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Marginality, Rise, and Authority in G. Oprescu's Career. A Critical Reading

Abstract: George Oprescu (1881-1969), a canonical voice in Romanian art historiography, established himself in the mid-20th century as a university professor, art critic, museum director, and founder of the Institute of Art History in Bucharest. Behind this symbolic authority lies an unconventional path, largely overlooked, as he entered academia relatively late in life, around the age of fifty. A social and professional outsider, lacking formal training in art history, he rose to prominence through his ability to adapt across divergent ideological contexts. This study examines how Oprescu accumulated and sustained symbolic and cultural capital over time, combining biographical reading with discourse analysis to explore the interplay between personal formation, institutional authority, and historiographical voice.

Keywords: Biography; George Oprescu; Romanian Art Historiography; Art Criticism; Cultural Capital; Interwar and Postwar Romania.

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Although a lesser-known figure in Romanian studies and the broader humanities, George Oprescu (November 27, 1881 – August 13, 1969) stands among the most influential Romanian art historians of the 20th century, widely read and frequently referenced in the field. His authority derived not only from his scholarly writings, but also from the key administrative roles he occupied in cultural institutions between the 1930s and the late 1960s. Yet, Oprescu's early and mid-life trajectory did not foretell such a career. Born into a modest and socially marginal background, he spent the first half of his professional life teaching in provincial Romania, far from the country's major cultural centres. Only in his fifties did he enter academia, advancing rapidly and establishing himself as a leading voice in art history, art criticism, and museography, a status he maintained after the Second World War and throughout the communist period.

Based on official and personal correspondence, institutional records, and Oprescu's autobiographical writings, this study reconstructs his biographical development and professional ascent within the ideological context of 20th century Romania and Europe. The analysis is informed

by Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, mediation, and symbolic reproduction, as explored in *La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* (1979)¹, while also considering his critique of the "biographical illusion"², which warns against presenting and explaining someone's life as a coherent sequence of events. Nevertheless, biography, however selective and retrospectively constructed, can offer insight into historiographical writing and discourse formation.

By tracing Oprescu's path from a marginal social background to the centre of academic art history, the article examines how his historiographical output and activity as an art critic were shaped both by his personal and professional trajectory and by shifting political and ideological contexts. While existing scholarship acknowledges Oprescu's institutional stature (the Institute of Art History in Bucharest now bears his name) and the importance of scholarly production³, the relationship between his biography and his historical writing has not yet been systematically examined. The first two parts of my study therefore show how a socially and professionally marginal figure lacking formal training in art history came to accumulate authority within Romanian art historiography. The next parts explore how his life path shaped both his institutional roles and the voice of his writings across ideological contexts.

Marginality, Education, and Early Networks (1881–1923)

Born in 1881 in the Romanian provincial town of Câmpulung-Muscel, George Oprescu was of humble origins. He was raised in a single-parent household by his mother, Maria Oprescu

(1862–1902), and his grandmother, Ana Oprescu (1844–1906), both of whom were working women: Ana a domestic and Maria a seamstress. He was never legally acknowledged by his father, magistrate Ion Bălteanu (1852–1919), descended from a boyar family⁴, who, in 1881, the year of Oprescu's birth, served as president of the Muscel Tribunal in Câmpulung⁵. Oprescu later referred to himself as "the natural child of a very young seamstress from that town, seduced and abandoned by a magistrate"⁶. He recalled his father in bitter terms: "[...] he never knew about me, and you can imagine how black his memory remained in my soul"⁷. The absence of a father figure shaped his character, leaving him proud yet uncertain of his own worth and abilities. Marked by illegitimacy and precarity, his early background appears to have fostered a drive for symbolic self-legitimation pursued through education and accumulation of cultural capital.

Education became George Oprescu's path to social ascent, serving as the primary instrument of advancement and a symbolic rupture with his modest origins. Before starting school, he taught himself to read by deciphering letters and words in newspapers⁸. While attending primary school in his hometown of Câmpulung⁹, his teacher advised Maria Oprescu to send George to Bucharest to continue his studies, rather than place him in apprenticeship, as she had planned¹⁰. At the age of ten, he left for Bucharest on a scholarship and enrolled as a boarder at the Matei Basarab High School. There he became familiar not only with French language and literature, but also with art, classical music, and theatre¹¹. He later studied History and French at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the

University of Bucharest, graduating with honours¹².

Bucharest also marked a social turning point. Through relationships forged in high school and at university, Oprescu entered elite intellectual circles¹³. His close friendship with Constantin Ionescu-Mihăești (microbiologist, 1883–1962)¹⁴ introduced him to a privileged milieu facilitating important career contacts. As a student, Oprescu came under the influence of his professor N. Iorga (historian and politician, 1871–1940)¹⁵, and from his third year at university worked for him copying and filing historical documents, established a lasting connection with the historian¹⁶. Another decisive figure was Ion Cantacuzino (microbiologist, 1863–1934), a friend of the Ionescu-Mihăești family, who became Oprescu's mentor in matters of art and an important protector, whose support later enabled him to become director of the Toma Stelian Museum in Bucharest.

In the absence of a structured university training in art history, Oprescu built his knowledge through reading and direct contact with artworks in museums, galleries, and antique shops. Under Cantacuzino's influence¹⁷, Oprescu discovered art from a collector's perspective. He built his extensive visual knowledge, supported by an excellent memory, through prolonged observation, comparison, and contextualization¹⁸. This self-taught method would later inform both his scholarly and his museum work.

Following his graduation from university, George Oprescu spent nearly fifteen years (1905–1920) as French teacher and high-school principal in the southern Romanian towns of Giurgiu and Turnu Severin. This period consolidated his

professional position within the secondary education system, while also allowing for discreet symbolic accumulation far from the cultural centre of the capital. After the First World War, despite lacking a doctoral degree, he moved from secondary to higher education with the support of his friend Vasile Pârvan and that of other members of his intellectual network. His appointment as lecturer in French at the University of Cluj took place in the context of the formation of Greater Romania (1918–1920), when the former Hungarian university was reorganized as the Romanian University "King Ferdinand I"¹⁹ and a new Romanian teaching staff was recruited by a commission led by Pârvan²⁰ and Sextil Pușcariu. During his years in Cluj, Oprescu earned his PhD in Philology (1923)²¹ and advanced to the rank of associate professor. He held this position until 1931, when he won the Chair of Art History at the University of Bucharest through public competition²².

