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Is nationalism everywhere?

The case of Romanian architects in the late 19th century.

My paper explores ways to move beyond a sole focus on nationalism in art historical studies about late 19th century Europe. It takes the case of Romanian architects in that period to show how very different concerns were more prominent, entangled and hidden behind apparently omnipresent nationalistic discourses.

For some decades now, art historians have described the relation between a constructed nationalism and visual arts in late 19th century Europe. The region that got a particular great attention was East-Central Europe, for which national architectural styles have been identified, contrasted and explained. For Western Europe, similar national styles have been harder to find and often the specific type of Art Nouveau/ Jugendstil /Arts and Crafts/ Modernismo styles have been seen as the Western ‘national styles’. Unsurprisingly, this approach reinforced the already contested but well-established binary between a civic, Western nationalism and a more vicious, ethnic-based and emphatic Eastern nationalism. However, in spite of the great focus on the connection between visual arts and national ideology, almost all scholars are ready to admit that national styles were only a part, sometimes small, of a bigger artistic landscape; that most of the artists were interested also in other forms of expression; that other styles were even more present; or that nationalism in art was often transnational/fluid/contradictory.

My paper takes these marginal observation as the starting point for analysing Romanian architecture in the late 19th century. It aims to show how nationalism was only one of the many driving forces that explain artistic developments and even when it was the most visible, it often concealed other purposes. The paper draws on the most recent studies of Central Europe that emphasized the importance of ‘national indifference’ or ‘non-national’ to study how people perceived the Empire and the new emerging nations.

To make my point as clear as possible, I will focus on a group of young Romanian architects that have founded key national institutions in the field of architecture and historical heritage and are seen as the creators of the Romanian national architectural style: Ion Mincu(1852-

1912), Ion Socolescu(1856-1924), George Sterian(1860-1936), and others. I will show how they often used the national discourse to achieve other, more practical goals, such as professional advancement or lucrative commissions. I will also argue that underneath sometimes very prominent national discourses, the Romanian architects had more pressing interests, such as the artistic education in Romania; the regulation of restorations and of the historical heritage; the architectural competitions; or even the difficulties in creating a national architectural style, required by some state leaders.

My paper aims to go beyond the over-researched theme of nationalism in art, and integrate a handful of other themes that have the potential to explain late 19th century developments in the visual arts.