

GHEORGHE PETRASCU - THE CHROMATIC STRUCTURE OF MATTER

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Abstract : The reprieve of the interwar period between WWI and WWII of the early 20th century yielded a fruitful blossoming of the arts throughout Europe and especially the flourishing of a powerfully influential School of Fine Arts in Romania. Gheorghe Petrascu, a vibrant and distinguished painter, who also served as Director of the State Pinacoteck, was at the forefront of the formation of this important school. Petrascu uniquely combined and assimilated the contemporary styles of the late 19th century, as exemplified by realism, impressionism and expressionism, with the ancient Romanian tradition of Byzantine influenced icons and frescoes. His oeuvre reveals the affirmation of a constructive vision of form expressed through the chromatic structure of matter. He combined the solidity of the realist data of objective experience with monumentality of form and expressionist content through chromatic color harmonies that are intensified by the use of black. With the heavily impasto canvases he created, Petrascu implies the quasi-palpable beauty of matter clothed in light and shadow, rendering both nobility and mystery to the objects. His paintings invite viewers to join him in feeling and sentiment through deeply experienced lived moments that are vividly expressed in paint. Similar to most Romanian great painters from the turn of the century, Gheorghe Petrascu also studied in Paris, where he completed the four-year study at the Julian Academy in the studio of Bouguereau, on the recommendation of Nicolae Grigorescu. Although permanently settling in Romania, he continued to travel abroad for both inspiration and study of the great masters in the various museums. His numerous national and international exhibits and the various prizes awarded to him attest to his important legacy and contribution to modern Romanian art. This paper is a continuation in a long series of scholarly works devoted to the spreading of Romanian culture and making it known to the Western world, which was began fourteen years ago. This paper proposes to examine the oeuvre of Gheorghe Petrascu by combining discussion of his artistic development and modernist synthesis of styles, with detailed analysis of some of his important paintings that demonstrate his influence on the evolution of a distinctly Romanian artistic style in the 20th century.

1. Introduction

The period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as defined by the devastating social and political ravages, radical changes and unimaginable carnage of the wars, also spawned tremendous artistic creativity and innovation. The search for individual expression led to numerous novel ideas exemplified in the different styles of realism, impressionism, expressionism, to name a few. In Romania, notable and distinguished artists including the vibrant Gheorghe Petrascu, who also served as Director of the State Pinacoteck, were at the forefront of the formation and development of the influential Romanian School of Fine Arts. Petrascu uniquely combined perceptual discoveries of the late 19th century contemporary styles with the distinctive Romanian tradition of Byzantine influenced icons and frescoes. His oeuvre reveals the affirmation of a constructive vision of form expressed through the chromatic structure of matter. He fused objective experience and expressionist content with monumentality of form through color harmonies intensified by a vibrant black. The nobility of his objects and their tactile beauty is revealed through the interplay of light and shadow beckoning the viewer to join in the deeply lived experience captured via heavily impasto canvases. This paper will explore the development of Petrascu's oeuvre and his unique contribution to the evolution of Romanian art in the 20th century.

2. Gheorghe Petrascu – Life and Studies

Gheorghe Petrascu was born on December 5th 1872, as the third son of Constantin Petrovici and Elena Petrovici (Bitu-Dimitriu), a peaceful, middle-class family which will later officially change the name Petrovici to Petrascu. Already in elementary school his artistic ability

was recognized and he later remarked: “I liked to draw”, but I wouldn't have thought to become a painter: at that time painting was not considered a profession” [1]. After earning his Baccalaureate in 1892, he registered in the Art School in Bucharest, under Prof. G.D. Mirea. In 1895, through his friend, the painter Ipolit Strambu, Petrascu made the acquaintance of the renowned painter Nicolae Grigorescu, whom he greatly admired. They remained good friends and helped each other: Grigorescu gave them both advice and sometimes they helped him prepare his canvases and apply varnish. That same year, during the summer, he met the poet Alexander Vlahuta at Agapia Monastery, who would later purchase some of his works. In 1898 when he finished his studies, having received seven bronze medals and honorable mentions, Nicolae Grigorescu recommended him to the Minister of the Education, Spiru Haret, for a scholarship abroad. The scholarship enabled him to register at the Julian Academy of Arts in Paris, where he attended the studio of Professors W.A. Bouguereau and Gabriel Ferrier from 1899-1902. He was a passionate visitor to the museums and art galleries in Rue Lafitte, where the Impressionists used to exhibit their paintings. He followed in the steps of Nicolae Grigorescu, traveling in Bretagne, at Vitre and in the summer at Agapia, Romania. While in Paris, together with other Romanian students, he founded the “Young Artists Society” and on the 6th of Dec. 1900 he opened his first personal exhibition at the Atheneum in Bucharest, with 58 paintings and 2 drawings [2]. His “debut” was very encouraging: the Mayor of the Capital, the writer B. St. Delavrancea, bought for the City's Townhall the painting “At Agapia after the rain”, which was mentioned much later in the discourse of I. Radulescu Motru, when the painter was received in the Romanian Academy (1936), being the first Romanian painter honored with this title.