Rise: From Geneva to Bucharest (1923–1931)

In 1923, due to strong political support generated by his personal connections, Oprescu was appointed secretary of the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation at the League of Nations (LoN), with the backing of Titulescu (head of the Romanian delegation at the LoN), Sextil Pușcariu (LoN delegate and academic ally), I.G. Duca (Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs), and Sir Eric Drummond (LoN General Secretary)²³. Although still a university lecturer, without diplomatic credentials, he joined a prestigious network of scholars and public intellectuals,

including Henri Bergson, Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, Thomas Mann, and Paul Valéry.

The International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC) was part of the LoN's cultural diplomacy project in the aftermath of World War I. Between 1923 and 1931, Oprescu served as one of Romania's representatives in Geneva, within a key interwar institution promoting the humanist ideal of "moral disarmament" through scientific dialogue and pacifism. He directly contributed to the creation of the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC) in Paris, a precursor to UNESCO²⁴, and assisted in establishing the International Office of Museums, a predecessor to the postwar International Council of Museums (ICOM)²⁵. Following his tenure as ICIC secretary, he served as expert on the Committee on Arts and Letters and board member in several related institutions, including the Institute of Intellectual Cooperation in Paris and the International Institute of Educational Cinematography in Rome. This experience brought him substantial symbolic geopolitical capital, positioning him as a mediator between international and local scenes, a status crucial to his later rise in Romanian academia and museography.

Around 1921, Oprescu's shift to art history was catalysed by his encounter with French art historian Henri Focillon²⁶. They collaborated on cultural diplomacy within the LoN network and beyond. When Oprescu began writing on art history, Focillon and Constantin Ionescu-Mihăești were among his most important advisors.

Upon returning from Geneva to Romania in 1931, Oprescu's career advanced

along two institutional paths: the university and the museum. This development was strongly influenced by three formative figures in his life – Ion Cantacuzino, Henri Focillon, and Ionescu-Mihăești – as well as by the symbolic capital he had accumulated abroad. In Bucharest, where the recently established Toma Stelian Museum required a director and the Chair of Art History at the University had become vacant, he soon came to occupy both positions, benefiting from the support of Focillon and N. Iorga.

Before obtaining the Chair of Art History at the University of Bucharest, Oprescu was first appointed Chair of French Civilization at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, a position financed by the Paris government at the initiative of Vasile Pârvan and Henri Focillon²⁷, under the broader policy of Franco-Romanian cultural and intellectual cooperation. The Faculty Council appointed G. Oprescu in recognition of his recent work on the painter Théodore Géricault²⁸, which demonstrated a solid understanding of French modern art²⁹.

Meanwhile, Oprescu prepared his candidature for the Chair of Art History. The position became vacant in 1926³⁰, when Alexandru Tzigara-Samurçaș, who had created and held the chair since 1911³¹, left for the University of Cernăuți. When the competition procedures were opened the following year, Tzigara-Samurçaș also decided to participate, becoming G. Oprescu's main rival³². The competition was highly contentious, delayed by appeals and protests³³. After several rounds of competition, Oprescu was eventually declared the winner by a commission chaired by N. Iorga, then rector of the University of Bucharest³⁴. The dispute

generated lasting animosity, extending beyond the university into press polemics, a challenge to a duel³⁵, and legal proceedings. At the centre of this battle for institutional legitimacy was the question of Oprescu's academic credentials. Tzigara-Samurcaş argued that the former lacked the necessary training in art history, being instead a graduate of philology with a doctorate in comparative literature and a background as a French teacher – qualifications that, in his view, did not justify his appointment to the Chair of Art History³⁶. Decades later, linguist Iorgu Iordan (1888–1986) suggested that Iorga “used and abused his authority” to support Oprescu, partly to block the ascent of his academic rivals:

[...] I knew that he had been “protected” by Nicolae Iorga, not so much out of conviction as out of interest, to prevent the Chair of Art History [...] from being filled by Al. Tzigara-Samurcaş or Orest Tafrales, his personal adversaries³⁷.

Despite the scandal surrounding his entrance to the University, Oprescu was a professor there for almost two decades and served as Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters in 1946³⁸. In his courses and seminars on Baroque, Classicism, Impressionism, and 19th-century Romanian painting, he presented a Eurocentric narrative of art history, while building a network of teaching and institutional ties that strengthened his professional influence. He would deliver his courses in a rather rigid format, reading them “word for word”³⁹, in a “monotonous voice”⁴⁰, whereas in the seminar he showcased his teaching skills by working closely with students and

emphasizing methodical, well-documented research⁴¹.

G. Oprescu was keen to encourage and cultivate his best students. In a practice reminiscent of N. Iorga's, he recruited several collaborators from among them. His course and seminar functioned as a mechanism of symbolic reproduction of cultural capital, mentoring a new generation of art historians, many of whom later became researchers at the Institute of Art History he would direct: Teodora Voinescu, Ion Frunzetti, Mircea Popescu, Adina Nanu, Amelia Pavel, Eleonora Costescu, Mircea Deac, Remus Niclescu, and Theodor Enescu. As recalled by former students and colleagues, his leadership style was vertical and paternalistic, yet effective in shaping the discipline during its institutional consolidation. Several testimonies also note his authoritarian attitude in the classroom, including criticism directed towards female students and occasional outbursts toward assistants, which earned him a reputation for misogyny⁴².

