

BOOK REVIEW:

Cosmin Năsui (ed.), *Artiști și istorici de artă în detenția politică a regimurilor totalitare din România (Artists and Art Historians in the Political Detention of Romania's Totalitarian Regimes)*, vol. I, PostModernism Museum, 2023, 208 p.



The scholarly bibliography regarding art history and historiography during the Interwar period and Communist regime was recently enriched with the volume *Artiști și istorici de artă în detenția politică a regimurilor totalitare din România*. This is the first of what should, in the future, be a series of three volumes dedicated to the topic. Eventually 168 artists and more than 10 art historians should be presented in these books.¹ This first volume comprises of an Introduction and chapters signed by Cosmin Năsui ("Honoriu Crețulescu și Vasile Hudici, artiști și cadre didactice ale catedrei de pictură a Academiei de Arte Frumoase din Iași, activi în timpul rebeliunii legionare din 1941", "Wilhelm Beneș, prozator, critic de artă, gazetar la ,Sfarmă-

¹ Cosmin Năsui, "Note asupra ediției – Artiști și istorici de artă în detenția politică a regimurilor totalitare din România," in *Artiști și istorici de artă în detenția a regimurilor totalitare din România/volumul 1*, ed. Cosmin Năsui (PostModernism Museum, 2023), 20.

piatră', ,criminal de război', agentul ,Bohumil'", "Vasile Ștefan. Profesor și rector al Academiei de Arte Frumoase din Odesa, în timpul ocupației românești, pictor în perioada comunistă", "Avatarurile lui George Tomaziu: Artist, poet, spion, deținut politic, agent de influență"), Cristian Vasile ("Oameni de artă în detenția regimurilor totalitare: cazul Barbu Brezianu"), and Luiza Barcan ("Constantin Calafeteanu – Pictura ca destin în infernul comunist").

The chapters are mainly descriptive in nature. This contributes to a deeper insight into the artistic life under the totalitarian regimes. In this form, the project promises to simultaneously examine the art publication network, art scene, and art academies of the times, pointing to the context and causes that led to the imprisonment of various artists and art historians. Moreover, the series promises to explore not only the art scene in Bucharest, but also developments in other parts of the country. The project is more than welcomed. As the editor observes in the introduction, those artists and art historians that ended in prison especially during the Communist era were not included in the main art historical narrative concerning the period.² Therefore, the book comes to expand the field.

From a methodological point of view, what all the chapters of the book have in common, regardless of their author, is that they heavily rely on the archive of Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității (further on, CNSAS). For the researcher of the Communist regime, browsing the CNSAS archive is a *sine qua non* requirement, with all the challenges that this process imposes. As the experienced researcher knows, one cannot completely rely on the reports that can be found there. Petty, revenge, hatred, the desire for social advancement, or the wish to protect loved ones—among other motives—may lie behind false declarations, or, in some cases, useless declarations. The authors are well acquainted with these challenges, mentioning even in the Introduction that the research process had to consider, among other things, the compromising perspective of the Securitate.³ At the same time, authors like Cristian Vasile are among the most experienced researchers of these archives. As he accustomed his readers, in the chapter that he authored, he cross-checked information using other archival sources, periodicals, memoirs, and scholarly literature, a process that even allowed him to correct errors he identified in other publications.

Among other interesting methodological approaches, one may note that this book steps out of the mainstream narrative concerning the Interwar and the Communist regime, focusing on artists and art historians who are little—or not at all—known to the wider public. The reason stated is that the lack of access

² Năsui, "Note asupra ediției," 9.

³ Năsui, "Note asupra ediției," 12.

to archives prior to 2011 led to mystifications and gaps in the art historical narrative, and even to ideological instrumentalization.⁴ Therefore, the authors go beyond narratives of historical condemnation, denial, aestheticization, martyr-making, sanctification, and political correctness.⁵

The decision to end each chapter with an analysis of a work of art or of the whole oeuvre instead of conclusions was part of the methodological approach.⁶ This can be interpreted as yet another attempt by the authors to avoid a moralizing tone, that researchers are prone to have, given the historical context.

How are those methodological challenges actually resolved in the chapters of this first volume?

In line with the book's aim of focusing on artists and art historians from outside Bucharest, the first chapter examines two artists from Iași: Honoriu Crețulescu and Vasile Hudici. It is equally important that the narrative includes the Interwar period.⁷

Reflecting the aim of exploring artists and art historians who are not among the well-known actors of the art historical narrative, the second chapter focuses on Wilhelm Beneș, the author of a few popularizing volumes published during the Communist period on both Romanian and foreign artists.⁸ The last chapter, signed by Luiza Barcan, focuses on Constantin Calafeteanu, a lesser-discussed artist.⁹ Cristian Vasile manages to summarize the adventurous life of Barbu Brezianu, an art historian who, while not among the most well-known, is still more familiar to the public than many others. The task was challenging, especially due to the constant changes in the life of Brezianu, who was a translator, minister, magistrate, and art historian, going through imprisonment. Cristian Vasile manages to maintain an objective tone while interpreting the archival material.¹⁰

⁴ Năsui, "Note asupra ediției," 11–12.

⁵ Năsui, "Note asupra ediției," 12.

⁶ Năsui, "Note asupra ediției," 18.

⁷ Cosmin Năsui, "Honoriu Crețulescu și Vasile Hudici, artiști și cadre didactice ale catedrei de pictură a Academiei de Arte Frumoase din Iași, activi în timpul rebeliunii legionare din 1941," in *Artiști și istorici de artă în detenția a regimurilor totalitare din România/volumul 1*, ed. Cosmin Năsui (PostModernism Museum, 2023), 22–51.

⁸ Cosmin Năsui, "Wilhelm Beneș, prozator, critic de artă, gazetar la 'Sfarmă-piatră', criminal de război', agentul 'Bohumil'," in *Artiști și istorici de artă în detenția a regimurilor totalitare din România/volumul 1*, ed. Cosmin Năsui (PostModernism Museum, 2023), 52–71.

⁹ Luiza Barcan, "Constantin Calafeteanu – Pictura ca destin în infernul comunist," in *Artiști și istorici de artă în detenția a regimurilor totalitare din România/volumul 1*, ed. Cosmin Năsui (PostModernism Museum, 2023), 188–207.

¹⁰ Cristian Vasile, "Oameni de artă în detenția regimurilor totalitare: cazul Barbu Brezianu," in *Artiști și istorici de artă în detenția a regimurilor totalitare din România/volumul 1*, ed. Cosmin Năsui (PostModernism Museum, 2023), 166–187.

Besides enriching our knowledge on art between the 1930s and 1989, this book can serve as a valuable resource for researchers. In cases involving artists and art historians who collaborated with the Securitate, the chapters also include the names of individuals mentioned in the files.

Most importantly, I would mention the fact that the book leaves the reader with the sensation that studying the Communist regime alone is not enough. A more comprehensive approach, starting at least with the Interwar period, would greatly enhance our understanding of the era for posterity.

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