

## **TOWARDS A VISUAL DIALECTICS. THE TRIUMPH OF THE PROLETARIAT IN ROMANIAN TOTALITARIAN ART**

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**Abstract:** In communist Romania, a questionable reverence for those artists working together with an enduring faith in the labour ethic played a significant role in shaping self – and civic identity from the late 19<sup>th</sup> till the near end of the second half of the twentieth century. Certainly it was a commonplace assumption that what the artists did as communists was often the most outstanding indicator of who they were. The diversity of images and objects belonging to Romanian socialist realism placed upon the worker’s heels a false property of heavenly ingredients for the birth of the new communist man, and the official painters were not far from this commitment. In the present article, I shall dwell upon the way Romanian totalitarian art turned the original role of art into a manipulative tool which legitimately paved the way of the communist political system to a powerful and influential position.

**Keywords:** Romanian socialist realism, communist art, communist new man, proletariat.

As some art theoreticians have written, such painted and sculpted representations of muscular producers, often accompanied by the fruits of their labors, helped to deflect exploitation era anxieties about unemployment, and undercut worries about the roles and responsibilities of masculine breadwinners. By largely avoiding contemporary labor issues such as collective bargaining, deskilling, mass-production, unionization, work-stoppages, and strikes, the vast body of these images and objects helped also to bolster post-war era government and business intentions to cast and constrict wage labor as a classless and collective enterprise. That is an iconography of labor presented in much Romanian communist art of the 1950s often upheld status quo patterns of corporate management and control, rather than proposing a radical critique of the meaning of work and the relationships between workers and management.

This is most obviously the case among much (but not all) government sponsored “bourgeois” art, and it continued under both government and private patronage during World War II. Comparable with the U.S.S.R., from 1941 to 1945, the success of wartime mobilization demanded the nourishment of an iconography of labor, and Romanian artists produced plentiful militant posters overlays the silk-screened silhouette of a Romanian little boy upon a cannon asking the audience: “*war?... who wants WAR?*”<sup>1</sup>.

Objectified and dehumanized, he symbolically fuel a burgeoning Romanian communist so-called *non militarism*, itself fueled by the economic mandates of socialism. As these type of artworks reveal, from 1947 to 1957, Romanian artists produced a large number of images and objects which meshed with the social mores and political ideology of Romanian communist government and Romanian steel works, both of which were aligned in the revitalization and sustenance of a culture of communism. A vast iconography of labor was marketed to the Romanian public, aimed at persuading people of various tenets of this kind of culture, including faith in work and faith in technology. Many art theoreticians<sup>2</sup> argued that many images including workers, women or children, were *emblems of production*, and that both the workers and the kind of work depicted emphasized the technological renewal which The Five Year Plan envisioned as essential to modern Romanian society. Some were simply offbeat and oddball. Obviously, neither of these objects is particularly explicable as political propaganda. They might be dismissed out of hand as bad design and bad art but, issues of taste and quality aside, their existence complicates many of our assumptions about the representation of work and workers in Romanian art in the 1950s. So do other images and objects in the different museums or exhibitions collections.

Women, for example, when depicted in much of the “official” government art of the 1950s, are usually cast as tractor drivers, helpmates, mothers, weavers or lathe operators. Women workers were rarely illustrated according to the so-called the turning points of the history of communism in Romania. There are a few pretty rare examples including woman tractor driver<sup>3</sup>, or a weaver<sup>4</sup>. Both feature depict autonomous female workers. The comparison of the two portraits leads to questions about what kind of work women felt comfortable about doing

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Grant, *război?... cine vrea RĂZBOI?*, reproduced in *Arta Plastică în Republica Populară Română. 30<sup>th</sup> December 1947-30<sup>th</sup> December 1957*, București, Editura de stat pentru literatură și artă, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Among them I mention the name of Amelia Pavel, Ion Jalea or the Soviet commissar V. S. Kemenov.

<sup>3</sup> Francisc Ferch, *Tractorista* (Woman Tractor-Driver).

<sup>4</sup> Justina Popescu, *La Uzinele „23 August” cresc cadre noi* (New Cadres Are Trained at “23 August” Works).

that work, and how the artists wanted to represent them, and female labor, during the communist era.

