THE SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDIES OF THE ROMANIAN ACADEMY "NICOLAE IORGA" INSTITUTE OF HISTORY

G. OPRESCU. A MONOGRAPHIC STUDY Institutional history, art historiography, and life history

DOCTORAL THESIS ABSTRACT

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Ph.D. Candidate, Ioana Alexandra Apostol **Keywords**: biography, the First World War, the League of Nations, museum, university, communism, art history, art critique

In Romania, art history as a discipline of history, as the object of institutionalized research, and as an independent academic field, owes its existence mainly to G. Oprescu (November 27, 1881, Câmpulung-Muscel – August 13, 1969, Bucharest). Indisputably, he impacted how we study, research, and write art history today, but especially the way art research is organized within the institutional frame. Between his career as a university professor to that of museum and research institute director, from art critique to historiographic endeavours, Oprescu was an authority in the field of art history for almost four decades, from the 1930s to the end of the 1960s. His influence as an art historian is still ongoing, the titles of his books and studies regularly emerging in specialized bibliographies used in universities and local research institutes. He was equally concerned with Romanian and European art, approaching both traditional, modern and contemporary art, the latter becoming the object of his art chronicles. The historiographical and critical contributions were doubled by his vocation as an institution organizer. He was the director of "Toma Stelian" Museum (1931–1947), he headed the Department of Art History of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Bucharest, being the founder and the director (for twenty years) of the Institute of Art History, which today bears his name. G. Oprescu's relationship with the work of art was not limited strictly to his professional and academic interests, the historian also being a passionate art collector, a bibliophile, and a knowledgeable music lover. Throughout his life, he gathered an impressive collection of more than 10,000 pieces: drawings and engravings, paintings, sculptures, and applied art objects, which he bequeathed in 1962 to the Academy of the Popular Republic of Romania. Besides his share in the establishment of art history as a discipline in the Romanian higher learning environment and his capacity as an art collector, G. Oprescu was also involved in cultural diplomacy. His career abroad developed between 1923 and 1939, as one of the Romanian envoys to the League of Nations in Geneva, where he carried out the function of secretary for the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (1923–1930) and of expert in several specialized commissions (after 1931).

The multitude and complexity of G. Oprescu's professional interests, the extent to which he influenced local art historiography and critique, as well as the significant part he played in the institutionalizing of the field in the University and the Academy, aroused my interest and G. Oprescu could have been limited to his professional career only, which in itself makes up an institutional and intellectual history due to his diverse preoccupations. However, I chose to give my research a biographical dimension, built upon Oprescu's memoirs and on the vast corpus of private correspondence I studied. Therefore, I structured my thesis on two levels that communicate with each other: the biographical one understood as a *life story*, which follows G. Oprescu's life and career in chronological succession, and the historiographical and institutional one, which examines his journalistic work and organizational contributions, placing a focus on the continuity and consistency of his discursive and institutional practice, observed throughout his public career.

Despite the potential of the subject and the numerous relevant archival sources – both domestic and foreign – the current stage of the research is incipient. The few works that make up the literature on G. Oprescu's activity are mainly homages written before 1990, that combine history writing with memoirs, to which a series of historiographical studies on art history in Romania may be added. The literature on G. Oprescu is therefore quite narrow and does not have the biographical character aimed at by this thesis. I am referring to certain categories of studies and papers: recollections and testimonies about G. Oprescu; studies and articles based on his previously unpublished correspondence; texts dedicated to his anniversaries or posthumous tributes; texts prefacing exhibitions featuring works from Oprescu's art collection or texts referring to the collection itself. An exception is Mihai Sorin Rădulescu's study which deals with the historian's paternal genealogy – Considerații despre genealogia lui George Oprescu – published in the volume 70 de ani de la fondarea Institutului de Istoria Artei "G. Oprescu" (see the selective Bibliography at the end of this abstract).

