

George Matei Cantacuzino: A Role Model in Architecture

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Abstract: One of the most remarkable Romanian architects of the 20th century, George Matei Cantacuzino (1899 – 1960) is the creator of a theoretical and practical work, as well as an educational one that needs to be explored and understood in its very own articulations; especially, because the particular discretion characterizing the author and his lesser known but so important contribution he has brought in a too short life. By combining traditional and neoclassical Romanian style of building with an original manner of interweaving elements of classicism, Renaissance and modernism, G. M. Cantacuzino left a memorable legacy not merely as an architect and urban designer, but also as a theoretician, restorer, painter, essayist, aesthetician, historian and professor, whose complex work is worth to be earnestly investigated and revealed. In this article we try to emphasize some peculiarities of an exceptional personality having a considerable influence on the development of the contemporary Romanian theory, practice and education in architecture.

Keywords: George Matei Cantacuzino, architectural theory and practice, classic attitude, Brâncovenesc style, architect role model

A VERY SHORT BIOGRAPHY

George Matei Cantacuzino was born in Vienna, in 11/23 May 1899, into a family of Romanian nobility, as the son of the diplomat Nicolae B. Cantacuzino – belonging to the Wallachian Cantacuzino branch of an old Romanian aristocratic family (see Gaster 1911, 208) – and of Marcela Bibescu – the granddaughter of Gheorghe Bibescu the Prince of Wallachia between 1843 and 1848.

After spending the first ten years in the Austrian capital, the young George Matei attended high schools at Montreux and Lausanne; and, in 1916, he graduated “Saint Sava” National College in Bucharest. He participated, as volunteer, in World War I (1917-1918). In 1919 he

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started studies at the School of Fine Arts / École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. At the same time, he has been engaged in restoring the Mogoșoia Palace / Palatul Mogoșoia – situated about 10 kilometres from Bucharest – built by the Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu between 1698 and 1702, and which is a representative construction of the Romanian Renaissance style, the well known “Brâncovenesc style”.

Since 1923, George Matei Cantacuzino has worked in his architectural office, together with August Schmiedigen, firstly planning the Chrissoveloni Bank Palace in Bucharest, some *cule* – semi-fortified buildings, originally homes of Boyar families in the historical Romanian provinces of Oltenia and Muntenia – and country houses, too.

Between 1920 and 1929, he has crystallized his own principles centered on the unity of “drawing, form, and composition” (Cantacuzino 1945, 115), which will define his entire mature work that – even though it is part of the neo-Romanian architectural style – is out of the frames of any classifications because the uniqueness of such a creator. Thus, returned from Paris, in 1929, George Matei Cantacuzino imposed himself as the “undisputed master of the architecture school in Romania” (Morand 1935).

Together with the mathematician, historian and philosopher Matila Ghyka, and the architects Paul Emil Miclescu and Octav Doicescu, in 1939 George Matei Cantacuzino founded the journal *Simetria. Caiete de artă și critică / Symmetry: Art and Criticism Book* that had eight Issues till 1947. In this series, he published essays, articles, book reviews, notes and, also, he kept up an apart section entitled “Dictionary” (see Chihăia 1997, 8-10).

In a relatively short active life – taking into account his dramatic destiny because the years of imprisonment (1948-1953) -, G. M. Cantacuzino succeeded to commendably dedicate and manifest in a plurality of enterprises, realizing many architectural projects, drawing and painting a significant number of works and having many art exhibitions or being curator. He travelled a lot and he published, for example, *Pătrar de veghe / Wakefulness Quarter* (1938). He used to continuously study and write focusing on fundamental problems of architecture.