Certain women artists, including Justina Popescu or Lidia Agricola, produced paintings which pointedly praise the state of labor, and the relationship between industrial labour and communist vision upon agriculture, in the 1950s. Octavian Angheluță's gloomy painting<sup>5</sup> depicts several steel workers trying to fuel an abandoned furnace inside a mill and a sculpture done by Maximilian Schulmann<sup>6</sup> shows the "exploited class" gazing to something beyond them. Near them can be seen a ruined furnace and on their left, a kind of train which awaits the energy to come immediately. All these images present a particularly heroic or idealized Romanian communist worker, and with their emphasis on mine closures and labor strife, the glorifying of the industrial production. More interestingly, because all of these pictures were produced under the auspices of a single ideology, all of them catered to the New World image of a collective and cooperative way of work. This suggests that an "official" ideological or propagandistic agenda was more dominant than we may want to believe. At the very least, such objects show that 1950s government arts patronage was punctuated by uniform declarations of the razing of the bourgeois past and its stability.

Plenty of these "social realist" images, as they are usually called, and more than a few take a dim view of the large-scale mass-industrialization that organized labor, more or less together, pursued in the 1950s.

On one level, the appearance of naked men in 1950s Romanian art signals is a continuation of a long-standing aesthetic interest in the ideal human form, mostly male, from the Greco-Roman era to the Renaissance. Following this, the relatively rare nineteenth century fine arts depictions of Romanian naked sculptures, such as Ștefan Ionescu Valbudea's sculpture, *Sleeping Child* which actually shows a teenager at his resting hour, which romanced the male figure as a pure age figure and with no work ethic.

Artists, trying to devise an aesthetic vocabulary which might nourish the era's struggling labor movement, drew on the traditional academic symbol of the heroic male nude. Some art critics argued that which features five skilled workers clad only in leather aprons or loincloths, such Romanian socialist realism images and objects also functioned as discourses about masculinity and manliness. The male body has historically functioned as both the site and nexus of cultural signification and during the *Golden Age* of art, depictions of muscular, working class male bodies both represented an ideal of manliness feared lost and signaled class fears about the changing nature of work.

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<sup>5</sup> Octavian Angheluță, *Reparații la cuptoare la Uzina Reșița* (Repair of Furnaces at the Reșița Works).

<sup>6</sup> Maximilian Schulmann, *Furnalistul* (Furnace Worker).

Turn-of-the-century images of nearly nude workers, in other words, upheld notions of a mythical past when manual labor defined manliness, and also spoke to an acute *crisis of masculinity* that was set in motion with the burgeoning of a modern way of work that consisted of big factories, mass-production, and the loss of the independent and autonomous soldiers, for example. The appearance of muscle-bound and seminude male laborers in Romanian art of the 1950s testifies to similarly complex cultural understandings of labor and masculinity in Soviet art. The straining bodies depicted in the Hermitage Museum or in the Tretyakov Gallery, for example, are obviously symbolic, but of what? On a simple level, they serve as icons for the thousands of workingmen who built the socialist edifices from the late 1930s to 1953. In a more sophisticated analysis, their actions-and those of the many other workers illustrated in the art of the 1950s attest to the general desire of Soviets during the post war period to move on and get out of the hard times of the present, and into a better tomorrow. The multitude of coal miners and steel workers in Romanian socialist realist paintings doesn't offer aesthetic alternatives to the "bourgeois economic era" and the same argument can be utilized to explain the number of active male bodies that are illustrated again and again in 1950s pictures and sculpture.

Ironically, when social and industrial progress seemed inert, many Romanian artists chose to depict sturdy, strong, muscular, and dynamic laborers, as if these painted and sculpted symbols of manly might and movement might actually propel Romania out of its economic slump. But what do we make of the nakedness, or near-nakedness, of many of these male workers? The powerful laborer of Boris Caragea<sup>7</sup>, for instance, is nude and bare-chested<sup>8</sup>. Among the many other examples are the Lucaci's sculptures<sup>9</sup> or Maxy's paintings<sup>10</sup>, both of which feature semi clothed working men, one duo operating steel furnace, and the other counting the fish harvest. The Welder<sup>11</sup>, a 1953 sculpture depicts a similarly shirtless young man, his head turned slightly, and the weight of his torso relaxed in a traditional pseudo-*contrapposto* stance.

While each of these images symbolizes work, they also embody the deep-felt anxieties of nonworking males of the beginning of communism in Romania, for whom labor had been the primary form of identity.

At a time when that identity was obviously in crisis, these pictures suggest that artists attempted to sustain a sense of the masculine self through depictions of the manly body, a body defined by muscles and might. In a fairly typical

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<sup>7</sup> Boris Caragea, *Miner - bronz* (Coal Miner - bronze).

