THE IMAGE OF MIHAI VITEAZUL
IN 19TH-CENTURY ROMANIAN PAINTING

Sergiu-Marius MAN*

ABSTRACT. The Image of Mihai Viteazul in 19th-century Romanian Painting.
The Romanian artistic movement of the 19th-century assisted the political endeavor
of national legitimization by establishing the Romanian identity, in its various
forms, through art.

By adapting the example of their neoclassical and romantic counterparts
they depicted various patriotic symbols on their canvases in order to appeal both to
the population, from a visual standpoint, and their inherent political cause:
obtaining independence and unifying the historical Romanian provinces. Such
unity was first achieved by the historical figure of Mihai Viteazul, a Wallachian
prince of the late 16th century. As a consequence, his figure became one of the
main motifs illustrated in the art of the time, being closely tied to the concept
of Romanian historic identity. The artists underwent a process of research in
order to represent and bring forward a faithful image of the ruler, and some of
his greatest achievements. Both historical and literary sources were approached,
resulting in a diverse body of paintings, which will be discussed in the present
article. The research aims to establish the sources on which the various artworks
were based, the accuracy of the represented message with respect to the historical
background of the ruler as well as the various stylistic approaches of the artists
in question.

Keywords: painting, portraiture, Romanian artist, Mihai Viteazul, 19th century.

---

* **Sergiu-Marius MAN** (sergiu.man@ubbcluj.ro) is a PhD student at the Faculty of History and
Philosophy, Babeș-Bolyai University, School for Population Studies and the History of Minorities,
Cluj-Napoca, Romania. His field of interest is 19th-century Romanian political art and its relation to
European cultural and political movements.

Introduction and method

The concept of Romanian historical painting revolves around the artistic movement that emerged in the mid-19th century and gained momentum following the events of 1848 in the Romanian Principalities. The artful evocation and glorification of prominent historical figures, specifically the rulers and voivodes of the Medieval Era, is what it relies on. The process of artistic emancipation coincided with the reception of Western currents of Neoclassicism and Romanticism through the works of the first generation of "revolutionary" artists: Constantin-Daniel Rosenthal, Barbu Iscovescu, and Ion Negulici. Their aesthetic direction was inherited and continued by contemporaries such as Constantin Lecca, Mișu Popp, and Mihai Lapaty as well as their younger successors Gheorghe Tattarescu, Theodor Aman, and Nicolae Grigorescu. Their political art is meant to fulfill a specific requirement which is the consolidation of a Romanian national identity and consciousness, built upon a shared historical background and evolution.

The generation of the 1848 Revolution identifies the people as the centripetal force necessary for the entire process of national legitimization.[1] To validate its status, a nation needs a consciousness[2] grounded in a common historical tradition.[3] That history undergoes profound transformations influenced by the selective collective imagination.[4] The cohesion of the national construct is further fueled by the various easily identifiable symbols and signs, such as the flag and other heraldic insignia.[5] The symbols themselves can decode a significant amount of information, the meaning and significance of which are exclusively attributed to those who associate with them. They express both emotions and reasons.[6] One such symbol, found in the 19th century political painting, in Delacroix, and later in Rosenthal's work, is the figure of the "mother nation," perceived as voluptuous, honorable, and fertile.[7]

Observing the recurrence of the figure of Mihai Viteazul (Michael the Brave), Romanian painting of the second half of the 19th century represents the mythological synthesis necessary for composing and solidifying a common historical pantheon. It is quite obvious why his personality has been chosen to

---

[1] Simona Nicoară, *Națiunea modernă. Mituri, simboluri, ideologii* (Cluj-Napoca: Accent, 2002), 137.

[2] Hagen Schulze, *Stat și națiune în istoria europeană* (Iași: Polirom, 2003), 100.

[3] Eric Hobsbawm, *Națiuni și naționalism din 1780 până în prezent. Program, mit, realitate* (Chișinău: Arc, 1997), 40.

[4] Simona Nicoară, *Mitologiile revoluției pașoptiste românești. Istorie și imaginari* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 1999), 19.

[5] Schulze, *Stat și națiune*, 100.

[6] Nicoară, *Mitologiile revoluției*, 63.

[7] Nicoară, *Națiunea modernă*, 145.

represent the idea of Romanian bravery and unity, as during his reign the three Principalities were united under the leadership of a single ruler, and his tragic end canonizes him in the collective psyche as a national hero and martyr for the Romanian cause. Moreover, his figure can fulfill the paternal role of the nation in a similar manner as Maria Rosetti's figure in Rosenthal's "Revolutionary Romania". The present research seeks to verify the accuracy of artistic representations in relation to historical precision, using arguments and sources related to clothing, military strategy, style, and composition. The research aims to establish the intake of Romanian artists who were active during the 1848 Revolution and have undergone art studies in the West. As such, the upper limit of the research will be Nicolae Grigorescu's work.

From a theoretical standpoint, the primary sources around which the current research effort is centered can be classified as vestiges or indirect sources.[8] These sources are represented by the individual artistic legacy of each previously mentioned author, in other words, their paintings and artworks. Additionally, lithographs, drawings, and literary work will be addressed, to further establish the sources that served as inspiration. The present approach aims to combine a set of research methods found in both historical research and the analytical precepts of art history.

Unwritten or indirect sources[9] must undergo an examination process that culminates in the identification and translation of their intrinsic significance.[10] Artwork in general possesses the ability to concentrate the narrative of the moment they were created, preserving the cultural energies of the era in which they were created.[11] Other means of research may refer to Freudian psychoanalysis, from which art history has benefited. Identifying psychopathological traits in the individual's biography[12] and their perceived influence facilitates the deciphering of messages found in an artist's work, as well as the motivation behind compositional or stylistic choices,[13] whose origin can be found in personal individual experiences. For instance, the existing friendship between Nicolae Bălcescu, Theodor Aman, and Gheorghe Tattarescu resulted in laborious research and a series of portraits dedicated to Mihai Viteazul.