Also, his old friend, Alexandru Vlahuta, bought a painting and even the great painter Stefan Luchian, although very ill, came to see his works and encouraged him. In 1901, he participated as one of the founders, at the official opening of the "Young Artists Society", in Bucharest, in the exhibitions of which, from now on, he would present several works every year. In 1902, he finished his studies at the Julian Academy and took a long vacation to visit and study in the most famous museums in London, The Hague, Amsterdam, Munich, Vienna, along the Rhine Valley, Venice and Naples. He was one of the most well-traveled Romanian painters from that period, in his country and abroad [3]. In 1906, after a visit to Assuan in Egypt he returned with several exotic paintings. Then he continued his travel in Romania: Nicoresti, Targu-Ocna, Campulung, Mangalia. In 1912, he began the series of visits in Venice and Chioggia, where he would return repeatedly, and in Romania, he added Turtucaia and Ivanesti on Siret Valley. At the first exhibition of the Young Artists, Dr. V.A. Urechea bought his "The Autumn" [4].

In 1911, he married Lucretia Marinescu, who became his favorite model. In 1912 their son, Gheorghe, was born and in 1915, their daughter, Mariana [5].

In 1919, in France he went in the footsteps of Nicolae Grigorescu visiting a variety of locations in Bretagne: Vitré, Dinan, Morlaix, Saint Egonat, Saint Malo. The Director of the Vitré Museum bought one of his paintings. In 1920 he visited Targoviste for the first time, helping to make the town a famous artistic center, by building a house to replace the one destroyed by the war at Nicoresti [6]. From 1921-39 he travelled every year to France, Italy and Spain along with Romania: Sighisoara, Targoviste (where he would stay for his quiet times, to paint), Viforata, Techirghiol, Bucharest (where he also lived most of the time, in order to keep abreast with all the Exhibitions), Dobrogea (Siliistra, Balcic, Caliacra), Brasov, Salistea, Eforie, Plumbuita, Tecuci (his birth place). These various travels inspired the creation of numerous paintings, drawings and watercolors, exhibited in many organized exhibitions in both Bucharest and abroad [7].

3. Gheorghe Petrascu – Selected Works

The general characteristics of the works of Gheorghe Petrascu could be summarized as follows:

1. He uses more black, than any other of his colleagues, reminiscent of Goya's paintings [8]. His works also contain the use of white, mostly spotted with grey, blue, gold, red and pink. Since 1900, Petrascu considered black and white as independent colors, integrated in the chromatic composition of the paintings to create dramatic effects. Most of his backgrounds are very dark or even black, but after 1921 his palette brightened [9].

2. His colors are not from the organic world, with the freshness of the morning grass or of a flower, but from the inorganic world of crystals, enamels, rocks and minerals, semi-precious stones with their cold, steel glitter or basalt brilliancy, emerald green and ultra-marine [10].

3. The objects have the "solidity" inspired from Cezanne's works.

4. His shadows are very different of the others: they are not obtained by different nuances of the same color, but by different colors.

5. He does not include contours or drawing, the objects and figures appear through the density of color while the volume is created from the relief of the object.

6. His works are characterized by a thick impasto of color applied with a palette knife often using a number of colors simultaneously [11].

7. His preferred subjects represent still life, portraits, flowers, the interior of his studio, seascapes and landscapes from his travels [12]. These subjects will be discussed in more detail below through various examples.