Sources and Methodology

The work is based on the research of archival and documentary funds belonging to public and private collections, as well as on the autobiographical accounts authored by G. Oprescu. This thesis is founded on several important primary sources: the unpublished manuscript of G. Oprescu's autobiography – entitled *Fragmente autobiografice* (tr. *Autobiographical Fragments*) – kept in the "Radu Bogdan" Archive and generously put at my disposal by Mădălina Mirea; the autobiographic writings published by Oprescu during his lifetime; his previously unpublished institutional and personal correspondence which I studied in archives and libraries in Bucharest

and across the country, as well as the Oprescu epistolary, published by various authors since the 1970s; the memoirs of those who knew and evoked him; the contemporary press; bureaucratic and administrative documents comprised in the historical archives of the institutions in which Oprescu worked.

The primary published sources I used in order to fill in G. Oprescu's autobiographical narrative were: *Jurnal de călătorie* – his travel journal –, printed in 1957; the volume *Amintiri, evocări* (tr. *Reminiscences, Evocations*) from 1968; Oprescu's speeches form 1956 and 1961, delivered at the Romanian Academy, on the occasion of his 75th and 80th birthdays; the short article published in the volume *Amintiri despre anii de şcoală* (tr. *Remembrances about the School Years*); and his testament draft, double-dated 1958 and 1962, published by Alin Ciupală in 2014. In order to check, clear up, corroborate or explain certain facts and events, I supplemented the information gathered from these autobiographical texts with those extracted from archival documents. For instance, when confronted with the primary sources from the time – chiefly with the correspondence – I noticed that some of the dates mentioned in the autobiographical text were erroneous, e.g., the year when G. Oprescu's mother was born or the year when he moved to Turnu Severin.

I researched various archival funds – from the Central National Archives of Romania, the Bucharest Municipal Archives, the County Archives in Cluj, Mehedinţi and Satu Mare, the Romanian Academy Archives, the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives, the archive of the "G. Oprescu" Institute of Art History, the archives of the National University of Art, the manuscript funds from the Library of the Romanian Academy and the National Library in Bucharest –, but only a selection of the extracted information was included in the thesis.

The documents comprised in the G. Oprescu–Constantin Ionescu-Mihăeşti archival fund from the National Library of Romania proved very useful because there I discovered the first autobiographical fragment signed by G. Oprescu – the one about his experience during the First World War –, a fragment which is also included in the *Autobiographical Fragments* manuscript, kept in the "Radu Bogdan" Archive. The documentary archive from the National Library radically differs from the rest of the exploited archives, because it consists of the personal correspondence between the two friends, Oprescu and Constantin Ionescu-Mihăeşti (September 12, 1883, Bucharest – April 14, 1962, Bucharest), comprising numerous letters from 1899 to 1920, a period undocumented by any other source. The funds from the Library of the Romanian Academy and

those from the Archives in Satu Mare contain personal and official correspondence dated after 1924, thus relevant to Oprescu's life and activity at the League of Nations. In the Mehedinți Archives, I found important testimonies of the persons arrested and deported to Bulgaria alongside Oprescu in the First World War, while the Archives in Cluj, Bucharest, and the University of Arts Archives were essential for retracing Oprescu's university career path between 1931 and 1962. In the archival funds of the University of Bucharest, I found an entire file of administrative documents and correspondence concerning Oprescu. I researched exhaustively the Casa Scoalelor (tr. House of Schools) archival fund for documents dated between 1931 and 1947 in order to carry out a study on the "Toma Stelian" Museum under G. Oprescu's leadership. The research of the "G. Oprescu" Institute of Art History Archives contributed to the documentation of Oprescu's activity as director of this institution. The files in the custody of the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives were an important source for the study of the post-war era. The abundance of materials and information found in this archive was regarded with the methodological restraint imposed by the fact that they were generated by the bureaucracy of a repressive body of the communist authoritarian state, Oprescu's figure thus appearing distorted through the lens of the State Security, consisting of the case officers' reports and intelligence notes signed by their agents, with unavoidably subjective accounts, potentially slanderous or compromising.

