

ARCHETYPAL SYNTHESIS IN THE CREATION OF MIHAIL GRECU

SINTEZA ARHETIPALĂ ÎN CREAȚIA LUI MIHAIL GRECU

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Studiul analizează universul artistic al lui Mihail Grecu, personalitate marcantă a artei basarabene contemporane, unde estetica devine reflecție asupra identității. Opera sa se fundamentează pe tradiție, folclor și modernism, transformând realitatea imediată în simboluri universale. Lucrările timpurii evidențiază rigoarea construcției și refuzul decorativismului, iar trecerea spre simbol se conturează prin structuri geometrice. Satul și spiritualitatea rurală constituie surse de arhetipuri, transfigurate în compoziții precum „Ospitalitate”, unde gestul arhaic devine declarație de demnitate. Identitatea este concepută ca proces dinamic, de la local la universal, vizibil în „Fetele din Ceadir-Lunga” sau „Zi de toamnă”. Prin tehnici inovatoare și simbolistică abstractă Grecu reînnoiește tradiția, oferind un limbaj organic ce unește istoria și modernitatea. Creația sa se impune ca model de revitalizare culturală, demonstrând că identitatea artistică este o regenerare continuă a spiritului prin actul creației.

Cuvinte-cheie: identitate, tradiție, modernitate, simbolism plastic, arhetipuri colective

The study analyses the artistic universe of Mihail Grecu, a major personality of contemporary Bessarabian art, where aesthetics becomes a reflection on identity. His work is based on tradition, folklore and modernism, transforming immediate reality into universal symbols. Early works highlight the rigor of construction and the refusal of decorativism, and the transition to symbol is outlined through geometric structures. The village and rural spirituality constitute sources of archetypes, transfigured in compositions such as “Hospitality”, where the archaic gesture becomes a declaration of dignity. Identity is conceived as a dynamic process, from local to universal, visible in “The Girls from Ceadir-Lunga” or “The Autumn Day”. Through innovative techniques and abstract symbolism, Grecu renews tradition, offering an organic language that unites history and modernity. His creation stands out as a model of cultural revitalization, demonstrating that artistic identity is a continuous regeneration of the spirit through the act of creation.

Keywords: identity, tradition, modernity, artistic symbolism, collective archetypes

Introduction

Mihail Grecu is considered by specialized historiography to be the founder of Bessarabian plastic modernism and one of the artisans of what was later called the National School of Painting in the Republic of Moldova. Of the over seventy works he signed throughout his career, six canvases – including *Hospitality*, *Recruits*, *The Autumn Day* and *The Girls from Ceadir-Lunga* – are today considered heritage landmarks of Moldovan painting [1]. The artist's biographical path is atypical for an Eastern European creator of the last century: initially formed in the interwar Romanian artistic environment, he continued his activity after 1940 in a political regime that did not look favourably on the free expression of aesthetic individuality. However, through the tenacity of a personal vision, he managed to give birth to a plastic language that would influence several generations of artists from the area between the Prut and the Dniester rivers.

Through this study, we do not intend to review biographical data, but rather try to understand the internal mechanism of creation: the way in which Mihail Grecu took elements from the life of the Bessarabian village, from local customs, from Christian-popular practices and from collective memo-

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ry, transforming them into a set of key images – the hearth, the hospitable gesture, the female face, the harvest, etc. – to which he gave a symbolic weight that goes beyond the strictly ethnographic framework. We conventionally call this operation “archetypal synthesis”: not a decorative juxtaposition of traditional motifs, but a process of essentialization through which the concrete reality of the village is transformed into a space for inner reflection, and the story of a community becomes a parable about the human condition in general.

Biographical landmarks: the formation of a visionary between two cultural worlds

Coming from a region of ethnic and linguistic encounter (his birthplace appears in sources either under the name Faraonovca or in the Romanian form Faraoni, a territory currently located in the Odessa region, Ukraine), Mihail Grecu had, as is evident from his own accounts, a difficult childhood, which he later recalled with affection. His artistic training occurred at the meeting of two distinct cultural traditions, and it was precisely this meeting that later became the main source of his plastic language.

During the interwar period, the young artist studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bucharest, where he came into contact with professors such as Francisc Șirato, Nicolae Dărăscu and others [2], from whom he took over a certain discipline of compositional construction and a specific sensitivity for color, close to the modern Romanian painting of the era. The year 1940 brought a radical change: following the annexation of Bessarabia by the Soviet Union, Grecu left Bucharest and settled in Chisinau, where he continued his studies at the Republican School of Fine Arts, under the guidance of Moisei Gamburd, himself trained at the Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels [3]. This double affiliation – to the Romanian artistic space and to a Central European tradition transmitted through the Chisinau school – helps to understand the stylistic synthesis of his work, where the rigor of drawing coexists with an expressive chromatic palette. Most of Grecu's career took place under the Soviet regime, in a climate in which a personal artistic vision, which did not fully obey the canon of socialist realism, could bring professional problems. Various sources mention difficult periods in the painter's career, which he overcame by constantly refusing to adapt his art to official requirements. Since 1946 he has been a member of the *Union of Fine Artists* of Chisinau, and since 1958 his works have been included in the collection of the *State Museum of Art of the Moldavian S.S.R.* (today the National Museum of Art of Moldova). In 1966 and 1970 he received official distinctions – gold medals of the Republican Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy of the U.S.S.R. – for the canvas *The Autumn Day* and, respectively, for the triptych *History of a Life*, and in 1991, already after the proclamation of independence, the work *Homage to the Ancestors* received the Grand Prize at the first edition of the Moldavian Salons, organized in Romania [4].