Finally, the form, or lack thereof, represents the substratum of the artwork to which the viewer and critic can relate objectively. In the opinion of Virgil Vătășianu, form in the field of visual arts is the same as the written word

---

[8] Jerzy Topolski, *Metodologia istoriei* (București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1987), 270–271.

[9] Jerzy Topolski, *Methodology of History* (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1977), 392.

[10] Topolski, *Methodology,* 293.

[11] Peter Claus and John Marriot, *History. An introduction of theory, method and practice* (London: Routledge, 2017), 262

[12] Jae Emerling, *Theory for Art History* (London: Routledge, 2019), 22.

[13] Emerling, *Theory,* 24.

for literature.[14] The form can vary from a general concept, such as the "human form," identifiable figures within the context of the painting, from a bare silhouette to a portrait, or forms that constitute themselves to represent clothing, weaponry, or facial features in certain cases. Thus, the research commences with Constantin Lecca's diverse patriotic feats.

Analysis

Between 1827 and 1833, Constantin Lecca was part of the editorial team behind the *Biblioteca românească* journal located in Buda, the western side of Budapest as we know it today. The editor, Zaharia Carcalechi worked alongside a group of young individuals, including Ioan Maiorescu, the father of Titu Maiorescu.[15] Lecca's main achievement was a series of historical articles published and adorned with lithographs. These early works mark his first historical-themed portraits, reflecting his interest in the figures of Ştefan cel Mare, Mihai Viteazul, Dragoş Vodă, and Radu Negru,[16] which are recurring themes in his work. Up to this point, Constantin Lecca had been strictly self-taught, as he did not have access to the necessary resources to travel to the West.

Upon arriving in Wallachia, he settled in Craiova in 1833.[17] His initial income came from local sponsors until he became an art teacher at Central School in Craiova.[18] The years spent in Carcalechi's editorial office allowed him to understand the infrastructure necessary to run a printing house. As such in 1837, he opened the first printing house in Craiova.[19] Through both printing houses, the artist managed to reproduce a series of portraits of medieval historical figures, that were made available to the general public.[20] Two such examples are the lithographs dedicated to the ruler Mihai Viteazul (Fig. 1) and Dragoş Vodă Ioan. These early attempts, as noted by Vasile Florea, were "imaginary effigies"[21] of his creation, whereas Paul Rezeanu stated that they were nothing more than mere fantasies that suffered from an obvious lack of research.[22] At first glance, the viewer can easily discern the simplicity of the figures, exaggerated or even

---

14 Virgil Vătăşianu, *Metodica cercetării în istoria artei* (Cluj-Napoca: Clusium, 1996), 77.

15 Paul Rezeanu, *Constantin Lecca* (Bucureşti: Arcade, 2005), 8–9.

16 Vasile Florea, *Arta românească. De la origini până în prezent* (Bucureşti: Litera, 2017), 353.

17 Rezeanu, *Lecca,* 10.

18 Rezeanu, *Lecca,* 10–11.

19 Rezeanu, *Lecca,* 14.

20 Florea, *Arta românească,* 354.

21 Florea, *Arta românească,* 354.

22 Rezeanu*, Lecca*, 21.

erroneous bodily proportions in places. For example, the foot sole of Mihai Viteazul is much narrower in relation to the calf and thigh, and there is an idealization of physiognomic features, denoting a lack of character. However, there is an obvious logical error in their judgment. The artist had at the very least conducted minimal research that has conducted him to one of the main motifs which will be brought up throughout the present study, that is Mihai Viteazul's cap.

Constantin Lecca's eventual refinement and proper artistic training occurred during a trip to Rome between 1844 and 1845. The existence of this trip has been the subject of debate, recently put to rest through Paul Rezeanu's research. Constantin Lecca submitted a request to the National Schools Authority, dated April 21, 1844,[23] seeking a replacement teacher during his absence. This episode is absent from earlier monographs dedicated to the life and activity of the painter. Moreover, a letter reproduced in Jacques Wertheimer-Ghika's work, between Gheorghe Tattarescu and Petrache Poenaru, confirms that Lecca had left Italy summer of 1845.[24] In the immediate aftermath, there is an increase in the number of works elaborated on historical themes. Notably, the portrayal of the historical figure of Mihai Viteazul coincides with a similar literary trend that seeks to highlight both his deeds and life. A few examples include Ion Heliade Rădulescu's poem *Mihaida* as well as biographies by Florian Aaron[25] and Dimitrie Bolintineanu,[26] which played an educational role to the general population.

Remus Niculescu's research provides additional information on some of these later paintings.[27] He proposes an interesting theory, attributing the work *Mihai Viteazul chemând pe fruntaşii ţării împotriva asupririi otomane* (*Michael the Brave Calling the Leaders of the Country to Resist Ottoman Oppression*) to Constantin Lecca, even though the work is neither signed nor dated as most of his artworks tend to be. The main argument in support of this theory is provided by page 22 of the mentioned sketch notebook, which represents an anatomical study of a man's head, a sketch reused to depict the figure of the ruler. The transition from the pencil sketch to oil paint alters the initial appearance of the work, causing the sketch to lose its original resemblance. Even so, Lecca's work could have inspired some of his students to pursue a similar path, as he taught until 1859.[28]

---

[23] Rezeanu, *Lecca,* 29–30.

[24] Jacques Wertheimer-Ghika, *Gheorghe Tattarescu și Revoluția de la 1848* (București: Meridiane, 1971), 28–29.

[25] Florian Aaron, *Mihaié II Bravulé: biografia și caracteristica lui. Trase din istoria Țării Românești*, (București: Tipografia Colegiului Național, 1858).

[26] Dimitrie Bolintineanu, *Viața lui Mihai Viteazul făcută pe înțelegerea poporului* (București: Librăria Socescu, 1870).