In 1931, simultaneously with his appointment as university professor, Oprescu also became director of the Toma Stelian Museum in Bucharest, a general art museum established through a private bequest to the Romanian state and dedicated to painting, sculpture, graphic and decorative arts⁴³. Under his leadership, the museum became a centre for collection-building and a hub for cultural diplomacy. He expanded its collections through acquisitions and donations and curated major international exhibitions in collaboration with European institutions, drawing on the connections he had established at the League of Nations⁴⁴. Oprescu drew his museum staff from among his top students: Mircea

Nădejde was hired as a librarian⁴⁵, Teodora Voinescu was appointed as an honorary assistant⁴⁶ and later promoted to the rank of junior researcher⁴⁷, and Ion Frunzetti worked as assistant⁴⁸.

Building on his experience as an organizer, in 1941 Oprescu co-founded the Institute of Art History within the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, alongside professors I.D. Ștefănescu (art historian and Byzantinologist) and I. Andriesescu (archaeologist). Conceived as a university-based research unit, the Institute aimed to provide the discipline with an institutional and scholarly framework⁴⁹. It was reorganized under the Academy of the Romanian People's Republic in 1948–49⁵⁰, when Oprescu was appointed director, a position he held until his death in 1969. Thus, Oprescu successfully transitioned from the royal regime to the communist state, obtaining institutional continuity and political protection in exchange for his symbolic and professional capital, as well as cultural legitimacy and expertise.

From provincial outsider to League of Nations official, and from schoolteacher to a leading academic, Oprescu's career shaped both his cultural authority and the voice of his writings, a voice that was formalist, descriptive, and aligned with dominant norms and mechanisms of institutional validation. It is this voice that I now turn to for a closer reading.

A Voice of Authority in Romanian Art History

George Oprescu's art historical and critical output, from interwar studies to postwar syntheses, reflects a multi-faceted career across changing political

contexts. His work comprises more than eighty titles on Romanian and universal art: monographs, art criticism, university course books, exhibition catalogues, and collective volumes coordinated at the Institute of Art History. Among the most important are the Nicolae Grigorescu volumes, written with Remus Niculescu⁵¹, and his study of French artists active in the Romanian Principalities during the 18th and 19th centuries⁵².

The foundations of this approach were laid in the interwar period. Writing in the context of the national consolidation post-1918, Oprescu positioned himself as an intellectual engaged in building the cultural legitimacy of Greater Romania. For him, the study of art history was part of the national project, as he stated in his inaugural lecture at the University of Bucharest. Expounding on the role of art history research in consolidating local cultural institutions, he argued that:

[...] researchers and young scholars must engage with our artistic and cultural past more frequently, more persistently, and perhaps more methodically than before, in order to present to the world our faithful and truthful image, rather than a tendentious caricature. [...] we are not the intellectual parvenus our enemies speak of, but a nation of ancient settlement, solid on its ethnic and cultural foundations. Our contribution to the heritage of European civilization is an indisputable fact⁵³.

Methodologically, Oprescu combined positivist historiography with formal analysis, drawing on Focillon and the French

tradition. He wrote in a clear, didactic style with a narrative and biographical orientation, focusing on technical and stylistic aspects and occasional axiological assessments⁵⁴. Without specialized academic training, Oprescu developed an empirical, self-taught method of visual analysis based on direct observation and informed by the cultural habits of the urban educated middle-class – museum visits, opera, and classical concerts – which shaped his sensibility and taste.

His contributions reflect prevailing ideological currents articulated along three main directions. First, he aimed at the recovery of traditional art as a source of national authenticity and cohesion⁵⁵, a theme explored during his early years at the University of Cluj. Second, he promoted cultural dialogue between Romania and Europe – especially with France⁵⁶ – an orientation shaped by his experience at the League of Nations and his active engagement in cultural diplomacy. Finally, he developed a major research line on 19th-century Romanian painting, first published in 1935 in foreign editions⁵⁷. This work reflects Oprescu's stature in the late 1930s as professor, museum director, and cultural intermediary addressing both domestic and international audiences.

Interwar Transformations: Between Tradition and Europe

Two case studies illustrate how Oprescu's writing transformed alongside his career and the shifting intellectual and cultural contexts of the interwar period: *Peasant Art in Romania* and *Romanian Painting in the 19th Century* – works that consolidated his reputation as an art historian.

The issues of *Peasant Art in Romania*, first published in 1922 and revised in 1929, and reedited a decade later, exemplifies a significant change in tone and discursive orientation. The 1922 version appeared under the editorial supervision of Vasile Pârvan in the series *Țara noastră. Culegere de scrieri pe înțelesul tuturor despre pământul și poporul românesc* (transl.: *Our Country. Collection of Writings Accessible to All about the Romanian Land and People*). Intended for a Romanian readership, the book was conceived in the spirit of the Greater Romania project and its program of cultural consolidation. Its rhetoric was nationalist and organicist⁵⁸, akin to that of Tzigara-Samurcaș and N. Iorga⁵⁹, who viewed folk art as a marker of ethnic identity and territorial continuity⁶⁰.

By contrast, the 1929 version – aimed at an international audience – attests to a change of register and reflects Oprescu's emerging role as a cultural mediator. Published in the special autumn issue of *The Studio* (London), under the title *Art in Roumania*⁶¹, with an opening message from Queen Marie of Romania, the study expanded on the 1922 text and was later reissued with a preface by Henri Focillon. In this version, Oprescu adopted a more diplomatic tone, reframing vernacular objects as elements of an intercultural aesthetic language with universal attributes, a strategy for integrating Romanian vernacular heritage into transnational networks⁶². The 1929 study departs from the ethnocentric perspective of Tzigara-Samurcaș and Iorga, challenging the claim that the geometric style was specific only to Romanian folk art – a thesis used to legitimize Romanian territorial primacy, particularly in Transylvania. Instead, Oprescu argued that

geometric ornamentation was widespread across cultures, setting aside ethnicity as a central analytical category⁶³. Moreover, while the 1922 study emphasized cultural coherence and national exceptionalism, the 1929 revision introduced a more cautious note, showing that folk art had become a symbolic battlefield where nations of Central and Eastern Europe asserted cultural primacy and territorial claims. Oprescu maintained that peasant art should not be politically instrumentalized, since it originated in what is universal and common to all human communities⁶⁴. This universalist approach to folk art was a direct consequence of Oprescu's diplomatic experience at the League of Nations within an intellectual milieu committed to combating nationalism and promoting moral disarmament through cultural cooperation.