Portraits: Although portraits attracted him, his interest was not in the interior life of the individual, but rather he explored the figures for their chromatic pretext and color [13]. At his personal exhibition in 1903, he presented 20 self-portraits and continued to exhibit self-portraits at all subsequent exhibits, a fact for which he was compared with Rembrandt and the latter artist's numerous and serious self-portraits. The "Self-portrait with a red beret", painted in 1934, is remarkable for its sobriety, severity and profoundness, accomplished by the use of black and the luminosity derived from the spots of color, rendering it one of the most valuable pieces of the genre in Romanian painting. The image includes two registers: the upper part – covered with a discrete, professional beret and a warm, inner, lightly enigmatic look – and the lower half, with a beard and moustache, indicating a contented friendliness [14]. Another portrait from the Studio-House Gheorghe Petrascu in Targoviste, shows the artist as a calm, bonhomie, equilibrated and modest man [15]. In "Self-portrait with hat", the painter sports a green coat and hat accentuated by a purple scarf with strong lighting on the left side and striking red lips.

Interiors of the studio: in these series of works, more than in any other of the subjects, one can see Petrascu's imagination at work, as the motif may be the same and yet the objects and colors permanently change. There are views from different angles of the same room, pillows or bed spreads on the couch, a coffee table, different Oriental or Romanian carpets, sometimes human figures are included and yet the room remains the same throughout the numerous variants. The yellow-brown walls are covered with the artist's colorful paintings in different configurations. In spite of the fact that the colors are dark, they appear very vivid. The expressivity of the light in these interiors is specific to the paintings made in Targoviste. His interiors with armchairs and paintings are real studies of shadow and light. Most of the represented objects emphasize folk motifs. Sometimes the space is enlarged through mirror reflections or by the inclusion of a window. The "Interior with a woman in blue" was created with a brush on the large surfaces and with a palette knife filled with red, grey, ochre, black and brown, but lack the intense and brilliant luminescence, which appeared late in his maturity. The blue of the dress creates the atmosphere of calm and meditation, to which many of his paintings refer. Therefore, it was said about him, that he is "before everything else, a painter, not a philosopher or writer, because in painting, he is interested more than anything else in color, not ideas or literary subjects". In an interview in 1931, when asked how he creates such unique light in his interiors, smiling, he answered: "for more than 30 years, I have been asking myself that, too!" [16].

Static Nature: In the work “Still life with brushes and flowers”, two enameled ceramic pots - one green with white spots and brushes, the other black, with vivid red and bright white flowers, are positioned right in the middle of the painting, on a brown table with touches of violet along with a metal pot with a beautiful metallic glitter. The paint is applied in a dense, iridescent and succulent enameled paste in successive layers [17]. The later works, created after 1930 appear much more luminous, obtained by more red and yellow and a brighter support [18,19].

Flowers continuously appear in Petrascu's oeuvre from the year of his first exhibit in 1900 until 1942 when he stopped painting [20], but his flowers are different, depending upon the period of work. Between 1900-1919, they are painted on a black background, in vivid colors - red, yellow, violet, green - usually with long stems (gladiolus, irises, tulips), arranged in vases with long and narrow necks. From 1920-1930, the backgrounds become blue and grey with zinnias and poppies grouped to form an oval line, in mostly transparent, cylindrical vases. From 1930-1940, the backgrounds are brown, ochre and greenish, and he prefers carnations, anemones, zinnias, poppies, chrysanthemum and peonies, arranged in brass pans or earthen, enameled pots. In this period, the flowers are presented with other elements of still life: books, pots and fruit. Light and shadows are indicated through different colors by placing three or four saturated colors all at once on a palette knife and thickly applying them to the canvas. Yellows and oranges provide luminosity, whereas blues and violets shadow. For Petrascu black is not shadow and white is not light, but they have the same role as every other single color [21]. In “Sun flowers”, the lighter blue background made up of many different intensities, highlights the centralized pot spotlighting the vivid yellows, greens and reds. In the “Anemones”, the green pot has the glitter of the enamel, the red and blue flowers placed on a white tablecloth are projected on a lighter background, high-lighted by splashes of green, which re-appears on the edges of the books and dark blue and green stripes table-cloth.

Landscapes with houses: Petrascu used to change the names of his works, or paint different variants of the same subject. In the painting of his old house at Nicoresti, which was destroyed in WWI, the whiteness of the walls is striking, occupying the left center of the picture and framed by the blue sky, covered with white clouds. The grass is highlighted by mixed nuances of green, brick, grey and black, while on the right side, some smaller houses in dominant grey and a tall tree in dark green, balance the composition. The addition of the red flowers on the upper porch, in the middle of the black wall under the black roof, together with and a white spot on the wall are unexpected and help focus the viewer's attention [22]. Two important buildings in Targoviste “The Belfry” and the “Parochial House” highlight typical and traditional Romanian construction and Petrascu painted them in several variants. The Belfry of the King's Church is a monument of the XVI century, repaired in the XVII century. In “The Belfry”, the dominant color is a brick-red, with different chromatic nuances accentuated by white spots leading down from the roof to the green tree hiding the entrance to the church [23, 24]. “The Café in Turtucaia” is typical for that town and occupies the center of the painting, on a downhill street.

