcas, 1938, 'Muzeul National Carol I la Expozitia din Paris': 104). The display as he conceived it, housed *de facto* the 'National Museum'. He resumed, almost identically, the scenography from the ceramics section of the museum in Bucharest. Here one could again find the idea of gathering, in the middle of the room, the antique pieces and contemporary peasant pottery, while placing other objects around it: carpets, costumes or wooden objects [fig. 11].

On the whole, the Romanian participation benefited from an excellent reaction (Lepretre, 1937: 1–2). We will only focus here on two texts that deal with the exhibition of the National Museum: the first one was published in *Beaux-Arts* by George-Henri Rivière and André Varagnac [fig. 10] and the second in the paper *La Flèche* by F. M. Calmont. Rivière and Varagnac were excited by the variety, the richness, the archaism of a popular art that transported them back to prehistoric worlds:

Ah ! what a singular intoxication it is to be dreaming one moment in front of this many-colored geometry, these flowers, these stylish birds picking festoons, and to think about the surprising bible of our popular European knowledge... (Rivière, Varagnac, 1937: 12)

They appreciated the beauty of the setting of the exhibition, which reached ‘a grasping scale in the embroidery of ancient noble and peasant ceremonial costumes’ (Ibid.). As for the crafted objects and elements of popular-orthodox culture, they noticed the influence of antique, Balkanic and Eastern decorative themes, more specifically from Asia. The prehistoric motif of the double spiral could be seen on peasant pottery and antic symbols ‘of our European people’ such as the horse, the rooster or solar wheels were noticed on door casements, on the porch of sculpted wood. The great passion of Rivière for folklore was evident from his attempt to complete the collection of ethnographic Romanian art of the former museum of the Trocadéro. That is why he asked the director of the National Museum of Bucharest for a few pieces, such as potteries and the large wooden porch, which became the pathway through the Romanian and Yugoslavian section ¹.

Like Rivière, Lassigne or Focillon at the time, F. M. Calmont praised the vestiges of a thousand-year-old humanity, highlighting the Neolithic tradition of Romanian popular art. He pointed out the ‘naive and harmonious execution’ of the votive wood cross, which reminded him of those ‘from home’. However, through the analysis of the four costumes exhibited, he concluded that peasant art, because it drew its inspiration from indigenous tradition, was an authentic and representative production for the country. To sum it up, ‘the small folkloric museum’ where the items exhibited were not ‘simple anecdotic curiosities’ but ‘the most elegant and refined art’ appeared to him as ‘one of the marvels of the exhibition’ (Calmont, 1937; *apud* Tzigara-Samurcas, 1938, ‘Muzeul National Carol I la Expozitia din Paris’: 107).

Conclusions

The national specificity as it is defined by the National Museum of Romania relies on a complex and contradictory approach to local heritage whose domain of reference is progressively restricted to the ethnographic object. That is why, after a first stage of accumulation and institutionalization of all areas of artistic inheritance, the national process determined a selection in favour of folkloric heritage that emphasized its nationalization. Museographic and official rhetoric are then grounded in the collective conscience of a nation as mostly defined by ethnic criteria. The museum became then the author of the national narrative. Making an inventory of and inventing its heritage, it made the course of history visible, traced the artistic specific and contributed actively to its affirmation in the local and international public space.

Notes

¹ Bucharest, the Museum of the Romanian Peasant, fondul ‘‘Aur’’ Archives, inv. 8 National Art Museum Carol I. Correspondence, the 1st of January 1933-13th of December 1939: p. 66; inv. 36, 28th of August 1937, Donation Project to Ethnography Museum of Trocadéro after the World Fair of 1937, p. 75; inv. 65, 5th of January 1938, Details about the return of the objects of the National Art Museum, with a list of those offered to the Musée de l’Homme, Palais du Trocadéro.

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