

INTERVIEW:

An Art Historian Dedicated to Cultural Heritage and Vernacular Architecture. An Interview with Christoph Machat

by Ciprian FIREA* 



Esteemed Professor Dr. H.C. Mult. Christoph Machat, you are an internationally recognized figure who has been active in the field of material cultural heritage protection and conservation for over five decades. A brief biography should mention that you were born in Sighișoara in 1946 to a family of Saxon descent and attended school in the historic building at the end of the Covered Stairway, near the remarkable Gothic edifice known as the “Church on the Hill.” After obtaining your baccalaureate in 1964, you initially pursued studies

in industrial electronics at the Polytechnic Institute of Bucharest. However, you abandoned these studies in 1967, finding them unsuitable. Instead, you enrolled in the university program for art history at the National University of Arts in Bucharest (then the Institute of Fine Arts), completing your studies between 1967 and 1972. You subsequently worked as a referent for Transylvania at the

* **Ciprian FIREA** (cfirea@yahoo.com), Institute of Archaeology and Art History of the Romanian Academy, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.



Directorate of Historical Monuments (1972–73) while also serving as a guide for foreign tourists visiting socialist Romania during your student years.

You emigrated to West Germany in 1973, where you quickly earned your doctorate (1976) and secured a position at one of the most prestigious institutions dedicated to the study and protection of historical monuments—the Bavarian State Office for Monument Protection (Bayerisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege). There, you gained hands-on experience, and in 1980, you joined the Monument Protection Office of the Rhineland (Rheinisches Amt für Denkmalpflege), which is headquartered at Brauweiler Abbey near Cologne. With the expertise you gained, you became Secretary General in 1992 and, in 1995, you were elected President of the International Committee for Vernacular Architecture (ICVA) within ICOMOS, under the auspices of UNESCO. In this capacity, you closely observed the nomination and subsequent inclusion of significant Romanian sites and monuments on the UNESCO World Heritage List. These include the wooden churches of Maramureș, the historic town of Sighișoara, and the reclassification of Biertan from an individual monument to the larger category of “villages with fortified churches”.

After 1989, as Romania opened up to Europe, you frequently returned to the country. You designed and coordinated an extensive research project on Transylvania’s built heritage—the Inventory of Monuments in German-Colonized Settlements of Transylvania (1991–1998), as well as the ambitious restoration project of the much-loved and well-known “Church on the Hill” in your native Sighișoara. Another iconic building in your hometown, the “House with the Stag,” was also rehabilitated and revitalized with your significant contribution.

For your outstanding efforts in promoting and preserving the cultural heritage of the Transylvanian Saxons, you served as president of the Cultural Council of Transylvanian Saxons for many years (1992–2013). In recognition of your contributions, Babeș-Bolyai University awarded you the title of Doctor Honoris Causa in 2001. Since 1998, you have also been teaching courses in a postgraduate program on historical monument rehabilitation, covering topics such as the history of heritage protection in Europe, international conventions, and vernacular architecture.

Today, as we meet in Cluj for this interview, you have just finished teaching one of these courses. While it would be fascinating to discuss your experience as a lecturer at Babeș-Bolyai University, for this interview, I would like to take a journey into your past—to your formative years. Given the profile of the publication for which I am conducting this interview, as well as my personal interest, I would primarily like to ask you about your training as an art historian and how it has influenced your major projects.

What do you believe Sighișoara offered you in terms of your personal and professional development? Could you share some of your earliest memories of the “Church on the Hill,” a place you have returned to time and again?

My earliest memories are linked to a few visits I made to the crypt beneath the choir, where the niches for sarcophagi were open, and remnants of bones were visible (and tangible...). However, my hometown played a decisive role in shaping my professional path since after deciding to abandon my technical studies—realizing that I did not want to spend the rest of my life in the industry—I recalled the citadel, with its defensive walls and towers, and its unique atmosphere. At that point, I only had to choose between studying architecture or art history.

When did you begin to view the monument as an “object of study”? What about the old town? Did you write any academic essays on these subjects during your university years?