He also unfolded a rich activity within the Romanian Society of Radio, delivering lectures in the frame of “Universitatea Radio” broadcasting; just between 1930 and 1940, he gave 87 radio lectures (Teodorovici 2016, 95). Some of 1930 and 1931 Cantacuzino’s radio

lectures on the topics “Romanian Architecture” have been included in the volume *Arcade, firide și lespezi / Arches, Niches and Pavings* (Cartea Românească Press, Bucharest, 1932), which was eulogistically commented by the playwright, novelist and journalist Mihail Sebastian and the literary historian and critic Perpessicius. Another part of his radio conferences has been developed in *Izvoare și popasuri / Sources and Stopovers* (1934). They “somehow completed the documentary book containing photos, entitled *Petits Édifices* (1931), which is one of the first comprehensive monograph in Europe about the traditional vernacular and religious architecture of Romania” (Teodorovici 2016, 96).

He carried out an intense journalistic and critical work, too, publishing in the French journal *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* and mostly in *Simetria* he has co-founded. The title of this journal is eloquent for the structural orientation of George Matei Cantacuzino towards an ethos of classical perspective, one of measure, proportion and harmony. He elaborated many essays and Dictionary articles focused on aesthetics, history of architecture, criticism, construction technology, etc.

G. M. Cantacuzino was also an exceptional teacher of the University of Architecture in Bucharest (October 1942 - May 1948). We find out about his notable pedagogical activity from the former students he had:

He was a magician of the word and drawing, with clear ideas directly enounced and always completed by expressive sketches. He didn't need to use written notes, scores and summaries, books, movies or slides. On a stage without scenery – merely a podium, a chair and a blackboard – he made alive for us so pride worlds gone. ... [Cantacuzino] was imposing himself by his prestige, look and soft voice. He had an undeniable rhetorical talent. (Patrulus 1975a)

Between 1953 and 1960, George Matei Cantacuzino worked as referent at the Historical Monuments Administration. In this quality, he carried out a complex activity “including all the modalities of protecting our historical and cultural heritage, from documentation to the effort of saving natural environments or old towns” (Greceanu 1981, 386); for example, the natural setting of Neamț Citadel and Monastery, or the displacement and reconstruction of the former site of Lake Bicăz, Neamț County. He took care of cataloging the church heritage and he also restored some monuments in Moldavia County

among which is Mănăstirea Trei Ierarhi / The Three Holy Hierarchs Monastery (1959-1960) -, a 17th century monument built in Gothic architecture style. On the whole, he had a “crucial role for the history of the monuments protection in Romania” (Ibid.).

G. M. Cantacuzino has elaborated some important studies that were supposed to become volumes expressing the need of merging practical activity along with theoretical and critical support. There were only manuscripts – unfortunately lost -, mentioned by Radu Patrulius (1975a, 62), entitled *Cultural Monuments of Bucharest; Cities and Monuments of the North Moldavia* and *Directives of Restoring and Protecting Historic Monuments*.

Fascinated by the Moldavian landscapes with the famous monasteries and little churches of the medieval times, George Matei Cantacuzino spent a part of his life in the „subtle alchemy of the magic Iași” (apud Chihaiia 1997, 8).

In early 1958, he became the architect of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași. Thus, he developed the project for restoring Cathedral and constructing its extension.

On March 21st, 1958, Cantacuzino gave a lecture “for the Union of Architects”, about Iași city, in the Aula Magna of the University, stressing that

Iași is the most Romanian city, wherein many manifestations and experiences of a society established at the cross of East and West, and North and South have fulfilled in a spirit of continuity. ... The particularity of this city is given by the equilibrium of various influences as regards the artistic creativity, which has nothing to do with a barbarian congeries of heterogeneous elements. ... Iași is unique because first and foremost it is a *peisagiu* [landscape] – a term close to the French *paysage*, coming from *pays* and *visage*, meaning country and the face of a country – that is more contoured, designed and specific. And Iași appears to me not just a simple view but the physiognomy of a country and nation, the expression of an alliance between human and nature, a unity of geographical features and good human qualities; it represents the physiognomy of a slowly and earnestly humanizing of five centuries; it is an expression of Romanian humanity. (Cantacuzino 1958, 389-390)

In his Lecture, G. M. Cantacuzino has insisted on the perfect spatial harmony of “a presence” emanating from the volumetric forms, when dominant, when discrete, orchestrated by the same rhythm with the hilly horizon, with the woods and the sky of the Romanian “city on

seven hills”. This “presence” is precisely “the style of a whole history, culture and civilization” (Ibid., 391).



