A Study on the First Generation of Romanian Women-Painters and the Continuity of Their Modernity

Mihaela Pop

ANNALS of the University of Bucharest
Philosophy Series

Vol. LXV, no. 2, 2016
pp. 131 – 143.
A STUDY ON THE FIRST GENERATION OF ROMANIAN WOMEN-PAINTERS AND THE CONTINUITY OF THEIR MODERNITY

MIHAELA POP

Abstract

This work intends to discuss about the first generation of Romanian women-painters within the wider context of the condition of woman within the Romanian society during the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. We will develop the following path: a) the movement of women’s emancipation in Romania – characteristics and phases; b) the Romanian art-world and this movement of women-painters.

Keywords: women emancipation, education, women artists, cultural development, economic development.

I. Introduction

The movement of women emancipation unveiled various difficult problems concerning the social relationships based on the difference between genders. The 19th century succeeded in conceptualizing women’s condition as a social and cultural group using various scientific concepts as: inclusion / exclusion, group rights, individual rights, the relationship public-private.

Within the Romanian territory as well as within the South-Eastern European part, the relationship public – private seems to be a relevant criterion for the analysis of the women’s condition during the 19th century.

1 Professor, University of Bucharest, Faculty of Philosophy. Email: pop.mihaela.a@gmail.com.
century. The masculine is the absolute equivalent for the public domain while the feminine is specific to the private domain, such as the house, the children and their education (Olariu 2006, 33). One can also remark women’s judicial incapacity. They were only considered as sensorial human beings, incapable of thinking and evaluating in an intelligent, abstract manner (Ciupală 2003, 51).

This natural determinism was transferred within the social world and legal framework, considering that woman should be watched by the omnipotent authority of the man. This inferior condition for women was prolonged through the entire 19th century even though in certain social milieux, a certain process of emancipation started to manifest itself after the first half of the century. During the second half of the century this process of emancipation becomes more evident, in domains as education, cultural life, social assistance and medical care. We are going to present one of the most characteristic aspects of this process.

II. Education

After 1859 when the Unification of Moldavia with Wallachia was achieved, the reform of education system made possible the access to school for young girls. The public primary school was legislated ever since 1822 and the Education law of 1864 assured the juridical frame also for the secondary school level. At the end of the 19th century, the public education system in Romania became really competitive. Girls could continue their university studies abroad and come back to start a professional carrier, if they wanted. This was possible of course, especially for the young girls who came from either a medium or high social and economic level. In 1895 the Romanian education system did not impose anymore any restriction for young girls.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the high university system had already a significant number of students. The University of Bucharest, for instance, had in 1910 around 442 students, from which 131 were female students. This is how the first phase of women’s emancipation seemed to have been accomplished from a legal aspect and this is when emancipation was born. This created the possibility
that each cultivated woman could better understand herself as a human being governed by reason and capable of progressing in knowledge and understanding the world in which she lived.

In 1913, one of the Romanian women leaders, Eleonora Strâtilescu said: “In order to raise a woman to the dignity level that she deserves, the best solution is the education, as the real freedom is the one assured by culture.” The motto of the Journal for Romanian Woman was Freedom through light (of culture and education) – a real Enlightenment motto, one could say. In consequence, it was right to have access to education which played a primordial role in the process of emancipation of Romanian women and not the electoral right which is a political one.

III. Second phase of women’s emancipation

At the beginning of the 20th century, the philosophical option of women’s emancipation went into a new phase, the civic affirmation. The main purposes were: a) preparation of highly cultivated women to become responsible citizens and b) rising the economic standards for the great majority of women at an acceptable economic level. As a consequence, by means of feminist publications such as Union of Romanian women (which published the first article of the feminist movement entitled Feminism in 19122), they organized local committees, public conferences, debates and publications having this subject as main topics. Women understood quite rapidly that they could become part of the public social space, especially in the urban areas.

At the beginning of the 19th century they started organizing small groups of women who had mutual interests and preoccupations (as literary books or musical activities), making thus possible the life of aristocratic local gatherings and salons. Step by step, they became more competent in critical debates on literary journals of high cultural level not only published in Romanian language, but also of widely known

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2 We have to mention that the feminist movement as it is understood in the West was not so manifest in Romania. What is usually considered the basic characteristic is the process of emancipation of Romanian women. See Ciupală 2003, 75.
publications. All these prove a higher, superior level of cultural education which was finally achieved. Women became at their turn artists, for instance good writers. Such cultural meetings were active especially during the end of the 19th century when they were transformed in very well organized cultural societies as The Literary society, The Society of Arts and Crafts or The Philharmonic Society.