[27] Remus Niculescu, "Constantin Lecca în Italia. După un jurnal de călătorie inedit," *Studii și cercetări de Istoria Artei* 49 (2015): 99.

[28] Rezeanu, *Lecca,* 10.

The physiognomy of the subject does not resemble the previous version, lithographed, of Mihai Viteazul, noting the absence of the cap or "calpac" that is part of almost every version of his portrait, regardless of the work's author, date, or technique. On the other hand, it is to be noted that the clothing, composed of a short tunic covered by a mantle, both elements having parallel straps or closure systems, does coincide with various representations that will be brought up in the present research.

Nevertheless, Remus Niculescu points out the fact that in subsequent works the artist will change the facial features of his subject.[29] The statement at hand lacks a certain nuance. There is a discrepancy between it and another piece of information. In a later version of Mihai Viteazul's Triumphal Entry into Alba Iulia, "the ruler's face is based on a contemporary portrait of him, engraved by Dominicus Custos, disseminated not only in its original form but also through several adaptions."[30] This proves that Lecca had accessed the aforementioned source and there is no logical reasoning for which he would deviate from it. Dominicus Custos's engraving,[31] dated Prague 1601, presents an archetype executed with surprising attention to detail. The most faithfully rendered features are the facial hair, particularly the shape of the mustache, alongside the beard, and the arches of the cheekbones that are shaded in a manner reflecting the strong light and contrast found in the engraving. The cap, in turn, covers a significant portion of the subject's forehead, albeit in a simplified manner. The shape of the eyes and eyebrows is relatively dramatic and well-defined in Custos's work.

Nevertheless, the subsequent appearances of Mihai Viteazul's facial features in Constantin Lecca's work will follow the same facial structure presented, refined in some places or altered due to the different positions the subject will adopt.

There is no doubt about the authenticity of the canvas known as *The Death of Mihai Viteazul* (Fig. 2) as it is signed and dated in the lower left corner, "Lecca 1845." We can identify a defined perspective and interest in composition as well as simulated dynamism. The background, in neutral, natural shades, is complemented by the vivid, primary colors in the foreground of the scene, such as the tricolor of the fictitious flags arranged horizontally or the existing clothing. The ruler is caught in a dramatic pose as he emerges from his tent, evoking a confident stance reinforced by the threatening raised sword over the heads of General Basta's soldiers. The ruler is also the best individualized figure, given his typical physiognomy, whilst the other characters are mere variations of a

---

[29] Niculescu, "Constantin Lecca," 117.
[30] Niculescu, "Constantin Lecca," 102–103.
[31] Domenicus Custos, "Mihai Viteazul", accessed August 9, 2023, http://clasate.cimec.ro/Detaliu.asp?tit=Gravura--Custos-Domenicus--Mihai-Viteazul&k=44B4FAE300B845EF90CD722139EFB9F3.

certain masculine template. The static horsemen seen behind the tent can be described in the same way. This type of landscape will remain a leitmotif in Lecca's work, as irregular relief forms and clear skies characterize the artists' late works, such as: *The Encounter between Bogdan the Blind and Radu the Great* and *Radu Negru's Dismount.*

Constantin Lecca adapts, in this case, Dionisiu Fotino's testimony regarding the end of Mihai Viteazul, which is more dramatic than the description found in General Basta's report on the ruler's death which focused on the ambush, and eventual decapitation of the Romanian lord.[32] In Fotino's vision, the unfortunate interaction did not result in the immediate assassination of the ruler but rather in a confrontation where he had the opportunity to appreciate the gravity of the situation and even retaliate by knocking down one of General Basta's soldiers, depicted at the entrance of the tent, only to be intercepted and pierced by a spear held by the soldier in the central left position.[33]

Their clothing follows an existing pattern, innovated solely by the inclusion of vivid, historically inspired colors. For example, the red-colored cloth present is a legacy from the reign of Ştefan cel Mare[34] (Stephen the Great), while trousers tailored to the shape of the leg and low boots were worn since the preceding century.[35]

This version of Mihai Viteazul is one of the most original representations, breaking away from the static portrait template that reproduces, with more or less accuracy, some contemporary sources. This portrayal appears to be an idealization of the one found in Custos's engraving, highlighting the fine line of the nose, the particularly well-individualized facial hair, and the unyielding gaze.

The chromolithograph *Mihai Viteazul's Triumphal Entry into Alba Iulia* should be briefly discussed. The particular copy represents a simple reproduction of the canvas that was lost in a fire, dated 1857.[36] Since the distinctive characteristics of the original artwork were lost, precise dating would be imprudent. The work reprises the previous lithograph, placing it amid a collective scene enriched by the inclusion of boyar figures and the country's populace, appearing enthusiastic. Subsequent interventions are minimal, except for the redesign of the cape covering the tunic in favor of a simpler design. This version includes

---

[32] "Raportul generalului Basta cătră Arhiducele Mateiu despre uciderea lui Mihaiu-Vodă," in Eudoxiu Hurmuzaki, *Documente privitoare la Istoria Românilor,* ed. Eudoxiu Hurmuzaki, vol. 4, 266–267. Bucureşti: Stabilimentul în arte grafice Socecu & Teclu, 1882.

[33] Dionisiu Fotino, *Istoria generală a Daciei sau a Transilvaniei, Ţerei Muntenesci şi a Moldovei,* vol. 2 (Bucureşti: Imprimeria naţională a lui Iosef Romanov et Companie, 1859), 76.

[34] Alexandru Alexianu, *Mode şi veşminte din trecut,* vol. 1 (Bucureşti: Meridiane, 1971), 94.

[35] Alexianu, *Mode şi veşminte,* 44–45.