The Upper Town, meaning the Medieval citadel of Sighișoara, became an object of study and reflection during Vasile Drăguț's courses on medieval architecture in Central Europe, as well as through the comparative research he conducted. It gave me much to think about when he considered only the Upper Town as a historical monument—reflected in its inclusion on Romania's first published list of monuments (1955)—while the Lower Town, despite being founded and built simultaneously, was viewed merely as a nineteenth-century creation (due to the remodeling of its facades in line with the fashion of that era). I chose the “Church on the Hill” as the subject of my undergraduate thesis in 1972. This provided me with a solid academic foundation that later formed the basis of my doctoral dissertation, a topic suggested by my doctoral advisor, Professor Binding, at the University of Cologne.

What was the academic atmosphere like at the Institute of Fine Arts? Which courses and professors influenced you the most? What memories does Vasile Drăguț evoke for you, and how did he impact your career?

The academic atmosphere was very pleasant, especially since all the art history students were required to also learn artistic techniques such as painting, graphics, though less so sculpture. My interactions with colleagues from these departments, visits to studios and exhibitions, and discussions and debates on artwork convinced me to focus on historical monuments rather than art criticism, which also allowed me to integrate the technical knowledge I had acquired at the Polytechnic Institute.

The curriculum was also crucial. Unlike the German program, it covered all archaeological periods (including fieldwork on excavation sites) and the full scope of art history (under Professor Radu Florescu), with a significant emphasis on Byzantine and post-Byzantine art and architecture. Other important and fascinating courses included cultural history and civilizations (with Dinu Giurescu), comparative literature (with Dan Grigorescu), aesthetics (with Ion Frunzetti and personal interactions with Eugen Schileru), paleography, and foreign languages.

However, what truly shaped my career were the courses on medieval European architecture, as well as the influence of Vasile Drăguț. He was the head of the Directorate of Historical Monuments at the time, and he offered me a job after graduation. As the then-president of ICOMOS Romania, when I informed him of my plans to emigrate, he made me promise that I would join ICOMOS Germany as soon as possible (in order to explain to my Western colleagues how the Soviets and the Socialist Bloc were using the platform to further their own goals...). I kept my promise, by becoming a member of ICOMOS Germany in 1978 and joining the International Scientific Committee on Vernacular Architecture (ICVA) in 1984. I chaired the ICVA for nearly a decade, from 1995 to 2005. Later, I was elected to the ICOMOS International Executive Committee for nine years (2008–2017) and simultaneously served as vice president of ICOMOS Germany.

What defining experiences shaped your formation as an art historian in Romania before emigrating to Germany? What was the atmosphere like at the Directorate of Historical Monuments? Who did you collaborate with there? How fulfilling was that experience professionally? Were you disappointed by the way historical monuments were researched and documented at the time?

The atmosphere at the Directorate of Historical Monuments was very pleasant and collegial. However, I didn't have my own office outside the library's large reading room, nor did I have "permission slips" to conduct research at various libraries in Bucharest. I worked in the records section as a referent for Transylvania, focusing on monument lists and preparing intervention projects (for example for Drăușeni or Aiud). I maintained close ties with painting restorers (most of whom were former colleagues from the Institute of Fine Arts), accompanying them on various field visits as part of the preparation for future restoration projects. Although I didn't manage to participate directly in restoration sites during execution, I gained a solid understanding of the Directorate's structure, which included departments for archaeology, records and stratigraphic research, architecture, and project execution (including mural painting conservation), making it a remarkably modern structure for its time.

As an art historian, I should have been troubled by the restoration concept that exposed multiple historical layers of monuments, thus revealing phases that had never coexisted visually. Examples include the choir of the Prejmer fortified church or the southwestern entrance of the church in Sebeș. However, it was only after I gained deeper expertise in the field and returned to Transylvania that I did come to see the issues with this approach. That said, I also understood that it was (partly) a didactic method to justify interventions on churches and monasteries within the socialist state. Unfortunately, this mindset still persists among many architects active today – a particularly negative example being the completely stripped façade of the church in Drăușeni, where centuries-old layers of plaster once effectively protected the interior murals...

What studies did you pursue in Germany after emigrating?

From the beginning, I tried to continue the profession I had started at the Directorate of Historical Monuments. However, during a meeting at the Bavarian Monuments Office in Munich in 1974, I learned that I would need a Ph.D. in art history to work in the public sector. Consequently, I spent two years working in archaeological documentation – specifically aerial photography – at the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Bonn, while simultaneously completing my doctorate at the University of Cologne.