Mihail Grecu's studio functioned, according to several testimonies, as a training space for artists such as Andrei Sârbu, Andrei Mudrea, Dumitru Peicev, Iurie Platon, etc. In 2016, on the occasion of the centenary of his birth, the Moldovan authorities dedicated an anniversary year to the artist, and in 2018 the National Museum of Art of Romania hosted a large retrospective exhibition, bringing together 72 works from the heritage of the *National Museum of Art of Moldova* – an important moment for the knowledge, in the Romanian cultural space, of an artist less visible to the public beyond the Prut, but considered, in Bessarabia, the most important representative of the national school of painting [5].

Conceptual framework: the archetype and the problem of symbolic synthesis in visual art

The notion of archetype comes from the analytical psychology of Carl Gustav Jung [6] and describes those basic symbolic patterns, common to the collective unconscious, that appear in dreams, in myths, in rituals and, equally, in artistic creation. Transposed into the field of visual arts, the idea of archetypal synthesis involves the identification of those motifs – the hearth, the threshold of the house, the cross, the spiral, the harvest, the hospitable gesture, the maternal face – which, although they

originate in a specific ethnographic context, end up functioning as recognizable symbols beyond the borders of the culture that produced them.

Art critics and others have often resorted to such a reading of Mihail Greçu's work [7, 8, 9], even if not with the tools of Jungian theory. Thus, it was noted that, starting in the 1960s, the painter showed an increasingly pronounced interest in integrating elements of popular spirituality into his own creation, the artist himself explaining, in a discussion that remained known, that he was not only interested in the local specificity, but rather in what could be called the creative genius of simple people, viewed in a broad, universal, not just Bessarabian sense [10].

Also, former disciples of the master, including Tudor Zbârnea, emphasized the innovative nature of his approach, showing that Greçu managed to propose new aesthetic principles precisely because his work put into circulation ideas and symbols from several cultural areas at once [10] – an observation coming from within the artistic process, which confirms the synthetic, trans-cultural side of the images that the painter developed throughout his career.

The archetypal synthesis should not be understood here as a simple decorative combination of folkloric-inspired motifs, but as a real process of transformation: the object of ethnographic origin – the jug, the basket, the agricultural tool, the traditional garment – is gradually emptied of purely descriptive detail and reduced to a simple formal structure (the circle, the spiral, the cross, the triangle), capable of carrying a broader symbolic charge than the object from which it started.

The formative stage: from the observation of the object to the germs of the symbol

Mihail Greçu's youthful works show a constant concern for the solidity of the compositional construction and for a certain austerity of form, opposed to any purely decorative temptation. In this stage, the artist starts from the direct exercise of observation – still life, peasant portrait, rural interior scene – in order to gradually form a plastic vocabulary that he would later develop in an increasingly symbolic direction.

The triptych *History of a Life* (1967), (awarded the gold medal of the Republican Exhibition of the U.S.S.R. in 1970) also dates from this transitional period, consisting of the panels *Childhood*, *Tractor Driver* and *Family*. Even through the titles alone, the work develops the artist's intention to construct, from the life stages of a collective, anonymous character, an exemplary existential path: childhood as the starting point, work – represented by the tractor driver, a frequent motif in the official iconography of the era, but here reinterpreted – as a stage of maturation through effort, and the family as the natural fulfilment of this path. The organization of the work into three parts, itself an ancient form of structuring the story, found in rites of passage in many traditional cultures, develops, under the appearance of a common theme for the era, a deeper reflection on the cyclical nature of existence.

The canvas *Recruits* (1965), considered one of the most representative works of Moldavian painting, illustrates the encounter between a way of using colour close to that of Van Gogh – a painter for whom Greçu had a confessed admiration – and the aesthetics of folk art, noted for its compositional unity and artisanal finesse. It is a conclusive example of the way in which the artist takes a language of Western modernism and puts it at the service of a local theme, developing that combination of tradition and modernity that would remain the defining feature of his entire work.

The village as an archetypal reservoir: hearth, hospitality, ritual

If the stage of youth outlines the formal instrumentation, the sixties and seventies of the last century mark the moment when the Bessarabian village becomes for Mihail Greçu a true source of archetypes – not in the sense of a simple illustrative collection of folkloric motifs, but as a spiritual source from which the artist extracts the fundamental symbolic structures of his mature work. In the same vein, the art critic Eleonora Brigalda remarked “M. Greçu sees in the symbol the image of an archetype, which preserves the existence of a primitive, fundamental language” [11 p. 157].