The thesis lays out the information extracted from the studied documentary sources through the classical historical method, prioritizing the chronological narrative meant to broadly reconstruct G. Oprescu's life. The approach lies at the intersection of biography with microhistory. The autobiographical and epistolary accounts were reassembled in order to render the protagonist's subjective experiences and to illustrate glimpses of his life. The biographical component is completed, in a monographic approach, with episodes of institutional history and historiographical analysis, which could be integrated as case studies for the general history of those institutions: G. Oprescu, as a teacher at "Ion Maiorescu" Secondary School in Giurgiu and at the "Traian" High School in Turnu Severin; fragments from the history of the Romanian education system at the beginning of the 20th century; Oprescu and the "Toma Stelian" Museum as a facet of the history of local museum institutions. The (auto)biographical detail, corroborated with the correspondence and contemporary testimonies, give to certain chapters and sub-chapters the quality of microhistory or that of the history of daily life: the life of a tuberculosis patient the Bucharest of

1907; the day-to-day life of the civil internees in Bulgarian camps during the First World War; the workday of a diplomatic official at the League of Nations.

Setting off with such an approach, one can sketch G. Oprescu's portrait beyond his official effigy, that of an authority figure praised in the academic texts written in his honour. My interest in G. Oprescu's intimate, informal portrait was generated precisely by his autobiographical account, full of naturalness and frankness. It seems that, towards the end of his life, he wanted to leave to posterity a sincere self-portrait, free of pomp, a fact revealed in his testament draft as well. Therefore, in the process of biographical reconstruction, I started with the perspective from below, specific to microhistory, i.e., from Oprescu's accounts and experiences moving outward, widening the angle to outline the great history which encompasses the personal one.

In order to conceptually frame my research approach, I opted for the life history formula starting with the very title of the thesis, thus referring to the method of autobiographical compiling used by sociologists and anthropologists in oral history interviews. The life (hi)story is the interviewee's retrospective account of their own life, a narrative form whose main characteristic is rendering meaning, willingly or unconsciously, to the life they lived. While reading the Autobiographical Fragments written by Oprescu when he was 87, I recognized the structure of this narrative type, in which the author constructs his biography so that the events succeed one another logically and linearly, so as to convey the story of a coherent life from birth, moving through childhood and adolescence, to adulthood. I took into account Pierre Bourdieu's criticisms of this method, which pointed out the "biographical illusion", that is the idea that life is a running set of events that can be narrated. Similarly to any other biographic account, this one is also a simplified sketch, comprising facts and events selected, both by G. Oprescu himself and by the author of this thesis, in order to tell a life story. The research, therefore, admits the autobiographical frame created by G. Oprescu, which is used in moderation via critical reading with the support of primary and secondary document sources, i.e., through the traditional historical method.

The Structure of the Paper

The thesis is structured in ten chapters: the first nine reconstruct G. Oprescu's biography – in its official and institutional aspects, as well as in those concerning his private life, family, and

formative years –, while the last chapter is dedicated to the historiographical and critical contributions authored by G. Oprescu.