For my PhD, in addition to art history as my main subject, I was required to choose two secondary subjects. Naturally, I selected archaeology (which in the Rhineland mainly meant Roman archaeology) and Eastern European history. For both, I was obligated to attend at least one semester of seminars, which included coursework. My doctoral advisor, Professor Binding, did not require my presence at any of his courses or seminars, especially after I presented him with my translated undergraduate thesis on the “Church on the Hill” in Sighișoara.

As for future career prospects, he frequently emphasized the importance of studying historical roof structures – an often-overlooked aspect of architectural history. I continued collaborating with him even after returning to the Rheinisches Amt für Denkmalpflege. In 1981, he offered me the opportunity to teach art history seminars at the university, focusing primarily on the Gothic period (though not exclusively) in Cologne.

How did you experience university education in Germany? Can you compare the offerings of the two education systems?

In Germany, the curriculum depends on the expertise of the faculty members, meaning that not all periods of art history are covered (and ancient art falls under archaeology) or required for the intermediate examination. From

the beginning, students must choose the specific field in which they wish to specialize. Professor Binding, being both an architect and an art historian, focused primarily on architecture – hence the seminar I previously mentioned. However, the German system lacks active engagement with works of art, such as the hands-on experience that students have in the fine arts sections at the Academy of Arts...

What did your collaboration with your doctoral advisor, Günther Binding, offer you? What opportunities did it open for you?

Professor Binding was already renowned in the field of monument conservation and protection, not only as an author but also for his active involvement in restoration projects and archaeological excavations inside churches. He was known for publishing results quickly, often with his own dating assessments, obviously. Earning my doctorate under his supervision essentially opened the doors to the monument preservation offices, particularly in Bavaria, where from July 1976 on, he regarded me as his “point of contact” ...

What were the most important formative experiences you had in Germany? What do you consider to be the turning point in your career path?

My career took a decisive turn when I spent three months (July, August, and September of 1976) at the Bavarian Monuments Office, where I was introduced to hands-on conservation and restoration work by Magnus Backes, PhD, head of the practical execution department. This period shaped my understanding of preservation philosophy and legislation (including practical training in the painting restoration section). Afterward, I was appointed as a regional heritage consultant for Upper Franconia, based in Bamberg.

How did your training as an art historian help in your work at the Rheinisches Amt für Denkmalpflege?

Even during my time at the Bavarian Monuments Office, art historical training was crucial. Each district had two art historians responsible for churches and palaces and two architects responsible for civil architecture. In the Rhineland region, my expertise became even more significant after I transitioned to leading the inventory and monument listing section for the entire region. My background in art history was essential in evaluating and arguing for or against a building's historical monument status.

How did your return to post-communist Romania happen? Who did you collaborate with in the years immediately following 1990?

In November 1990, I returned to Romania for the first time as part of an official UNESCO delegation, along with Șerban Cantacuzino, who was coming from England. Our mission was to assess the possibilities of international support for protecting Romania's historical monuments. Andrei Pleșu, my former university colleague, was the Minister of Culture at that time. During this visit, I met Peter Derer, the new director of The Directorate for Monuments, Ensembles, and Historic Sites (DMEHS), and I was able to reconnect with almost all my former colleagues from the former Directorate of Historical Monuments.

How did the idea for the major project of cataloging the cultural heritage of the German settlements in Transylvania come about? Could you briefly describe how the project was carried out? What methodology did you use, and how was it integrated with the experience of local researchers from Romania with whom you collaborated? What do you believe was achieved through this project and which objectives do you believe were not fully met?

The project for the comprehensive documentation of all former Saxon settlements in Transylvania emerged against the backdrop of the massive emigration of the Saxons starting in 1990. It was proposed by the Cultural Council of the Saxons in Germany (Siebenbürgische Sächsischer Kulturrat), which approached me for the general concept and implementation details. I designed it based on the model used for compiling monument lists in the Rhineland, which involved marking all heritage-worthy buildings on a 1:5000 map, photographing and describing them in individual records, combining these with aerial photographs of the settlements and descriptions of the cultural landscape, drawing up architectural surveys for key buildings (churches, fortifications, schools, etc.), and publishing the results in the *Topography of Monuments in Transylvania*, modeled after similar works from Rhineland.