[36] Rezeanu, *Lecca,* 45.

the similar position of the horse, the disproportionality of the head compared to the body, the hat, the ruler's appearance, and his clothing, which can all be found in the 1837 illustration. Essentially, the lithograph was detached from its relatively neutral landscape and placed in a grand scene at the gates of Alba Iulia, where numerous standardized and substance-lacking figures celebrate the event. The painting is overflowed with the patriotic energy of the period. In contrast to the painting depicting the ruler's end, Mihai Viteazul seems to lead the entire painting and even the viewer's imagination toward the idea of victory. Furthermore, the artist attempts to remain impartial when considering the social balance depicted in the captured crowd, featuring a well-balanced mixture of voivodes, peasants, and soldiers.

Despite his dedications, Constantin Lecca's renditions are not the most well-known. Probably the most recognizable portrait of Mihai Viteazul is Mişu Popp's which derives from and elevates Aegidius Sadeler's engraving.[37] An example of this engraving is found in the Brukenthal Museum's collection in Sibiu. At first glance, in the absence of an in-depth understanding of the specific working method of such a historical reproduction, the viewer might be led to believe that the ruler himself visited the artist's studio to be immortalized on canvas. The artist captures the aesthetic and compositional essence of Sadeler's engraving, infusing an archetype of academic portraiture into it.

The painting measures approximately 70 x 100 cm and is signed and dated on the verso, completed in the year 1881 (Fig. 3).[38] Compared to the primary source, the position of the ruler is invigorated by favoring the right shoulder, although the head's position and facial features maintain a conventional line typical of his neoclassical portraits. Another element of aesthetic innovation is the representation of the chest piece instead of period-specific clothing. The coat of arms on the chest brings together a series of elements with patriotic connotations: the ox head representing Moldavia, the eagle or vulture representing Wallachia, sitting on top of on the seven hills of Transylvania.[39] The cape framing the ruler's silhouette has likely acquired a strong yellow hue over time, originally being white.

---

[37] Aegidius Sadeler "Mihai Viteazul" accessed August 10, 2023, http://clasate.cimec.ro/Detaliu.asp?tit= Gravura--Sadeler-cel-Tanar-Aegidius-DEL-SC--Michael-Waivoda-Walachiae-Transalpinae-utraque-fortuna-insignis-et-in-utraq-Eadem-virtute-aet-XLIII-in-registrul-inventar-Mihai-Viteazu&k=BC87215668114C69A8FE188A0BB86967.

[38] Elena Popescu, *Mişu Popp. Reprezentant al academismului românesc. Pictura religioasă şi laică*, (Sibiu: Muzeul Naţional Brukenthal, 2007), 279.

[39] Popescu, *Mişu Popp,* 180.

The cap represents one of the elements of continuity in the iconographic depiction of the ruler, decorated, of course, with a feather,[40] the coloring of which could suggest it comes from a crane or a pheasant. The position of the hands denotes the meticulous theatricality of the composition, with the right hand lifting the cape to hip level while the left hand supports the handle of a golden sword, leaning against a dark-colored tunic. The ambiance of the ruler's face underlines a certain tense emotion due to the frowning eyebrows. Compared to the neutral and natural expression in Custos's engraving, Sadeler's vision, transposed in oil paint, undergoes a conformist refinement that exudes an invigorating vigor and boldness. As opposed to Lecca's representations, Popp's painting captivates the viewer through bold chromatics, the general composition as well as the dramatic vibe of the subject's physical traits. All these elements outline the typical atmosphere of the Biedermeier style. The neutral background in shades of gray can enliven the elaborated skin tones in a warm color palette, another aspect confirming Popp's stylistic affiliation.[41]

In the later part of their life and career, both artists undertook an extensive process of popularizing the figures of Romanian political rulers, retaining examples from previous iconographic work, and establishing a visual pantheon of glorious medieval Romanian figures. Receptive to the political atmosphere of the era, when the revival of national history was a recurring source of inspiration in literary and visual arts, Mişu Popp's contribution to the pantheon of portraits of rulers from the Romanian Principalities is remarkable. In the collective consciousness, the vision of Mihai Viteazul is often synonymous with Popp's portrait, making it one of the most recognizable artworks we have brought up in the present research. His portrait presents a series of physical qualities associated with the epitome of a visionary and courageous leader who inspires through the power of his exemplary behavior. Virgil Vătăşianu, somewhat regretfully, states that historical-themed portraits "are – unfortunately – the most well-known works by M. Popp and are partially disseminated through reproductions."[42] The research will divert now to one of the least known depictions of the Wallachian leader.

Research dedicated to Gheorghe Tattarescu's life and artwork does not cover a particular series composed of three portraits: Mihai Viteazul (Fig. 4), Ştefan cel Mare, and Mircea cel Bătrân (the Elder), located in the Art Museum of Prahova. All of them share some common characteristics such as: being created within a common time frame, namely the year 1880, as evidenced by their

---

[40] Alexianu, *Mode şi veşminte*, 235.

[41] Elena Popescu, "Repere portretistice Biedermeier în opera lui Mişu Popp," *Revista Transilvania*, no. 2–3 (2004): 156.

[42] Virgil Vătăşianu, "Opera lui Mişu Popp," *Ţara Bârsei* IV, no. 4 (1932): 310.

signatures, similar dimensions, approximately 90 x 70 cm, and a unified appearance through the color palette, style, and compositional elements, such as the ruler's name written in the background, which gives this series an iconographic aspect. Tattarescu's reproduction of Mihai Viteazul is a less virtuous adaptation of Aegidius Sadeler's engraving. However, the research will attempt to synthesize the main elements of originality and significant differences between this version and Mişu Popp's.