IV. Social and medical care system

During the Independence War (1877-1878), these cultural societies became a real front screen for courageous political decisions. They became stations for the preparation of supplies for the Romanian army who was fighting against the Ottoman Empire. Women of such societies were directly involved in medical care, especially in field hospitals. Numerous rich women transformed their mansions in medical unites for wounded soldiers. The Independence War radically changed both the social and the mundane activities (talks, social gatherings, cultural debates) in associations having a clear legal identity with very well established purposes. The war, a dramatic and serious experience, transformed the literary salon in a field hospital and home for wounded soldiers. The Romanian Red Cross was founded in 1876. A little later on the Romanian Women Red Cross was organized and functioned very well during the next war, The First World War. This proves that women's emancipation was already accomplished and women had already become aware of their public role hence: the public space was not a prohibited domain for them, anymore.

Another characteristic of the emancipation of Romanian women was their implication in an institutionalized relationship with the Romanian Orthodox Church. In 1910 they founded The National Orthodox Society of Romanian Women. At the beginning, it was projected as a reaction to the activity of Catholic associations, but later on it developed cultural and social significant objectives, especially within the education of young girls. This education also supposed a civic education. The Society also organized schools for adults and public libraries, public conferences on civic topics, especially on the popularization of scientific
discoveries and on patriotic subjects. After 6 years of intense activity, The Society counted: 17 kindergartens (900 children), two institutes of education, 22 public libraries, a great number of public conferences in hospitals, prisons, factories, military units and villages. In numerous factories the Society also organized classes for adults.

A quite impressive number of women, real personalities, became cultural and social models of behavior for the great majority of Romanian women. We will mention some of them.

1. Elena Ghica, (Helena Koltzova Massalskaya), born in 1828 in Bucharest, studies in Dresden, Berlin, Vienna and Venice. She married a Russian count and officer of high rank and lived 6 years at the imperial Court of the Tsar Nicolas I. Then she settled down in Italy and supported the cause of the Unification of the Romanian Principalities during the 1850s in the diplomatic media. She became famous for her texts *Women in the Orient* (2 volumes) and *About women by a woman*, works published during 1859-1860 and respectively in 1865 at Zurich and Paris. Her literary pseudonym was *Dora d’Istria*. She also became famous in the USA and was elected as a corresponding member of the American Society of Social Sciences.

2. Alexandrina (married) Ghica, great cultural personality of the second half of the 19th century. In 1907 she established a significant annually rent for the Romanian Academy basically for the acquisition and publication of historical documents concerning the history of Romanian territories.

3. Alexandrina Cantacuzino, born in 1881, was the leader of the feminist movement in Romania. In 1921 she founded the National Council of Romanian Women and the Feminist Petite Entante.

4. Marta Bibescu was a remarkable personality of the literary and diplomatic milieu, both Romanian and French, during the Two World Wars. She was a member of the Royal Academy in Brussels and wrote more than 40 works under the French literary pseudonym *Lucille Decaux*.

5. Queen Elisabeth of Romania (1843-1916), wife of Charles I of Romania (1866-1914), played an immense role in a great national project: to render the Romanian culture more familiar
in the Western countries. For instance, she unveiled the beauty of the traditional Romanian costumes wearing them herself. This decision generated a real movement that reinforced the patriotic feeling among Romanians. Queen Elisabeth of Romania also encouraged the development of small domestic industries and enormously contributed to the organization of the medical social care system, especially during the First World War. She founded hospitals, the ambulance system and assured medication for the wounded. She was also a very talented writer and wrote many texts (more than 45), either memories, geographical descriptions, poems and prose, or ethnographic studies referring to the Romanian life under the pseudonym Carmen Sylva. Some valuable Romanian artists were encouraged and supported economically by the Queen Elisabeth, especially the poet Vasile Alecsandri, the painter Nicolae Grigorescu and the musician George Enescu.

One can remark that the emancipation of the Romanian women during the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th was a long process which evolved through various phases and had certain features. The emancipation passed through a first phase which stressed the role of education for young girls who, through their primary and then secondary classes, became aware of their social condition, of the role they had to play in society. It is evident that this process was not a uniform one and did not evolve equally in urban areas as in rural areas, but also made possible a certain civilizational progress. As the emancipation through education was expanding significantly, one can remark that the feminist movement got a structure, became more visible in the public space and got involved in greater social and cultural responsibilities. More and more female personalities got a respectable social status and became models of successful careers for younger generations. This phenomenon is specific also for the cultural milieux, not only for the literary world but also for the fine arts.
V. The first generation of Romanian women-artists

We have to mention from the beginning that the tradition of women-artists in Europe is long and it expresses the same difficulty these women were confronted with: the difficult confirmation of a woman-artist in a male community.