Another significant example of Oprescu's interwar writings is his work on 19th century Romanian art, which represents a clear case of canon formation, with art framed as a record of civilization. His narrative privileged a chronological model, presenting the development of local art as an evolutionary process linked to Western models, an advancement from early or "primitive" forms to the integrative modernity of Theodor Aman, Nicolae Grigorescu, and Ion Andreescu. For decades, this interpretation functioned as the authoritative account of Romanian artistic modernity.

Primarily concerned with painting, Oprescu expanded this line of research in 1937 with the publication of *Romanian Painting in the 19th Century*⁶⁵, for which he received the *Eliade Rădulescu Prize* of the Romanian Academy. The work was innovative for its biographical recovery

of previously unknown painters⁶⁶, based on extensive primary sources: periodicals, correspondence, and archival materials. The book's structure revolved around what Oprescu identified as a pivotal moment in local art history: the founding of the Schools of Fine Arts in Iași and Bucharest. This chronological threshold – still widely accepted in Romanian art historiography – marked the completion of the modernization process through the adoption of new Western artistic models⁶⁷. The categories he introduced – foreign painters, primitive painters, church painters of Western tendency, Transylvanian painters, modern painters, and independent painters – have likewise endured.

Art Criticism and Ideology

Alongside his academic work, Oprescu was a prolific art critic, publishing hundreds of articles in the 1930s and late 1940s, mainly in *Universul*, then Romania's most widely read daily newspaper⁶⁸. His public writing pursued two main aims: to promote the Toma Stelian Museum, which he directed, and to advance an aesthetic ethos rooted in academic convention, refinement, and Western models. Acting as a cultural mediator, he sought to shape the public's aesthetic sensibility and connect institutions, artists, and readers. His criticism followed a pedagogy of legitimate taste, promoting compositional harmony, technical skill, and mastery of colour.

Until the late 1930s, Oprescu maintained an ideologically discreet public profile. As early as 1914 he declined N. Iorga's invitation to join the Democratic Nationalist Party – which Iorga had co-founded with far-right politician A.C. Cuza – citing

Cuza's intolerant rhetoric as the reason for his refusal⁶⁹. Yet as regimes changed, so did his public voice. On the eve of the Second World War, Oprescu openly denounced the Nazi repression of contemporary art, becoming a rare Romanian critic to speak against the *Entartete Kunst* campaign. In articles published in 1937⁷⁰ and 1938⁷¹, he condemned the Nazi interference in art and culture, defending artistic autonomy, invoking the doctrine of *art for art's sake*:

From a desire to renew and purify everything, the current government of Germany has decided to put an end to those movements it deems harmful or immoral [...]. Hence, last year's exhibition of "degenerate art" (*die entartete Kunst*), where, indiscriminately, wonderful works, freer in treatment and more independent in technique, by the most valuable contemporary artists were stigmatized together with truly shameful and ridiculous pieces that time would have eliminated. [...] This year comes [...] the exhibition of works that meet its ideal, healthy art, eternal art, that which reflects the nature of the German people [...] The immense canvases [...] all seem to have been executed by the same hand. [...] Whoever [...] would judge the "culture" of the German people by the exhibition in the "Deutsches Haus" would be sorely mistaken. The German people, in the artistic field, even in recent times, are capable of far more [...] ⁷².

Strikingly, that same year Oprescu also curated a *German Graphic Arts Exhibition* at the Toma Stelian Museum and expressed

gratitude to Joseph Goebbels's Ministry of Propaganda⁷³, an episode revealing the ambiguities of cultural diplomacy under authoritarian regimes. Presenting the exhibition as evidence of strengthened Romanian-German cultural relations⁷⁴, Oprescu attracted the criticism of his long-standing rival Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcaș. Writing from a pro-German standpoint and quoting Hitler, Tzigara-Samurcaș denounced the exhibition as opportunistic and labelled Oprescu "the chameleon of our artistic movement"⁷⁵.

In the early 1940s, Oprescu tentatively aligned with the far-right movement by endorsing an exhibition by artists affiliated with the Iron Guard. In his *Universul* review he adopted Legionary rhetoric, promoting the notion of social or collective art and declaring that the principle of *art for art's sake* had become irrelevant, an abrupt reversal of the position he defended two years earlier in his critique of the Nazi exhibitions in Munich:

We have before us perhaps the best and most interesting [...] exhibition of the year. [...] Starting from the conviction that art must be placed in the service of the nation, [...] that it must be conceived as a collective endeavour [...] subordinated to the common goal [...], that the principle of "art for art's sake" has outlived its time, and that the work of sculptors, painters, and architects should serve faith and love of country, we are shown what can be achieved through such fraternal collaboration⁷⁶.

Oprescu's attitude may have reflected a strategy of self-preservation or cautious

compliance with the Legionary movement, even though he did not share its ideals. Only a month before the publication of this article, N. Iorga had been assassinated, an event Oprescu later condemned in his 1968 memoir⁷⁷. Nevertheless, his 1940 review reveals his willingness to use art criticism as a vehicle for political messaging and to position himself favourably in relation to power, demonstrating pragmatism and calculated political awareness.

A similar pragmatism informed his 1945 article on the exhibition *Art, Work, Democracy*, held at the National Museum [Muzeul Național de la Șosea]. Adopting the vocabulary of Soviet-inspired Proletkultist aesthetics, Oprescu echoed the exhibition's ideological premises in a sympathetic tone, criticizing capitalist society while promoting the principles of the new movement⁷⁸.