George Matei Cantacuzino, photos

Over the years, he painted a lot of landscapes, buildings, churches, monuments, etc. of Iași and of Moldavian places he has taken quite a fancy to them. In September 1960, he generously donated an important series of watercolors to the Central University Library of Iași. On the one hand, they reveal the passion for painting, the finesse of observation and the color’s transparency, and on the other hand, they testify the accuracy of the architect’s analysis; the all revealing “a thirsty spirit of harmony” (Chihaiia, 8).



G. M. Cantacuzino’s watercolors (Acuarele G. M. Cantacuzino | Arhitectura)

It’s worth noting that George Matei Cantacuzino had several painting exhibitions of aquarelles and sketches in Bucharest, between 1931 and

1956, and he used to write art chronicles that have been published in cultural journals of fourth and fifth decades of the 20th century.

During the celebration of „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University’s century, in 26 and 27 October 1960, the Project regarding the Metropolitan Cathedral by George Matei Cantacuzino was one of the principal points of interest, being highly appreciated by the guests from European institutions. The architect was invited to explain his project and he presented the ready first pavilion, arousing the wonderment of the group of foreign rectors and deans; especially, that of the Rector from the University of Padova seeing the Venetian lodge and the Florentine room (Cantacuzène 2011, 82).

Two days later, the architect suffered a serious bleed, and in the night of November 1st, 1960, George Matei Cantacuzino passed away. He was buried in “Eternitatea” Cemetery, Iași.

A GIFTED THEORETICIAN AND PRACTITIONER OF ARCHITECTURE

Throughout his entire complex and original work, being an authentic polymath, George Matei Cantacuzino aimed to realize an equipoise concerning the dynamism of the artistic creation, expressing his trust in the value of classical disciplines as foundation, and considering both modern and traditional themes – according to his emphasis of 1947 “Puncte de vedere” / “Views”. He has always followed to avoid any kind of “labeling style”, believing in the power of original synthesis and harmonizing traditions with modernism, classical and vernacular alike (Cantacuzino 2001, 40-41).

Mainly concerned with the possibilities of a classic attitude meeting the modern technological innovations and norms, G. M. Cantacuzino has contributed to the renewal of the Romanian architectural culture, embracing aesthetics as well as ethics regarding the science and art of designing buildings, structures and environments. His proper “classic attitude can be read as an aesthetical and ethical compass, indicating the direction of his activities, and at the same time unifying them as a ‘paper clip’ in his own conception of creativity” (Teodorovici 2017).

The whole work of George Matei Cantacuzino is a fine example of balancing ‘beauty’ and ‘good’ in the effort to identify and unfold the most comprehensive metaphorical expression for his projects. A meaningful statement we can read in his *Letters to Simon*:

I have always tended to metamorphose things into symbols and to give them mythic resonances, and scientific explanations have never satisfied

me. Behind each of them I sense that something else exists, a something that moves into the distance without diminishing and which is all the more oppressive the further away it moves. The world of appearances satisfied me precisely because the shapes of things and, in general, the outward aspect of life were and have remained for me like a text by means of whose letters I am able to read and understand. The forms of things created ideograms (Cantacuzino 2010, 126; 128).

In the territory of the theoretical work of George Matei Cantacuzino, an important place belongs to his conception on architecture, unfolded in significant writings, such as articles and essays on history of art and architecture, ancient civilizations and contemporary movements, international modernism and Romanian architecture, through which he has consistently affirmed his *classic attitude*. Focusing on the harmonious unity of proportion, rhythm and human measure, and looking for “an ethics from which an aesthetics will have to emerge”, Cantacuzino explained himself the meaning of ‘classicism’ he has appropriated: “a certain state of mind”, respectively “a soul balance between knowledge and feeling, personality and tradition; an attitude of serenity of the present that is caught between the known, judged and understood past and the intuited, prepared and challenged future”¹.