– Marguerite Van Eyck (15th century), sister of the famous brothers Van Eyck and who seems to have been appreciated during her life as much as her brothers.

– Elisabeta Sirani (1638-1665) was painter at the Court of the Duke Cosimo III Medici and was poisoned by her rivals who envied her due to her success to the public.

– Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun (1755-1842) was the official painter of the queen Marie Antoinette of France.

– Sophonisba Anguissola (1532-1625) was a painter of the Court of Philip II of Spain and seems to have been blind since her youth.
Some of the Avant-Guard movements as the Dada and the Surrealism encouraged women to manifest their creativity. In order to overpass certain social and gender obstacles, women-painters used pseudonyms or male names. Only using such solutions they could exhibit their works in galleries. Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938) for instance, signed her paintings only by her family name. She was the first women-painter admitted in the famous Société Nationale des Beaux Arts in Paris. She was also mother of another famous painter, Maurice Utrillo.

During the end of the 19th century, significant social, political and artistic changes happened. The Union of Women-Artists was created in Paris. Berthe Morisot (1841-1895), Marie Bracquemond (1840-1916) and Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) were impressionist painters deeply admired by the public. They are among the first women accepted by an artistic movement.
In Romania, a country with a short tradition in fine arts at that time, women started to manifest their artistic qualities at the end of the 19th century and especially at the beginning of the 20th. It is the period when women’s emancipation became stronger through the contribution of the educational system. This explains the fact that many young girls (in comparison to the total amount of students) were studying at that time in the artistic domains of fine arts and later on they were accepted and recognized by the artistic community.

Romania was among the first countries where young girls were accepted as students of the High School of Fine Arts both in Iași and Bucharest after 1895. The supporter of this modern thought was the painter Gheorghe Tattarescu. However, the director of the School of Fine Arts in Bucharest, Theodor Aman, was more reluctant explaining that it was “impossible to admit young girls to work together with young boys in front of nude male models” (Cristea, Popescu 2004, 16).

The young female students were aware of the efforts they had to overpass in order to get the public confirmation and sympathy in a world dominated by men. Many young girls would go on ameliorating their talent abroad, in the most famous European towns and Academies of Arts as Paris, Dresden, Vienna, Munich, or Venice (Bădilă 2016).

Lucia Demetriade Bălăcescu and Cecilia Cuțescu Storck studied at the famous Academies Julian and Ranson. Cecilia Storck got also a diploma at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich and then she continued to develop her skills and talent in the studio of the French painter André Lhote in Paris.

Michaela Eleuthériade was influenced by Raoul Dufy’s art. Milița Petrașcu, both painter and sculptor, studied in Moscow with the woman-painter Natalia Goncharova and had a very solid friendship with this famous avant-gardist woman. Later on she went to Munich, to the Academy of Fine Arts where she studied with great painters as Vassili Kandinski and Aleksei Jawlenski. Marica Râmniceanu participated to the artistic exhibitions organized by Marcel Janco, Milița Petrașcu and other Dadaist and abstractionist painters.

The first professional association was founded in 1916 under the patronage of the Queen Elisabeth of Romania. During the same year, the group organized the first exhibition of paintings. The founders of this
Society were Cecilia Cuțescu Stork, Olga Greceanu and Nina Arbore, who were very well appreciated by the royal family. This society, named *Society of women-painters and sculptors* continued to be active till 1927. They organized numerous exhibitions in Bucharest which were very well perceived by the press and the public at the time. One could read articles about the “exquisite feminism” of those works of art, about “the seriousness of the mutual effort” of the women-artists, or about the “disappearance of futile effects, the clarification of intentions in the case of young talents” (Bădilă 2016, 17).

In 1924 these women-artists created the Trade-Union of the Arts thus proving a very well consolidated professional consciousness. We have to mention that in 1916 Cecilia Cuțescu Stork became the first woman who was teaching in the department of Decorative arts of the School of Fine Arts in Bucharest.