Unlike his earlier executions, Mihai Viteazul, in Tattarescu's vision, improperly reveals his age. The artist emphasizes skin creases, expression wrinkles, and the eyelid structure, which diminishes and inhibits the fleeting but ideal qualities of an immortalized hero. The portrayal deviates from the traditional classic pose, seemingly meant to conserve his memory in a sublime, robust state. The attire is customary yet concealed by a white cloak embroidered with golden thread, showcasing the golden decorative elements even more prominently. These would have represented silhouettes of vultures in their original form.[43] The shoulders are covered by a very subtly depicted black mantle. The chest is covered by a tunic that can be described as much better individualized in a repetitive manner in Aman's works, with a gem-encrusted clasp around the neck.[44] Whilst Tattarescu's work might not be the boldest or most recognizable portrait dedicated to the Wallachian leader, it might be the sincerest one, diverting from the conventional purpose of the classic portrait, to depict a noble and seemingly timeless figure, following in the footsteps of realism. But the artist most concerned with the most faithful representations of Mihai Viteazul's greatest feats is Theodor Aman.

In the view of art historian Vasile Florea, Theodor Aman's work represents an upper limit of the Romanian artistic movement,[45] a final bastion of academicism in its elementary form that would steer local taste in a new avant-garde direction with the emergence of Nicolae Grigorescu. According to George Oprescu, the artistic accumulations of the first half of the 19th century only anticipated the emergence of an impetuous and commendable artist, synonymous with what Theodor Aman would become and express.[46] Naturally, the perspectives of both art historians are the product of a specific enthusiasm for 20th-century art historiography. However, Aman's biography has now been reevaluated by Adrian-Silvan Ionescu in the study *Aman's Modernity,* reproducing existing information about the artistic and personal evolution of painter Theodor Aman in an exhaustive

---

[43] Alexianu, *Mode şi veşminte,* 234.
[44] Alexianu, *Mode şi veşminte,* 235.
[45] Vasile Florea, *Theodor Aman* (Bucureşti: Meridiane, 1965), 13–16.
[46] George Oprescu, *Pictura românească în secolul al XIX-lea* (Bucureşti: Meridiane, 1984), 164–165.

manner, naming him the first exponent of the modern generation of Romanian artists.[47] Therefore, regardless of historiographical affiliation or epistemological convictions of the moment, Aman's figure is presented in a laudatory manner.

The domain in which Aman excels by comparison to his counterparts, who mainly approached historical themes, either through elaborate allegorical compositions or through "effigy portraits,"[48] evoking the figures of heroes often in a conservative yet inspiring manner, while simultaneously being dependent on the source on which their resemblance was based, is the integration of battle themes in his works. However, Theodor Aman's painting steps outside the conventional boundaries in order to "put history into action."[49] The genre he approached is often referred to as "Bataille composition"[50] derived from the French "bataille," meaning "battle." Encouraged by Nicolae Bălcescu, the artist undertakes a thorough documentation process so that his work can depict the reality of the Romanian medieval era with the highest degree of accuracy,[51] regardless of the level of dynamism found in the composition. Several ink sketches of a janissary and specific Turkish clothing elements are found in Adrian-Silvan Ionescu's article.[52]

Aman's studies in Paris extended for approximately 9 years,[53] during which the artist cultivated his interest in patriotic composition, as evidenced by two lithographs, one centered around the figure of Mihai Viteazul: *The Last Night of Mihai Viteazul* (Fig. 5), and *The Battle of Oltenița*, a copy of the original which came into the possession of Sultan Dolmabahçe Sarayi,[54] commemorating the Ottoman victory against Russian troops during the Crimean War. Some considerations regarding the first mentioned lithograph should start with the fact that, unlike Constantin Lecca's version, which illustrates the ambush orchestrated by General Basta, the title of the work reflects the content figuratively.

In the foreground is the figure of ruler Mihai Viteazul seated at a table in the open air, near his camp, raising a cup with a small group of scarcely individualized soldiers. In the lower right plane, the shape of a cannon can be discerned, consistent with technological developments in mercenary armies.[55] The prince's expression exudes a certain enthusiasm, making it difficult to

---

[47] Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, "Modernitatea lui Aman," *Studii și Cercetări de Istoria Artei* 45 (2011): 97–139.

[48] Gheorghe Cosma, *Pictura istorică românească* (București: Meridiane, 1986), 51.

[49] Cosma, *Pictura istorică,* 59.

[50] Cosma, *Pictura istorică,* 56.

[51] Ion Frunzetti, *Arta românească în secolul al XIX-lea* (București: Meridiane, 1991), 52–54.

[52] Ionescu, "Modernitatea," 108.

[53] Ionescu, "Modernitatea," 100.

[54] Oprescu, *Pictura,* 171–172.

[55] Petre P. Panaitescu, *Mihai Viteazul* (București: Corint, 2002), 61.

determine whether the artist follows the anatomical line of Sadeler or Custos, while the clothing and accessories are the conventional ones in which he has been portrayed throughout the era. The only anachronistic element with strange implications in this context is the presence of the full moon, which, while serving as an ideal source of diffused light, can also be seen as a bad omen. However, the primary source of inspiration is not historical but literary. The lithograph in question adopts Dimitrie Bolintineanu's poem: "But on a mountaintop stands Michael at the table, [...] He stands at the head of the table, between captains..."[56], delimiting the scenography behind the composition, while the verse "Like a golden globe the moon was shining"[57] explains the inclusion of the full moon in the previously described context.

Some of the main motifs of Aman's work and stylistic approach to the historical composition can be found in an opulent setting of the *Turkish Envoys Bringing Gifts to Mihai Viteazul* (Fig. 6) an oil painting part of the collection of the Craiova Art Museum. The painting likely aims to illustrate the moment of handing over the "banner of rule"[58] with honors and gifts from the Sultan. In this case, attention is drawn to the tunics embroidered with decorative threads known as "brandenburgs", "fabric of all colors,"[59] white silk stockings, and thin leather boots made out of goat or calf leather, also known as "saffian".[60] This "standard" attire, encountered in the representations of Aman's predecessors, undergoes minimal modifications in his work but is qualitatively reproduced far beyond the previous approaches. Of course, the cap is unique in appearance, reinforcing the connection between the ruler's image and its accuracy through repetition. The facial structure primarily reflects the visual template found in the engraving by Aegidius Sadeler. Additionally, the ruler is the only one wearing a cloak, whereas the garments of those present in the scene are a chromatic reinterpretation of an existing template, with minimal interventions, with or without a similar cap worn by the ruler.