The first chapter presents G. Oprescu's childhood, spent at Câmpulung-Muscel. Previously unknown information on the historian's family is revealed, thus succeeding in completing his genealogy, especially on the maternal side. The female figures which impacted his childhood and formative years are introduced – his grandmother, Ana Oprescu, and his mother, Maria Oprescu – contrasting with the absent paternal figure of Ion Bălteanu, who shunned his son from his very birth. This chapter is followed by the one recounting the years of secondary and university studies followed in Bucharest – at the "Matei Basarab" High School and the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the University – and it closes with a sub-chapter on young Oprescu, which describes his pastime hobbies and the circle of friends he belonged to, emphasizing, in particular, his relationship with Constantin Ionescu-Mihăeşti, with whom he would bind a lifelong friendship. The thesis continues with the chapter dedicated to the period after university graduation, that is the two decades when Oprescu worked as a French teacher at the "Ion Maiorescu" secondary school in Giurgiu and the "Traian" High School in Turnu Severin. A sub-chapter renders the historian's experience during the First World War, when he was arrested by the authorities of the Central Powers, being detained initially at Turnu Severin and the Tismana monastery and then deported to Bulgaria, where he was held in the civil internee camps at Plovdiv and Golemo Konare. The next chapter deals with his career ladder and his admission among the university staff in Cluj, as well as with the first cultural diplomacy actions Oprescu carried out, in Lyon, where he met the art historian Henri Focillon (September 7, 1881, Dijon, France – March 3, 1943, New Haven, Connecticut, U.S.A). The life history moves on with a chapter about Oprescu's activity at the League of Nations, where he worked as a secretary for the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation, his activity being described from the perspective of his private correspondence, his daily life but also his allegiance to the internationalist creed of the League of Nations. Next, I reconstructed the path the historian followed until he was granted a tenure position to teach at the Departments of French Civilization and Art History of the University of Bucharest, as well as the teaching activity he held there until 1948 which was prolonged after the war with a professorial position at "N. Grigorescu" Institute of Visual Arts. Another chapter presents his activity as a director of the "Toma Stelian" Museum, focusing on administrative aspects concerning the functioning of the museum, the exhibition policies, the situation of the museum during the Second World War, ending up with its merging with the Art Museum of the Popular Republic of Romania. In the beginning, the chapter deals with the context in which the museum was set up, and then with George Olszewski's activity, the director who preceded Oprescu. The following chapter recounts G. Oprescu's post-war destiny as it appears outlined from the documents studied in the Securitate's Archives, which depict him as an intelligence objective investigated by the secret police of the Romanian communist state. The penultimate chapter focuses on G. Oprescu's role in the founding and leading of the Institute of Art History, under the auspices of the Romanian Academy, regarding aspects such as the Institute's division into sections, its scientific activity, the director's organizational policy, his relationship with subordinates and, finally, the last years of his life. The final chapter analyses G. Oprescu's historiographical and critical contributions by examining as case studies several representative titles from the author's bibliography: peasant art, 19th-century art, artists' monographs, post-war historical syntheses. The sub-chapter on the chronicles published in the "Universul" newspaper is split into three directions reviewing aspects which concern G. Oprescu's vision on cultural policy and the relationship between art and ideology in the interwar period, as well as in the post-war era.

The paper closes with the conclusions of the research, a biographical annex of G. Oprescu's writings, organized chronologically by categories, including the posthumous editions (1905–2019), seven documentary annexes, the list of illustrations, and the complete bibliography of the paper.

Conclusions

The results of the research are promising. They outline a biographical sketch that opens new perspectives onto possible future directions of study. The examination of the *Autobiographical Fragments*, written by G. Oprescu and preserved in "Radu Bogdan" Archive, provided a great amount of previously unknown facts on which I elaborated the first chapters of the paper dealing with the beginning of the historian's life, from his childhood to his appointment as a secretary of the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation, at the age of 43, thus reconstructing young Oprescu's intimate portrait. I illustrated the detailed picture of his official career, from the League of Nations to the Institute of Art History, and I created an interpretation of his historiographical and critical work, read in a biographical key. It's apparent that G. Oprescu's writing had a general tendency of shadowing his professional activity: when he was

working in Geneva he was concerned with international openness and the establishing of bridges of communication between Romania and the rest of the world; when he was teaching he aimed his writings at didactic syntheses and scientific monographs; whereas his activity as a museum director was illustrated in press articles meant to popularize museographic culture and to attract the interest of the political decision-makers. I highlighted G. Oprescu's contribution to the method of studying art history, influenced by positivism and formalism, as well as his pragmatism in coordinating or elaborating certain works within the Institute of Art History – such as *Sculptura statuară romînească* (tr. *The Romanian Statuary Sculpture*) from 1954 – which played the part of ideological delivery, thus justifying the existence and functioning of the Institute, being strategically planned to preserve a certain degree of professional and institutional autonomy for the research team coagulated around him.

I viewed G. Oprescu's biography from several angles: the protagonist is seen through the eyes of loved ones, as found in their private correspondence, and also from an institutional perspective, as it results from the study of the archival funds of the Universities in Cluj and Bucharest, of the "Toma Stelian" Museum, and the Institute of Art History –, but I prioritized the autobiographic perspective due to the access I had to the memoirs manuscript. Oprescu's autobiography, written at the end of his life, in a style that led me to the life story method, is a retrospective construct, and yet a truthful one, the author's narrative is substantially corroborated with the primary and secondary sources I consulted.

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