Towards the end of the Second World War, Oprescu's discourse underwent a further strategic reconfiguration. In a striking reversal of tone and alignment, he praised the Allied forces⁷⁹ and lamented the destruction caused by the Nazi bombings of Bucharest⁸⁰. In July⁸¹ and September 1947⁸² he published two ideologically charged articles theorizing the forms of art education and pictorial genres suitable to the new political order, texts suggesting his continued professional ambitions in the field of art education. The September 1947 article coincided with the purges in higher education, which he managed to survive, although his position became fragile when, at sixty-six, he was forced into retirement⁸³. In this context, he used his *Universul* articles to signal his continued relevance as an art critic within the new "people's democracy".

Finally, by 1948, in five successive reviews of the *Flacăra* group exhibition⁸⁴, he

had fully adopted the vocabulary of socialist realism – a sign that his transition to the doctrinaire demands of the new regime was complete. As he still stood on the margins of the circle that now controlled the institutional and discursive apparatus of art, these chronicles functioned as a strategy of reintegration, demonstrating his capacity to adapt and negotiate ideologically.

The Postwar Years: (Re)Writing under Pressure

After 1948, George Oprescu consolidated his standing within the new cultural apparatus as director of the restructured Institute of Art History in Bucharest, securing institutional continuity and maintaining authority in the field. In the 1950s, his writings aligned with the prescriptions of Socialist Realism, becoming critical of modernism.

His 1954 volume on sculpture, *Sculptura statuară românească*⁸⁵, exemplifies this discursive accommodation, offering a harsh critique of Constantin Brâncuși consistent with the contemporary ideological demands. The book marks a visible departure from Oprescu's earlier writing, incorporating communist ideological imperatives. As revealed in his *Securitate* (secret police) file, Oprescu admitted to art historian Sydney Geist that the critique had not been written out of conviction, but was rather "an order", in accordance with Party propaganda⁸⁶. Some of the volume's most politically charged passages, including the anti-Brâncuși sections, were drafted by collaborators such as Eugen Schileru, as later revealed by Ion Frunzetti⁸⁷, reflecting Oprescu's practice of delegating ideological discourse to more adept associates.

By the 1960s, amid gradual dogmatic loosening, Oprescu revisited the text in a second edition, retitled *Sculptura românească*⁸⁸, and in essays celebrating Brâncuși as a national icon⁸⁹. Seeking to reverse the judgments expressed in the 1954 synthesis, Oprescu asserted from the opening paragraph that Brâncuși was the most prestigious Romanian artist, whose sculptures of “absolute perfection” were sought after by museums and collectors alike⁹⁰. Later autobiographical writings recount his encounters with Brâncuși (1914, 1937)⁹¹, further contributing to the sculptor’s symbolic rehabilitation. Unlike the 1954 critique, written under ideological pressure, these later texts reflect a more genuine engagement, a view supported by the fact that Oprescu owned a Brâncuși work acquired in the 1930s: *Head of a Child* (1906)⁹².

Conclusion:

From the Margins to Authority

George Oprescu’s career spans the ideological divides of the 20th century, bridging interwar formalism and postwar Socialist Realism. From the margins of provincial Romania to European diplomatic circles and the university halls

of Cluj and Bucharest, his trajectory illustrates how symbolic capital accumulated through education, elite networks, and institutional roles in museums, universities, and the Academy. His voice – as historian and art critic – was shaped by his life path and served as an instrument for navigating the normative demands of each era.

Though not a theorist or methodological innovator, Oprescu was a framework-builder, both discursively and institutionally. The Romanian art-historical canon he helped shape favoured moderate formulas valuing stability and refinement, while excluding the avant-garde, symbolism, and other alternative genealogies of modernity. This selectivity was not incidental, or a matter of personal taste, but part of a broader logic of cultural validation in accordance with dominant norms both before and after the Second World War. In this sense, G. Oprescu’s legacy demonstrates that art-historical writing cannot be neutral: it reflects the outlook and strategies of its authors, in relation to the norms and constraints of their time. Seen in this light, Oprescu’s work is not merely a record of past art, but also a revealing document of how cultural legitimacy, scholarly authority, and historical canons are constructed.

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NOTES

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard University Press, 1984.
2. *Idem*, "Iluzia biografică", in *Rațiuni practice. O teorie a acțiunii*, translated by Cristina și Costin Popescu, București, Editura Meridiane, 1999, p. 58–65.
3. Theodor Enescu, Amelia Pavel, "Critica de artă și studiile de istorie a artei privitoare la perioada modernă și contemporană a artei românești", in Al. Dima, Mircea Popescu (coord.), *Istoria științelor în România. Știința literaturii. Istoriografia de artă*, București, Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1979, p. 127–140; Roxana Modreanu, "Art Historical Writing During Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's Regime. The Case of Academic Painting in the Romanian Academy's Scholarly Journal", in *Brukenthal. Acta Musei*, XV.2, 2020, p. 349–362; *Eadem*, "Romanian Art History During the 1950s as a Form of Social History of Art", in *Art History & Criticism/Meno istorija ir kritika*, vol. 19, 2023, no. 1 (December 2023), p. 81–94; Petre Oprea, *Două perioade din istoriografia artei românești moderne și contemporane*, București, Maiko, 2001, p. 73–78; Vlad Țoca, *Art Historical Discourse in Romania. 1919–1947*, Budapest, L'Harmattan, 2011, p. 100–116.
4. G. Oprescu, *Autobiographical Fragments* [orig. *Fragmente autobiografice*], 1968 (hereafter cited as G. Oprescu, *Autobiographical Fragments*), *Ibidem*, ch. I, f. 5. For more on Ion Bălțeanu, see Mihai Sorin Rădulescu, "Considerații despre genealogia lui George Oprescu", in Adrian-Silvan Ionescu (coord.), Ioana Apostol, Virginia Barbu (eds.), *70 de ani de la fondarea Institutului de Istoria Artei „G. Oprescu”*, București, Editura Academiei Române, 2020, p. 75–90.