This work serves as an overture to the murals *The Battle of Călugăreni* and *Mihai Viteazul's Triumphal Entry into Bucharest after the Battle of Călugăreni*, substantial compositions executed in encaustic technique,[61] which can be found in the entrance hall of his residence. Both works preserve the main content elements found in *The Expulsion of the Turks from Călugăreni*, except the fact that the focus is more vividly placed on the favorable position of the Romanian army,

---

[56] Dimitrie Bolintineanu, *Legende Istorice* (București: Litera 2018), 12.
[57] Bolintineanu, *Legende Istorice,* 12.
[58] Panaitescu, *Mihai Viteazul,* 125.
[59] Alexianu, *Mode și veșminte,* 233.
[60] Alexianu, *Mode și veșminte,* 235.
[61] Ionescu, "Modernitatea," 107.

with Mihai Viteazul also present as the central figure in both murals. It's worth noting that the flag present in one of the murals features the arrangement of colors with horizontal stripes, but unlike the version of the flag adopted during the 1848 Revolution, it does not, at first glance, contain notions of "justice, fraternity."[62]

The influence of Bălcescu's work is evident in two other paintings, currently exhibited at the "Theodor Aman" Museum in Bucharest[63]: *After the Battle of Ruse* also known as *The Kidnapping of Soldiers' Children by Mihai Viteazul's Troops* and *Mihai Viteazul Contemplating the Head of Andrei Bathory* (Fig. 7). In the case of the first painting, through a clever process of "artistic symbiosis," Aman takes a quote found in *The Romanians under Mihai Viteazul*,[64] which describes the situation in the city of Ruse following the rebellion orchestrated at the beginning of his rule.[65] A witness describes the situation as follows: "delicate Turkish women, much spoiled [...] had you seen them then, naked, barefoot, rolling in the snow."[66] The second painting depicts the favorable outcome of the Battle of Şelimbăr. On the one hand, Mihai Viteazul's entry into Alba Iulia marked the annexation of Transylvania,[67] presented in Lecca's work, but on the other hand, this process involved the killing of the former prince, Andrei Báthory, through decapitation.[68] Once again, the artist takes a sequence from Bălcescu's work, a fateful interaction between the ruler and "Lady Stanca," whose purpose was to reaffirm the ephemeral nature of human life but also to foreshadow the grim manner in which the ruler's life would end two years later.

Worth noting is the fact that the general resemblance of the Wallachian lord sees a recurrence in Aman's work, in the absence of credible historical sources. The iconographic pantheon initiated by the artist encapsuled a relatively wide variation of moments and historical figures. To conclude this journey through Romanian medieval history, another painting needs to be addressed featuring Moldavian ruler Stephen the Great as its protagonist. Stephen appears in two main guises in Aman's work. The first of these is *Stephen the Great Falling from His Horse at the Battle of Şcheia*, but due to the multitude of soldiers, horses, and dislocated objects, his position is partially concealed. The fur cap and white horse serve as a bridge between appellation and allegory. However, this theme is revisited and better represented in a later work, currently part of the collection of the Cluj-Napoca Art Museum.

---

[62] Maria Dogaru, "Tricolorul și cocardele în contextul luptei revoluționarilor pașoptiști," *Revista de istorie* 31, no. 5 (May 1978): 861.

[63] Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, *Artă și document. Arta documentaristă în România secolului al XIX-lea,* (București: Meridiane, 1990), 242.

[64] Nicolae Bălcescu, *Românii supt Mihai-Voievod Viteazul,* 2nd ed. (București: Meridiane,1982).

[65] Panaitescu, *Mihai Viteazul,* 111–112.

[66] Bălcescu, *Românii,* 52.

[67] Panaitescu, *Mihai Viteazul,* 159.

[68] Panaitescu, *Mihai Viteazul,* 160.

Drawing inspiration from Ion Neculce's chronicle and the poetry of Dimitrie Bolintineanu, "Stephen the Great and Purice the Bailiff"[69] seeks to distill the energy resulting from the previously evoked painting. The chronicle mentions that a court official named Purice witnessed the scene and offered his support by helping the fallen ruler remount his own horse.[70] The canvas (Fig. 8) reveals a particular cliché of Aman's historical composition, namely, the Moldavian prince's physiognomy is a simple adaptation of Mihai Viteazul's physical traits, albeit less well-defined. The scene takes place on a battlefield. At the feet of the horse, Purice is crouched, looking toward the ruler. Near Stephen the Great, is a fallen white horse belonging to him, which he is forced to abandon. A vibrant scene unfolds around them, Moldavian soldiers confronting the forces of Petru Hronoda, "Hroiot". Surrounding them we can identify several weapons specific to the era, including spears and axes.[71]

The last two contributions are much more timid and take inspiration mostly from Constantin Lecca's work. Little is known about Mihail Lapaty's family and history. His work was strongly influenced by the contributions of Géricault and Delacroix, as well as his teacher Ary Scheffer,[72] at least in terms of dynamics and chromatics. However, his contribution to the current endeavor is limited to a work based on the figure of Mihai Viteazul. In 1855, the artwork was reproduced in the *Illustration* magazine[73] being an almost faithful copy of a previously realized lithograph.[74]

Finally, we can introduce Nicolae Grigorescu's modest contribution, an early work of his before the eventual artistic proliferation. The first historical composition of Nicolae Grigorescu *Mihai Viteazul at Călugăreni* (Fig. 9) shows the influence of his predecessors, especially Lecca, as Aman had not yet composed his own *Mihaida*. Even without well-established stylistic directions, his composition has the power to not necessarily surpass Lecca's vision he transposed it into a personal patina. Isolating the central figure from the rest of the work, we can observe that the position of the horse's legs is identical to that in the lithograph produced about two decades earlier. Nonetheless, there are minor anatomical aberrations, with the dimensional ratio between the horse and the rider severely diminished. There cannot be a specific characterization of the physiognomy,

---

[69] Bolintineanu, *Legende Istorice,* 257.