The programmatic work *Hospitality* (1967), the result of a long period of artistic searches, develops the theme of welcoming the guest with bread and salt – an essential ritual gesture of the Romanian/Bessarabian peasant culture and, more generally, of the agrarian civilizations of central and eastern Europe. The particularity of the coloristic work was noted: the white tones of the main motifs stand out against an all-white background, with bright colour accents inserted into the structure of the painting, a plastic solution through which the idea of ritual purity associated with the hospitable gesture gains direct formal expression. Through this work, an everyday gesture, specific to a specific area – Bugeac, southern Bessarabia – is elevated to the rank of an emblem of human dignity in general, the artist managing to give a rigorous compositional form to an entire way of being of the rural community.

The work *The Hearth in Bugeac* (1982) also falls in the same direction, often mentioned alongside *Hospitality* and *The Girls from Ceadir-Lunga* as an example of the artist's constant concern, after 1960, for the integration of the popular spirit into his own painting. The hearth – a domestic place by definition, but also an ancient symbol of the centre, of family continuity and of the sacredness of the home in agrarian cultures – appears in Grecu as a recurring plastic structure, resumed in different forms throughout his entire career.

In the eighth decade of the last century, an important technical change takes place: the artist resorts to less common materials for easel painting – bitumen, industrial pigments, bronze and silver powder, spray paints [5] – through an experiment that is not only related to the formal search, but also contributes to the outline of his own artistic universe, with almost spiritual accents. It is the period in which his works acquire a special depth, the material texture of the pictorial surface becoming itself a carrier of meaning – the roughness, opacity or metallic shine being put in relation to themes related to memory, the passage of time and the deep, almost organic connection with the land and rural life.

From the regional face to the icon of universality: identity and transfiguration

One of the artist's most famous works, *The Girls from Ceadir-Lunga* (1960), illustrates very well the process of identity transformation on which, in our opinion, the entire archetypal synthesis of Grecu's painting is based: starting from a specific human face, geographically and ethnographically linked to a specific locality in southern Bessarabia – Ceadir-Lunga, a settlement with a mixed Romanian, Gagauz and Bulgarian population –, the artist constructs an image of femininity that goes beyond the regional particular, by eliminating any anecdotal detail, in order to arrive at a form of symbolic generality. This process is not isolated in his work: it is found, with similar means, in an entire series of portraits and rural scenes through which Grecu builds, over the years, a gallery of human types with exemplary value.

The work *Homage to the Ancestors*, awarded the Grand Prize at the first edition of the Moldavian Salons organized in Romania in 1991, marks, towards the end of the artist's career, an explicit synthesis of the identity theme: the title itself reveals the idea of an uninterrupted connection between generations, of a spiritual continuity with the ancestors – a central theme for any archetypal thinking, to the extent that the archetype presupposes precisely the transmission of stable symbolic structures beyond the immediate historical context. It is noteworthy that this transition from the particular to the universal takes place in an artist who carried out most of his activity in a political context that viewed with distrust any uncontrolled manifestation of ethnic or religious identity. The fact that Grecu's work nevertheless managed, under the appearance of an officially tolerated ethnographic interest, to convey a profound reflection on identity and the sacred, explains the way he is viewed today: as an artist who preserved his creative freedom and inner coherence in a historical period strongly marked by the political factor.

Colour, matter, and technique as vehicles of the sacred

An important aspect of the archetypal synthesis achieved by Mihail Grecu concerns the connection between the symbolic content and the plastic means actually used. Commentators almost

unanimously recognize his quality as an exceptional colourist, with a luminous temperament, whose pictorial logic is based on the relationship between warm and cold tones, between light and shadow [12]. The works *The Autumn Day* (1964), (awarded a gold medal in 1966) and *Supper in the Field* (1970-1971) are frequently mentioned as examples of this chromatic force, achieved through a wealth of yellow-reddish shades that evoke, at the same time, the light specific to the season and a symbolic warmth linked to the harvest and abundance.

The artist's technical innovative side – the use of collage, fluorescent dyes, metallic effects obtained with bronze or aluminium powder – should not be seen separately from his archetypal project, but rather as a natural continuation of it: the experiment with the material becomes, for Grecu, a means of obtaining new tactile and optical qualities of the painted surface, capable of suggesting something beyond simple representation, almost the nature of a ritual gesture in itself. In a context in which any formal innovation was viewed with suspicion by the cultural authorities, this technical experimentalism was one of the means by which Grecu managed to impose, on the scale of the entire artistic space, new aesthetic criteria.

Conclusions

The archetypal synthesis achieved by Mihail Grecu lies precisely in his ability to transform the concrete elements of the Bessarabian village — the hearth, the hospitality, the folk costume, the harvest, the regional human face — into a plastic language capable of expressing ideas with universal value: the continuity between generations, the sacredness of the home, the dignity of the hospitable gesture, the cyclical nature of existence.

His legacy, confirmed by the trajectory of his disciples and by the institutional recognition, remains a relevant example of how art can transform the historical and spiritual reality of a community into a language whose cultural relevance transcends the spatial and temporal boundaries of the context in which it was born.

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