5. After leaving Câmpulung, Ion Bălțeanu was a member of the Court of Accounts, which he headed between 1906 and 1919. See Theodor Cornel, "Ion Bălțeanu", in *Figuri contemporane din România. Dicționar biografic*, vol. I, 1909, p. 225.
6. G. Oprescu, *Op. cit.*, ch. I, f. 2–3: „Sunt născut în Câmpulung–Muscel, în 1881, copil natural al unei foarte tinere cusătorese din acel oraș, sedusă și părăsită de un magistrat”.
7. “Sărbătorirea acad. George Oprescu. Răspunsul Academicianului George Oprescu”, in *Analele Academiei Republicii Populare Române*, vol. XI, 1961, p. 524: „[...] niciodată n-a știut de mine, iar amintirea lui, vă puteți închipui cât de neagră mi-a rămas în suflet”.
8. G. Oprescu, *Autobiographical Fragments*, ch. I, f. 5.
9. *Ibidem*, f. 6.
10. *Ibidem*, f. 8–9.
11. *Idem*, *Amintiri, evocări*, București, Editura pentru Literatură, 1968, p. 30.
12. Bucharest Municipal Archives of the National Archives of Romania (BMA), Fond of the University of Bucharest–Faculty of Letters, file 99/1904, f. 273.
13. Oprescu became good friends with Vasile Pârvan (historian and archaeologist, 1882–1927), the brothers Alexandru Ciucă (veterinarian, 1880–1972) and Mihai Ciucă (bacteriologist, 1883–1969), and later, in Cluj, with George Vâlsan (geographer and ethnographer, 1885–1935), Vasile Bogrea (linguist, 1881–1926).
14. Belonging to the urban middle class, Constantin Ionescu–Mihăești came from a family of physicians, and wealthy landowners, who frequently travelled abroad, particularly to France and Germany. His mother, Aristia Ionescu–Mihăești (1859–1939), was the daughter of the painter Anton Chladek.
15. G. Oprescu, *Autobiographical Fragments*, ch. VIII, f. 10.
16. National Library of Romania–Historical Archive (NLR), Fond G. Oprescu & Constantin Ionescu–Mihăești, file 24/1899–1905, f. 41–53.
17. Ioana Măgureanu, “Contribuție la istoria colecționismului românesc interbelic. Colecția Ciucă”, in *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei. Arta plastică*, 2011, t.1(45), p. 220.
18. G. Oprescu's published travel journals contain dozens of pages describing artworks and offering museographic commentary prompted by his visits to museums in Dresden, Berlin, Prague, Moscow, and Saint Petersburg. See G. Oprescu, *Jurnal de călătorie*, București, Cartea Rusă, 1957, passim; *Idem*, *Amintiri, evocări...*, 1968, passim.
19. Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle. 1918–1930*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 219–221, 225–226; Nicolae Sabău, “Coriolan Petranu și începuturile Istoriei artei la Universitatea din Cluj (1919–1945)”, in Nicolae Sabău, Corina Simon, Vlad Țoca (eds.), *Istoria artei la Universitatea din Cluj, Vol. I (1919–1987)*, Cluj, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2010, p. 15.
20. G. Oprescu, *Op. cit.*, ch. XXIII, f. 7.
21. *Idem*, “Eliade Rădulescu și Franța. Studiu de literatură comparată”, in *Dacoromania*, an III, 1923, p. 2–128.
22. BMA, Fond of the University of Bucharest–Faculty of Letters, file 297/1933–1948, f. 113–115.
23. For more information on the process of Oprescu's appointment at the League of Nations, see Ioana Apostol, “Numirea lui G. Oprescu la secretariatul Ligii Națiunilor: un episod biographic”, in *Revista istorică*, t. XXXIV, 2023, no. 4–6, p. 365–384.
24. Romanian Academy Library (RAL), Fond G. Oprescu, S3 (10) DCLXXXVII, G. Oprescu to Constantin Ionescu–Mihăești, Geneva, September 21, 1924.
25. Susanna Caccia Gherardini, “Prima di Atene. Cooperazione intellettuale e illusione elitaria, atmosfera de La Conférence d'Athènes sur la conservation des monuments del 1931”, in *Restaurazione Archeologica*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2021, p. 10.
26. For a brief history of Oprescu's friendship with Focillon, see Eduard Andrei and Ioana Apostol, “Pragmatism and Idealism, the Local and the Universal in Henri Focillon's and George Oprescu's Museum Practice and Conception”, in *Hiperboreea*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2024, p. 67–89.