One of the conditions for the German Federal Ministry to finance the project was that the work be carried out in collaboration with Romanian specialists. To familiarize them with the working methods, most of the Romanian colleagues involved were invited to complete internships at heritage offices in the Rhineland and Bavaria. Remarkably, all 247 settlements were documented and the first volume of the monument topography was published within a short period (1991–1998). Each year, we organized conferences and scientific sessions to analyze the results and clarify attitudes toward the documented heritage, its historical monument value, as well as the significance of historical ensembles, sites, and cultural landscapes.

Among other things, the results were used for the UNESCO inscription dossiers for the city of Sighișoara and for expanding Biertan's designation to include the surrounding fortified church villages (both inscribed in 1999). Unfortunately, the full publication of the *Topography of Monuments in Transylvania* series has not yet been fully published.

When did you become involved with the academic and university life of Cluj? Who did you collaborate with, and what were the outcomes of these collaborations?

One of the documentation teams was composed of colleagues from the Institute of Archaeology and Art History of the Academy in Cluj – Kovács András, Nicolae Sabău, and Marius Porumb. Szabó Bálint contributed to architectural surveys, and these connections led to collaboration for the *Tușnad* conferences on heritage conservation and rehabilitation. One key outcome of these experiences was the establishment of a postgraduate course on the rehabilitation of historical monuments at Babeș-Bolyai University in 1998.

I would also like to ask you to share some impressions about your most cherished project, the restoration of the “Church on the Hill” in Sighișoara.

When the Messerschmitt Foundation in Munich offered me funding for a rehabilitation project in Transylvania, I naturally chose the “Church on the Hill” because it was in a precarious state of conservation. In fact, it was only used by the Evangelical community during the summer since it had no heating. I designed the intervention project based on the principle of maximum intervention where necessary and as little as possible elsewhere.

Since Sighișoara is in a seismic zone, the inspection and restoration of the structure were top priorities. To avoid concrete reinforcements, I opted for a solution developed at the University of Karlsruhe—so-called “pre-tensioning,” which involved drilling longitudinally through all the walls at three levels and inserting cables that were connected at the corners and pre-tensioned according to seismic data. Naturally, obtaining approval from the technical commission of the National Commission for Historic Monuments was a challenge. The execution was entrusted to a company from Germany with experience in such drilling techniques. (After the project was completed, engineer Pavelescu adopted this drilling technique for other projects in Romania, such as Curtea de Argeș Monastery and the stabilization of Bran Castle.)

The complete restoration of the roofing reactivated Sighișoara's traditional brick and tile factory, while the wooden framework was repaired and made accessible, though not to visitors. A crucial aspect was the full re-plastering of

the exterior, which serves as a protective layer for the interior mural paintings (although, many locals were quite upset, feeling that I had “ruined” the “Medieval” look of the exposed stone walls).

The construction site was truly “European” in that it included craftsmen from Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Romania. In 1995, in collaboration with ICCROM in Rome, we organized a three-month workshop for mural painting restorers from across Europe. The church was re-consecrated in April 1999 and awarded the prestigious Europa Nostra Grand Prize for Cultural Heritage in 2004.

Finally, esteemed professor Christoph Machat, could you tell us a little about your sense of belonging? Where is “home” for you? Among places like Sighișoara, Bucharest, Cologne, and Cluj-Napoca, where would you place your homeland or how would you describe it through a personal filter? What are its “colors” and its traits?

This is a difficult question to answer, but the fact that I immigrated to Germany in 1973, where I learned my profession and started a large family, and became involved in international activities makes it clear that, by 1980 at the latest, my homeland had become the Rhineland and Cologne. When the need arose to contribute my professional experience to the organization of the protection and conservation of historical monuments in Romania, I obviously accepted immediately. Since then, I have kept coming back. When asked by many colleagues if I would ever return to Romania, I always responded that I could act and help much more effectively from Germany. In fact, I represented Germany at the international level in ICOMOS, but it was never a secret, and almost all my colleagues knew that I was originally from Romania...

Thank you very much for your kindness in answering these questions and addressing the readers of the *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai. Historia Artium* journal!

Translated from Romanian by Voica Pușcașiu