During 1924-1938, these women-artists got the confirmation of their talent and success. Here are some moments and names of this national and international confirmation:

*International prizes*:

1909 – *Gold medal at the international exhibition in Rome* – Elena Popea

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3 Here are some fragments of the critical chronics published in the press of those times. All the quoted fragments are extracted from *Ladies of Romanian Fine Arts who distinguished themselves between the two World Wars*, Bucharest, Monitorul Oficial, 2004, pp. 30-33: “As a whole, and taking into account the fact that this is a women’s exhibition, it gives the impression of force... Very different characters and original temperaments are being rendered in detail... The women-artists’ idea of exhibiting together was brilliant and their exhibition at the Athenaeum will certainly be visited with much interest.” (P. Georgescu-Rachtivanu, “Women Artists – An Exhibition at the Athenaeum”, in *Flacăra*, year V, no. 19, 20 February 1916); “Women’s activity here – we avoid calling it feminist, attained remarkable dimensions... in cultural institutions and lately, in the Romanian academies, the Romanian women have given beautiful examples of energy and force, love for work and progress; they actually rival their male competitors.” (Mircea Freamăt, “The Romanian Women and Art – Exhibition of the Women Painters”, in *Artistic Life*, year 1, no. 1, 1st of March, 1916); “Along the artistic evolution here, women, who only a couple of years ago would give merely one or two fully praised and well-known representatives kept enlarging their group with newly discovered talents and offer us such exhibitions that rouse the admiration of the artistic elite.
At the official Salons, the works created by women are no longer placed in hidden corners; on the contrary, they receive all marks of respect, beside the works of our outstanding masters. It is, therefore, a great satisfaction that we have expressed our views on the comprehensive work created by such women artists as... Mrs. Delavrancea – D. Filotti-Atanasiu, Popea, R. Maniu, N. Arbore... in them we can see the professional artists, who handle their brush with talent, force and inspiration.” (Fulmen (Ecaterina Raicoviceanu), “Women and Painting” in Adevărul, year XXXIII, no. 11070, 6 of May, 1920); “Mrs. Storck’s other canvases – apart from a couple of landscapes where she really is concerned with the straightforward rendering of nature as it is – show her desire to go on with what she has been doing for a couple of years now, that is to make up decorative creations by putting together and interpreting certain lively shapes... Her composition is studied carefully and smartly.” (P. Georgescu-Rachtivanu, “Women-Painters – An Exhibition at the Athenaeum” in Flacăra, year V, no. 9, February 20, 1916); “Miss Maniu’s exhibits are, actually, most self-defining. By means of a not very wide range of colors, she succeeds in rendering the aspect of an upturned field somewhere in Romania, with the forceful light and shade incongruity which keeps throwing the burning sunshine all over the place. Miss Rodica Maniu is undoubtedly an artist of temperament. She has been endowed with that great ability in painting the light effects, which highly facilitates her solving of matters pertaining to perspective and coloring.” (Mircea Freamăt, “The Romanian Women and Art – Exhibition of the Women Painters” in Artistic Life, year 1, no. 1, 1st of March, 1916); “The watercolors painted by Mrs. Brateș are throbbing with atmosphere. Her style is ample and by no means unnatural; with her, the color is accurate and the substance is utterly transparent. Her works convey a pleasant feeling of earnestness and discretion whereas the subject is always placed in perfect taste.” (P. Georgescu-Rachtivanu, “Women Painters – An Exhibition at the Athenaeum” in Flacăra, year V, no. 9, February 20, 1916).
National Prizes:
1929 – Prize of the Ministry of Arts for Margareta Sterian
1939 – Prize ‘I.G. Palade’ of the Romanian Academy for Lucia Demetriade Bălăcescu
1942 – Prize ‘Elena et Gheorghe M. Vlasto’ of the Romanian Academy for Miliţa Petrașcu
1957 – Cecilia Cuţescu Storck received the title Honoured Master in Monumental Art
1945, 1965, 1969 – Prize of the Union of Artists – Vanda Sachelarie Vladimirescu
1972 – Miliţa Petrașcu and in 1975 Margareta Sterian – Prize of the Union of Artists

VI. Conclusions

One can thus remark that women’s contribution to the Romanian art had, during the beginning of the 20th century, a remarkable affirmation, stimulating the development of the Romanian artistic activity. Many women-artists of the following generations will take as models, the style and the attitude of this first generation that succeeded to manifest its creativity through effort and difficulty. Even if their number was impressive, not all of them succeeded in going on with their artistic carrier. After the Second World War the dramatic political changes in Romania made any artistic activity impossible for some of them, as their physical survival. Those who succeeded to pursue their carrier had to fight forcefully for their affirmation, not only with the new artistic and political critics, but also with the new public who had already changed the artistic preferences due to the new orientations imposed by the communist ideology which encouraged a specific style – the socialist realism – in opposition with the avant-gardist and post-avant-gardist explorations. These women-artists, having a robust talent and a solid artistic education, had explored all the artistic genres: painting, sculpture, graphics, decorative art and various themes as
portrait, landscape, still life, maternity, compositions etc. This is a convincing proof of their artistic talent.

REFERENCES