27. RAL, Fond G. Oprescu, S 21(1) DCLXXXVI, Henri Focillon to G. Oprescu, Paris, February 16, 1928.
28. G. Oprescu, *Géricault 1791–1824*, Paris, La Renaissance du Livre, 1927.
29. National Archives of Romania (NAR), Fond of the Ministry of Education, file 462/1927, f. 77.
30. Anca Podgoreanu, Geta Costache (eds.), *Alexandru Tzigara-Samurçaș. 1872–1952. Biobibliografie anotată*, Constanța, Editura Ex Ponto, 2004, p. LXXII.
31. Alexandru Tzigara-Samurçaș, “Oportunismul ocult al d-lui G. Oprescu”, in *Convorbiri literare*, no. 66, September 1933, p. 811.
32. BMA, Fond of the University of Bucharest–Faculty of Letters, file 297/1928–1948, f. 192.
33. *Ibidem*, f. 203, f. 209.
34. *Ibidem*, f. 226: G. Oprescu was appointed professor to the Chair of Art History, effective January 1, 1931, by Royal Decree No. 4202.
35. Mihai Chipier, *Pe câmpul de onoare. O istorie a duelului la români*, București, Humanitas, 2016, p. 208–213.
36. Alexandru Tzigara-Samurçaș, *Op. cit.*, p. 811–814.
37. Adina Berciu-Drăghicescu, *Facultatea de Litere a Universității din București: 150 de ani de învățământ filologic românesc 1863–2013. Tradiție și valoare. Partea 1*, București, Editura Universității din București, 2013, p. 198, n. 145: „[...] știam că fusese «protejat» de Nicolae Iorga, nu atât din convingere, cât din interes, pentru a împiedica ocuparea Catedrei de Istoria Artei [...] de către Al. Tzigara-Samurçaș sau Orest Taffrali, adversari personali ai săi. N. Iorga a uzat și a abuzat de autoritatea pe care o avea spre a-l aduce profesor la această catedră pe G. Oprescu”.
38. NAR, Fond of the Ministry of Education, file 682/1946, f. 19, f. 47; file 763/1946, f. 2; BMA, Fond of the University of Bucharest–Faculty of Letters, file 297/1928–1948, f. 50.
39. Ion Frunzetti, “Prefață”, in Alexandru Busuioceanu, *Scrieri despre artă*, București, Editura Meridiane, 1980, p. 17.
40. Alexandru Tzigara-Samurçaș, *Op. cit.*, p. 813.
41. Radu Bogdan, “Profesorul și falsurile de artă”, in *România literară*, no. 6, 2000; Mircea Deac, *Fără rame, fără soclu. Istoria unor date reale și a izvoarelor subiective*, București, Editura Medro, 2004, p. 87.
42. Ion Frunzetti, *Op. cit.*, p. 17; Adina Nanu, *Călătorie în jurul casei mele*, București, Editura UNARTE, 2014, p. 37–38; Mircea Deac, *Op. cit.*, p. 87.
43. NAR, Fond Casa Școalelor, *Lege pentru organizarea Muzeului “Toma Stelian”* (Law for the Organization of the Toma Stelian Museum), file 1114 (1931), f. 35–36; Lucian Goilă, “Muzeul Toma Stelian și politica expozițiilor internaționale”, in *Caiete de istoria artei*, 2017, p. 56.
44. Eduard Andrei, Ioana Apostol, *Op. cit.*, p. 78–79.
45. NAR, Fond Casa Școalelor, file 964/1937, f. 19–20.
46. *Ibidem*, file 954/1938, f. 41.
47. *Ibidem*, file 803/1942, f. 54.
48. *Ibidem*, f. 8–9.
49. BMA, Fond of the University of Bucharest–Faculty of Letters, file 297/1928–1948, f. 73–75, 85–96.
50. Cristian Vasile, “Institutul de Istoria Artei ca parte a sistemului de cercetare științifică umanistă în timpul regimului Gheorghiu-Dej”, in Adrian-Silvan Ionescu (coord.), Ioana Apostol, Virginia Barbu (eds.), *70 de ani de la fondarea Institutului de Istoria Artei „G. Oprescu”*, București, Editura Academiei Române, 2020, 2020, p. 387–392.
51. G. Oprescu, Remus Niclescu, *N. Grigorescu*, 2 vol., București, Editura Meridiane, 1961–1962.
52. *Idem*, *Țările Române văzute de artiști francezi (sec. XVIII și XIX)*, București, Cultura Națională, 1926.
53. *Idem*, *apud* Mircea Popescu, “Cuvânt-înainte”, in George Oprescu, *Pictura românească în secolul al XIX-lea*, București, Meridiane, 1984, p. 8: „[...] cercetătorii și tinerii învățați vor trebui mai des, mai persistent și mai metodic poate decât pînă acum să se ocupe de trecutul nostru artistic și cultural, pentru a prezenta lumii imaginea noastră fidelă și veridică, iar nu o caricatură tendențioasă. [...] nu sîntem parveniții intelectuali de care vorbesc dușmanii noștri, ci o nație de veche așezare, solidă pe

- temeliile ei etnice și culturale. Contribuția noastră la patrimoniul civilizației europene este un fapt incontestabil”.
54. Ioana Vlasiu, “George Oprescu, critic de artă”, in *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei. Arta plastică*, t. 39, 1992, p. 3–5; *Eadem*, “George Oprescu, critic de artă: între hedonism și politică culturală”, in *70 de ani de la fondarea Institutului de Istoria Artei „G. Oprescu” ...*, p. 91–100.
 55. G. Oprescu, *Arta țărănească la români*, București, Cultura națională, 1922; *Idem*, “Peasant Art in Roumania”, in *The Studio*, Special Autumn Number, 1929; *Idem*, *L'art du paysan roumain*, avec une préface de Henri Focillon professeur à la Sorbonne, București, Academia Română, 1937; *Idem*, *Peasant art in Rumania, with a foreword by Henri Focillon*, București, Academia Română, 1939.
 56. *Idem*, *Țările Române văzute de artiști francezi...*; *Idem*, *Géricault 1791–1824*, Paris, La Renaissance du Livre, 1927.
 57. *Idem*, *L'art roumain: de 1800 à nos jours – Roumanian art: from 1800 to our days – Samtida konst i Rumänien*, Malmö, Malmö Ljustrycksanstalt, 1935; *Idem*, *Roumanian art: from 1800 to our days*, Malmö, John Kroon, 1935; *Idem*, *Pictura românească în secolul al XIX-lea*, București, Fundația pentru Literatură și Artă „Regele Carol II”, 1937; *Idem*, *Pictura românească în secolul al XIX-lea*, second Romanian edition, București, Fundația pentru literatură și Artă, 1943; *Idem*, *Pictura românească în secolul al XIX-lea*, București, Editura Meridiane, 1984.
 58. *Idem*, *Arta țărănească la români...*, p. 70.
 59. Shona Kallestrup, “Problematising Periodization: Folk Art, National Narratives and Cultural Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Romanian Art History”, in Shona Kallestrup, Magdalena Kunińska, Mihnea Alexandru Mihail, Anna Adashinskaya, and Cosmin Minea (eds.), *Periodization in the Art Historiographies of Central and Eastern Europe*, 2022, p. 192–213.
 60. Vlad Țoca, *Art Historical Discourse in Romania 1919–1947*, Budapest, L'Harmattan, 2011, p. 135–137.
 61. *The Studio* had previously published studies on the folk arts of Sweden, Lapland, Iceland (1910), Austria and Hungary (1911), Russia (1912), Italy (1913), and Switzerland (1924).
 62. Shona Kallestrup, *Op. cit.*, p. 195.
 63. George Oprescu, *Peasant Art in Roumania...*, p. 24–25.
 64. *Ibidem*, p. 8.
 65. Gh. Oprescu, *Pictura românească în secolul al XIX-lea...*, 1937.
 66. Mircea Popescu, *Op. cit.*, p. 14.
 67. George Oprescu, *Pictura românească...*, 1984, p. 21–22.
 68. Oprescu's press activity extended beyond *Universul*, including reviews, essays, and analyses in periodicals such as *Luceafărul*, *Convorbiri literare*, *Viața românească*, *Contemporanul*, *Universul literar*, *Boabe de grâu*, and the magazine *Arta plastică/Arta*. His collaboration with *Universul*, however, remained the most consistent.
 69. RAL, Fond Iorga, vol. 239/1914, f. 248–249, G. Oprescu to N. Iorga, Turnu Severin, April 16, 1914.
 70. G. Oprescu, “Arta decăzută (Entartete Kunst)”, in *Universul*, November 10, 1937.
 71. *Idem*, “Casa artei germane”, in *Universul*, September 10, 1938.
 72. *Ibidem*: “În dorința de a reinnoi și purifica totul, guvernul actual al Germaniei a hotărât să pună capăt acelor curente pe care le considera vătămătoare, imorale [...]. De aici a ieșit expoziția «artei degenerate», *die entartete Kunst*, de anul trecut, în care, de-a valma, erau stigmatizate opere minunate, mai libere, ca tratare, mai independente ca tehnică, ale celor mai valoroși artiști contemporani, și caraghioslăcuri, cu adevărat rușinoase, pe care vremea le-ar fi eliminat. [...] Anul acesta vine [...] expunerea operelor care corespund dorinței sale, arta sănătoasă, arta eternă, cea în care se oglindește firea poporului german [...] Imensele pânze [...] par toate executate de același om. [...] Cine [...] ar judeca «cultura» poporului german după expoziția din «Deutsches Haus» s-ar înșela amarnic. Poporul german, pe terenul artistic, chiar în ultimul timp, este capabil de mai mult [...]”.
 73. *Gravura și cartea ilustrată germană (secolele XV și XVI). Expoziție organizată cu înaltul concurs al Guvernului german prin Direcția Muzeelor de Stat din Berlin [German Engraving and Illustrated Books (15th–16th Centuries). Exhibition organized with the support of the German Government through the*