<sup>8</sup> Mihail Onofrei, *Montarea liniei ferate* (Lying of Railway Track).

<sup>9</sup> Constantin Lucaci, *Creșterea tinerelor cadre la Reșița* (Young Cadres Are Trained at Reșița).

<sup>10</sup> M. H. Maxy, *Bogăția apelor noastre* (Wealth of Our Waters).

<sup>11</sup> Iosif Fekete, *Sudor* (The Welder).

pattern of Soviet and Romanian artistic response, they avoided the real labor issues of power and authority in the workplace and among workers, and focused their attention specifically political manipulation.

In the 1950s, issues of labor collectivity, mass-production unionization, and workplace reform were similarly sublimated by artists who focused on the manliness of the male body and, ultimately, on the immortality of that body. Nearly nude, these manly workers are eternal as objects of the Romanian gaze. Well-muscled, sinuous, and virile, they are the source of visual pleasure and the ideological artistic motto. What may have been desired most is to literally have, hold, or own the body of the worker. First of all, these representations of the worker's body may be seen as signals of collectivist desire to own labor and control the working class. It is worth noting that, aside from purely aestheticized representations of naked men after the World War II in Romanian art, the male most often depicted nude or nearly nude was communist worker, and the act of reducing the Romanian individualism to a savage, exotic, and "primitive" body was akin to their social marginalization. It is also noteworthy that of the many Romanian artists who were openly committed to representing and encouraging labor and the labor movement in the 1950s, workers were consistently illustrated fully clothed. The body of labor is seen marching to work, whereas in Fekete's sculpture, it is the laborer's body that is singled out and openly invites our brazen scrutiny of male flesh. Fekete's worker is, in fact, not working but posing: flanked by the tools of his trade, his protective goggles perched on his head, and his leather safety gloves completely encasing his hands and forearms, The Welder's thumbs are firmly hooked into the beltbuckle of his overall. His downward gaze, and the obvious positioning of his big gloves on his thrusting hips draws our attention to his groin-not to his status as a skilled laborer. But, labors aren't metaphoric: they have only real utility, save as hard bodies whose athleticism serves to pique the admiration and persuasion of spectators.

Dehumanized as permanent working objects, these images of seminude workers are also indicative of a unique line of importance of work for the Romanian communist regime in the 1950s. With the shift from manual labor to the machine operations of the large-scale industrial workplace, bodily strength was increasingly superfluous for the typical Romanian workingman. But, if 1950s artists, and audiences, found everything very heroic or ennobling about the real conditions of factory labor, and the image of the mostly sedentary and highly-schooled worker was found similarly lacking, it is no surprise that they struggled to hold on to an image of dynamic masculine strength. Men continued to identify with and pursue a masculine image defined by muscular brawn and athleticism. The strong male body they promoted was emblematic only for the communist ideology not for leisure and consumption which dominated, for example, the twentieth century American culture and society. As an American

art critic writes<sup>12</sup>, the “manly worker” image offered by many American artists of that similar era “embodied nostalgia for an imagined past of individual dignity lost in the modern world of work”. But the prevalent seminudity of that image also signaled a widespread loss of certainty about the centrality that labor had traditionally held as the key indicator of masculine identity in the United States. The ambivalent images imposed a newer model of masculinity, one which dominates today, which posits the strong male body as simply a body, an icon of personal goals and an object of political ideology, of social construction and production.

As these diverse images and objects in the Romanian socialist realist art in the 1950s demonstrate, there were many codes placed upon the bodies of male laborers during that period. While often ambiguous, the image of the worker evoked tensions about masculinity at a time when the cultural construction of the politic was in upheaval. With the exception of the pictures and sculptures generated by specific trade and labor unions, the 1950s also marked the near end of a period in Romanian art which saw the production of a significant number of images and artifacts attuned to the themes of work and workers. Many Romanians claim to continue to believe in the work ethic, but lotto sales and dreams of “easy winning” increasingly dominate our national behaviour. The ways in which 1950s artists portrayed workingmen, and working male bodies, their images and objects bring up many other points for consideration, from analyzing how men and women perceived and valued male worker appearance during the 1950s. However, these are all issues for further speculation in the study of twentieth century Romanian art.

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<sup>12</sup> Barbara Melosh, “Manly Work: Public Art and Masculinity in Depression America”, in Barbara Melosh, (ed.) *Gender and American History Since 1890*, New York, Routledge, p. 173.