[70] Ion Neculce, *Letopisețul Țării Moldovei* (București: Litera, 2001), 16.

[71] Radu R. Rosetti, *Istoria artei militare a românilor până în veacul al XVII-lea* (București: Monitorul Oficial și Imprimeriile Statului. Imprimeria Națională, 1947), 139.

[72] Vasile Florea, "Pictura românească în secolul al XIX-lea," in Vasile Drăguț, *Pictura românească în imagini: 1111 reproduceri* (București: Meridiane, 1970), 135.

[73] Ionescu, *Artă și document*, 240.

[74] Dimitrie Papazoglu, *Istoria fondării orașului București. Istoria începutului orașului București. Călăuza sau conducătorul Bucureștiului* (București: Fundația Culturală "Gheorghe Marin Speteanu", 2000), 280–284.

given that Dominic Custos's engraving had not appeared in Lecca's work, except in the later editions. Except for the central position, there are no other distinctive elements to help the viewer distinguish Mihai Viteazul's identity from the amalgamation of soldiers and Turkish soldiers present. The clothing in this case suffers from a lack of documentation, having an anachronistic appearance, identifying several pieces of armor and a chest piece that were not part of the attire of mercenaries in that century.[75] Most human figures are depicted in a frontal manner, an aesthetic cliché of the iconographers of that time.[76] In the distant secondary plane, two flags can be identified, incorporating the colors of the Romanian national flag, represented horizontally. Both the chromatic order and the heraldic symbol incorporated, although difficult to decipher, are innovative and original in the given context.

Conclusions

Having all these paintings and artworks in mind we can identify a visible interest for representation and historical accuracy, especially in Theodor Aman's case. However, if we were to concentrate on the significance of all the works discussed, except for the portraits of Mihai Viteazul based on two credible historical effigies, the historical art of this period seeks to inspire and open the Romanian cultural horizon to the past. Visual representations provide meaning and significance to events often obscure or difficult to transpose into reality, as long as the audience possesses the necessary references. Thus, returning to the previously mentioned series of portraits, his stoic image, accompanied by his characteristic hat, firm gaze, and facial hair, overlaps with his identity in the Romanian collective consciousness.

Of course, the ruler of Wallachia and Moldavia represents more than that; he is a recurring symbol meant to affirm and support the idea of unity. His figure has been animated by a majority of modern Romanian artists. Furthermore, except for a few innovative attempts, his depiction is constant, emanating a multitude of patriotic feelings. His identity is guaranteed through those recognizable clothing and decorative elements, except for *The Death of Mihai Viteazul* in Lecca's work, which deviated from the established creed of Sadeler's or Custos's engravings.

In Aman's case, we observe his tendency to transcend this symbolic essence and evoke the actual virtues and victorious conquests that led to the unification of the Romanian nation for the first time in its history. Regardless of the earlier versions produced, each variant in which the ruler is depicted creates a

---

[75] Alexianu, *Mode și veșminte,* 150.
[76] Valentin Ciucă, *Pe urmele lui Nicolae Grigorescu,* (București: Editura Sport-Turism, 1987), 42.

new cultural horizon. The pinnacle is undoubtedly Mişu Popp's portrait. However, the Romanian artistic movement acted independently from each other, certainly not due to a lack of artistic camaraderie. On the contrary, Lecca and Popp had a well-established friendship, while Aman and Tattarescu formalized superior artistic education in the newly formed Romanian state. Every artist has created according to their criteria, thus their individuality is showcased. Lecca, through his collective compositions, technically inferior but equally pertinent, relied on Custos's engravings, being the first artist to bring the Romanian rulers' subject matter into concrete form through his engravings. The reason why the other artists, from Aman to Popp, relied more on Sadeler's version is strictly due to aesthetic preference. Custos's version presents several anatomical similarities, yet the overall aspect of the engraving is theatrical and superficial, in comparison to the tenacity and compositional drama found in Sadeler's engraving.

His masculine, noble, heroic, and dramatic figure offers a moral and courageous example. The emergence of this pictorial genre was a necessity, filling a cultural void identified and fueled by the political changes determined by a succession of events, starting with the Revolution of 1848. In the proximity of the War of Independence, an influx of historical portraits can be observed, as the majority of battle compositions of that period focused mainly on current events and not on the past. Artists of the modern era drew inspiration sequentially from reality, history, and politics to produce art that first satisfied their personal demands and then fulfilled an educational function, paving the way and cultivating the Romanian spirit, adorned with such noble examples that serve both as legitimization and inspiration for the future generations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aaron, Florian. *Mihaié II Bravulé: biografia şi caracteristica lui. Trase din istoria Ţării Româneşti*. Bucureşti: Tipografia Colegiului Naţional, 1858.

Alexianu, Alexandru. *Mode şi veşminte din trecut.* Vol. 1. Bucureşti: Meridiane, 1971.

Bălcescu, Nicolae. *Românii supt Mihai-Voievod Viteazul.* 2nd ed. Bucureşti: Meridiane, 1982.

Bolintineanu, Dimitrie. *Viaţa lui Mihai Viteazul făcută pe înţelegerea poporului*. Bucureşti: Librăria Socescu, 1870.

Bolintineanu, Dimitrie. *Legende istorice.* Bucureşti: Litera, 2018.

Ciucă, Valentin. *Pe urmele lui Nicolae Grigorescu*. Bucureşti: Editura Sport-Turism, 1987.

Claus, Peter, and John Marriott. *History. An introduction of theory, method and practice.* London: Routledge, 2017.

Cosma, Gheorghe. *Pictura istorică românească.* Bucureşti: Meridiane, 1986.