- Directorate of State Museums in Berlin*], May 15–June 19, 1938, Bucharest, Toma Stelian Museum, p. 15.
74. G. Oprescu, “Gravura și cartea ilustrată germană la muzeul Toma Stelian”, in *Universul*, May 14, 1938.
75. Alexandru Tzigara-Samurçaș, “Gh. Oprescu critică și laudă arta germană”, in *Convorbiri literare*, LXXI, no. 1–5, ianuarie–mai 1938, p. 127.
76. G. Oprescu, “Expoziția muncii legionare”, in *Universul*, December 29, 1940: „Avem în fața noastră poate cea mai bună și mai interesantă [...] expoziție de anul ăsta. [...] Pornind de la convingerea că arta trebuie pusă în serviciul țării, [...] că ea trebuie concepută ca un efort colectiv [...] subordonat scopului comun [...], ca principiul «artei pentru artă» a trăit și că producția sculptorilor, pictorilor și arhitecților se cuvine să fie pusă numai în serviciul credinței și al iubirii de țară, ni se arată ce se poate obține printr-o astfel de frățescă colaborare”.
77. *Idem*, *Amintiri, evocări...*, p. 25.
78. *Idem*, “Expoziția Artă, muncă, democrație”, in *Universul*, June 21, 1945.
79. *Idem*, “Adevărata cultură azi”, in *Universul*, August 22, 1945.
80. *Idem*, “Germanii dela noi și cultura”, in *Universul*, September 13, 1944.
81. *Idem*, “Curente noi în arta românească”, in *Universul*, July 12, 1947.
82. *Idem*, “Cultura artistică”, in *Universul*, September 18, 1947.
83. BMA, Fond of the University of Bucharest–Faculty of Letters, file 297/1928–1948, f. 11–13, f. 22.
84. G. Oprescu, “Expoziția grupului Flacăra”, in *Universul*, April 15, 1948; *Idem*, “Grupul plastic Flacăra. Pictura”, in *Universul*, April 17, 1948; *Idem*, “Grupul plastic Flacăra. Pictura (II)”, in *Universul*, April 17, 1948; *Idem*, “Grupul plastic Flacăra. Desenul și gravura”, in *Universul*, April 23, 1948; *Idem*, “Grupul plastic Flacăra. Sculptura”, in *Universul*, April 26, 1948.
85. *Idem*, *Sculptura statuară românească*, București, Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, 1954.
86. National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives, file I 3608 (*G. Oprescu's surveillance file*), vol. 1, f. 43.
87. Archive of the G. Oprescu Institute of Art History, file IV.A.B.C./1970, Ion Frunzetti, *Probleme actuale ale cercetării artei românești moderne și contemporane*, 1970, f. 8–9.
88. G. Oprescu, *Sculptura românească*, second edition, București, Editura Meridiane, 1965.
89. *Idem*, “Brâncuși”, in *Arta plastică*, no. 10–11, 1963; *Idem*, *Brâncuși*, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1964; *Idem*, *Scrieri despre artă*, București, Editura Meridiane, 1966 and 1968; *Idem*, *Considerații asupra artei moderne*, București, Editura Meridiane, 1966.
90. *Idem*, *Scrieri despre artă...* 1966, p. 203.
91. *Idem*, *Amintiri, evocări...*, p. 82–94, p. 77–78.
92. Sorana Georgescu-Gorjan, “Statueta CAP DE COPIL, de Constantin Brâncuși – Un loz câștigător...”, <<https://academiaromana.wordpress.com/2017/05/20/statueta-cap-de-copil-de-constantin-brancusi-un-loz-castigator/>> accessed on October 10, 2025.