The white walls offer luminosity and a spotlight amidst the abundance of green hues that dominate the work. Spots of blue appear in the pond on the left side of the house as darker nuances fill the upper right corner. The “Old House in Targoviste” dominated by nuances of blue, marked by spots of white, alluding to snow that contrast with the dark brown and black roof, under which unexpected red lights appear. Between 1905 - 1932, Petrascu painted several windmills from Ialomita, Mangalia, Branesti, Balci, and from Bretagne, as a romantic subject, repeated with different chromatic palettes. An example is “Windmill in Bretagne”, rendered in vivid colors - especially the blue of the sky and water, the brick red of the mill and the brilliant white of the small houses [25].

Marines: “Landscape at Roscoff”, called sometimes also “Saint Malo”, represents a cliff on the shores of Bretagne, with a small silhouette of a woman holding an umbrella. The yellow of the cliff and shore and his signature spots of red accentuate the dominant white clouds and water foam. In “Looking at the sea at Mangalia”, the artist's wife and daughter break the saturated dominance of ultra-marine and the emerald-green. The contrast between the blue of the sea, the yellow of the sand and the red of the dress or between the sky-blue and sea blue and the beach yellow-green are striking and the shadows cast by the figures are apparent. Petrascu started painting marines, already as a student, discontinuing around 1940, because of health problems. Many of his marines are tranquil, serene, sometimes sad, sometimes brilliant, stressing the movement of light and often including his wife, Lucretia Petrascu, their daughter, Mariana, or Lila Marinescu his wife's sister. In the year, 1930 Petrascu painted numerous marines at Techirghiol. The foamy waves and the movement of the dresses exposed to the wind are concentrated in the center of the composition dominated by grey, ultra-marine and emerald-green accentuated by the usual violet-red of the hats [26].

The theme of the Nudes first appeared in Petrascu's oeuvre in 1913. In the first, more romantic period, he placed his nudes in nature - in landscapes, on beaches, at the seaside, or in the forest - mainly focusing on contrasts between light and shadow, but after 1927 the nudes are mostly shown in interiors. “Model at rest”, is a painting in which a field of various blue hues permeates the room and contrasts with the white wall vividly emphasized by the use of black throughout in the paintings on the wall and the Romanian carpet. In “The Sitting Nude”, the back of the sleeping figure with her head on the table dominates the composition. The colorfully dressed, reclining “Odalisque” presents a languishing woman on a very hot day [27].

Beginning with the year 1900, Petrascu participated each year in the exhibitions of the Young Artists and at most of the Official Salon, being one of the most productive painters, selling many of them and receiving many awards. A retrospective exhibition was organized in 1933, to celebrate his 60th year, at the Dalles Hall, displaying 306 works selected by the artist and spanning the period 1907 - 1933. In 1936, he exhibited 205 oeuvres at Dalles, and the last personal exhibition, the artist's 16th, was another retrospective spanning the years 1912-1940 and took place in 1940 at the Dalles Hall [28]. Gheorghe Petrascu died on 1 May 1949, at 77 [29].

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper examined some of the important works of Gheorghe Petrascu and his significant contribution to Romanian Art. In the broader context of Modern Romanian Art, Gheorghe Petrascu is considered a person of distinct and uncommon origin, both contemporary and from the past, he developed his own unique style. His chromatic harmonies intensified by the use of black, present a distinctive expression of a constructive vision of the beauty and nobility of matter clothed in light and shadow. In the words of another significant contemporary Romanian painter, Nicolae Tonitza : "... Petrascu is a colourist. And in his way, a unique one! "Petrascu even remarked: "I saw many beautiful things, but I always kept away from influences...I registered at the Romanian Academy in Bucharest, where Prof. Mirea appreciated me very much. However, I did not regularly follow the classes. I preferred to go instead to my neighbor, on Polona Street, to Grigorescu, with whom I talked a lot and from whom I learned even more. Grigorescu greatly encouraged me. I listened to my professors, because such was my character: to listen to everybody, but to follow my own feeling... without nobility art does not exist" [30].

5. References

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