Dogaru, Maria. "Tricolorul şi cocardele în contextul luptei revoluţionarilor paşoptişti." *Revista de Istorie,* 31, no. 5 (May 1978): 861–869.

Emerling, Jae. *Theory for Art History.* London: Routledge, 2019.

Florea, Vasile. *Theodor Aman.* Bucureşti: Meridiane, 1965.

Florea, Vasile. "Pictura românească în secolul al XIX-lea." In Vasile Drăguţ, *Pictura românească în imagini: 1111 reproduceri*, 105–169. Bucureşti: Meridiane, 1970.

Florea, Vasile. *Arta românească. De la origini până în prezent.* Bucureşti: Litera, 2017.

Fotino, Dionisie. *Istoria generală a Daciei sau a Transilvaniei, Ţerei Muntenesci şi a Moldovei.* Vol. 2. Bucureşti: Imprimeria naţională a lui Iosef Romanov et Companie, 1859.

Frunzetti, Ion. *Arta românească în secolul al XIX-lea.* Bucureşti: Meridiane, 1991.

Hobsbawm, Eric. *Naţiuni şi naţionalism din 1780 până în prezent. Program, mit, realitate.* Chişinău: Arc, 1997.

Ionescu, Adrian-Silvan. *Artă şi document. Arta documentaristă în România secolului al XIX-lea.* Bucureşti: Meridiane, 1990.

Ionescu, Adrian-Silvan. "Modernitatea lui Aman." *Studii şi cercetări de Istoria Artei*, no. 45 (2011): 97–139.

Neculce, Ion. *Letopiseţul Ţării Moldovei.* Bucureşti: Litera, 2001.

Nicoară, Simona. *Mitologiile revoluţiei paşoptiste româneşti. Istorie şi imaginar.* Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 1999.

Nicoară, Simona. *Naţiunea modernă. Mituri, simboluri, ideologii.* Cluj-Napoca: Accent, 2002.

Niculescu, Remus. "Constantin Lecca în Italia. După un jurnal de călătorie inedit." *Studii şi cercetări de Istoria Artei* 49, (2015): 85–122.

Oprescu, George. *Pictura românească în secolul al XIX-lea.* Bucureşti: Meridiane, 1984.

Panaitescu, Petre. *Mihai Viteazul.* Bucureşti: Corint, 2002.

Papazoglu, Dimitrie. *Istoria fondării oraşului Bucureşti. Istoria începutului oraşului Bucureşti. Călăuza sau conducătorul Bucureştiului.* Bucureşti: Fundaţia Culturală "Gheorghe Marin Speteanu", 2000.

Popescu, Elena. "Repere portretistice Biedermeier în opera lui Mişu Popp." *Revista Transilvania*, no. 2–3 (2004): 154–161.

Popescu, Elena. *Mişu Popp. Reprezentant al academismului românesc. Pictura religioasă şi laică.* Sibiu: Muzeul Naţional Brukenthal, 2007.

"Raportul generalului Basta cătră Arhiducele Mateiu despre uciderea lui Mihaiu-Vodă." In *Documente privitoare la Istoria Românilor*, vol. 4, edited by Eudoxiu Hurmuzaki, 266–267. Bucureşti: Stabilimentul în arte grafice Socecu & Teclu, 1882.

Rezeanu, Paul. *Constantin Lecca.* Bucureşti: Arcade, 2005.

Rosetti, Radu. *Istoria artei militare a românilor până în veacul al XVII-lea.* Bucureşti: Monitorul Oficial şi Imprimeriile Statului. Imprimeria Naţională, 1947.

Schulze, Hagen. *Stat şi naţiune în istoria europeană.* Iaşi: Polirom, 2003.

Topolski, Jerzy. *Methodology of History.* Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1977.

Topolski, Jerzy. *Metodologia istoriei.* Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, 1987.

Vătăşianu, Virgil. "Opera lui Mişu Popp." *Ţara Bârsei* IV, no. 4 (1932): 291–313.

Vătăşianu,Virgil. *Metodica cercetării în istoria artei.* Cluj-Napoca: Clusium, 1996.

Wertheimer-Ghika, Jacques. *Gheorghe Tattarescu şi Revoluţia de la 1848.* Bucureşti: Meridiane, 1971.

Illustrations

Fig. 1. Constantin Lecca, *Mihai Viteazul*, litograph. (photo Romanian Academy Library)

Fig. 2. Constantin Lecca, *The Death of Mihai Viteazul*, oil on canvas, signed and dated in the left corner in blue paint "Lecca/1845", inventory number 3566. (photo The National Museum of Art of Romania, Gallery of Modern Romanian Art)

Fig. 3. Mişu Popp, *Mihai Viteazul*, oil on canvas, signed and dated on the hilt of the sword "M. Popp/1881", inventory number 71. (photo Braşov Art Museum)

Fig. 4. Gheorghe Tattarescu, *Voivod Mihai*, oil painting, signed and dated center left in red paint "Tattarescu/1880". (photo: Art Museum of Prahova County "Ion Ionescu-Quintus")

Fig. 5. Adolphe Mouilleron after Theodor Aman, *The Last Night of Mihai Viteazul*, lithograph, inventory number 35315/527. (photo The National Museum of Art of Romania)

Fig. 6. Theodor Aman, *Turkish Envoys Bringing Gifts to Mihai Viteazul*, oil painting. (photo Craiova Art Museum)

Fig. 7. Theodor Aman, *Mihai Viteazul Contemplating the Head of Andrei Báthory*, oil on canvas, signed and dated, right corner, in red "Th. Aman 1865", inventory number 21. (photo The Bucharest Municipality Museum)

Fig. 8. Theodor Aman, *Stephen the Great and Purice the Bailiff*, oil painting. (photo Cluj-Napoca Art Museum)

Fig. 9. Nicolae Grigorescu, *Mihai Viteazul at Călugăreni*, oil on canvas, signed and dated, center down "N. Grigorescu", inventory number 4495. (photo The National Museum of Art of Romania)