G. M. Cantacuzino was a prolific theoretician of architecture, co-editing and publishing in cultural journals, like *Revista Fundațiilor Regale*, *Viața Românească*, *Revista Istorică Română*, *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, etc.; and – as we’ve already mentioned – he was the founder and editor-in-chief of *Simetria. Caiete de artă și critică*.

In 1931, George Matei Cantacuzino published a book review of the large study and album elaborated by Paul Henry² about a singular phenomenon in the entire post-Byzantine art: the Moldavia architectural prototype of churches with outer frescos dated from the 16th century. We refer to “Paul Henry: Les églises de la Moldavie du Nord des origines à la fin du XVI^e siècle. Architecture et peinture. Contribution à l’étude de la civilisation moldave” / “Paul Henry: The

¹ We find clear explanations concerning the comprehension of the ‘classic’ attitude George Matei Cantacuzino has adopted and permanently tried to practice in many of his writings, firstly in his *Introduction to the Study of Architecture and Towards an Aesthetics of Reconstruction*.

² Paul Henry, *Les Églises de la Moldavie du Nord des origines à la fin du XVI^e siècle. Architecture et peinture. Texte et album. Contribution à l’étude de la civilisation moldave*, Presses Universitaires de France, Louis Bellenand, Fontenay-aux-Roses; Librairie Ernest Leroux, Paris, 1930.

Churches of North Moldavia from the origins to the end of 16th Century. Architecture and Painting. A Contribution to the Study of the Moldavian Civilization”, in *Romanian Historical Review*, Volume I, No. 4. A few years later, in the same journal, Cantacuzino published the essay “Considérations générales sur la genèse de l’art moldave” / “General Considerations on the Genesis of the Moldavian Art” (*Romanian Historical Review*, Volume III, No. 1, 1933).

He wrote many articles, among which we mention some titles (translated in English) that are suggestive as regards the thematizations Cantacuzino was interested in: “Tendencies in Romanian Architecture” (in *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, No. 5, 1934); “Popular Arts” (in *Royal Foundations Review* 1, 1934); “Traditionalism and Modernism” and “Fountains, Wells and Stopovers” (in the volume *Sources and Stopovers*, 1934); the regular column “Fine Arts Chronicle” in the *Royal Foundations Review* (1934-1936); “Modernism and Romanian Architecture” (in *Royal Foundations Review* 2, No. 3, 1935); “Impasse and Theme” (in *Ibid.* 3, No. 5, 1936); “The Useful and the Symbolic”, “Architecture and Landscape”, “Proportion”, “Notes on Fine Art Education”, “Church Painting” (in *Simetria* 1, 1939); “Romanian Architecture of Today” (in *Romanian Life* 31, No.4, 1939); “Art and Technique”, “Harmony, Athens, and Classicism”, “Amateurism and Urbanism” (in *Simetria* 2, 1940); “Romanian Towns and Villages” (in *Simetria* 5, 1943); “Fine Arts Chronicle” and “A kind of Balance Sheet” (in *Romanian Life* 36, No. 11, 1944); “The Exhibition from the House of Arts” (in *Ibid.* 36, No. 12, 1944).³ Various articles have been reprinted in the anthology edited by Adrian Anghelescu, in 1977, *Izvoare și popasuri / Sources and Stopovers* (Bucharest: Eminescu Publishing House).

In December 1947, he wrote a study on the historiography of the Roman architect, author and engineer Vitruvius (G. M. Cantacuzino | *Arhitectura*).

It must be pointed out that the theoretical legacy of George Matei Cantacuzino also contains the first Romanian translation of Marcus Vitruvius Pollio treatise *De architectura* - published posthumously, in 1964, at the Romanian Academy Publishing House, and edited by Traian Costa and Grigore Ionescu.

³ See Luminița Machedon and Ernie Scoffham. 1999. *Romanian Modernism: The Architecture of Bucharest, 1920-1940*.

Fully entitled being acknowledged as the pre-eminent architectural theoretician of the inter-war years in Romania, G. M. Cantacuzino is the author of significant books.

Since the early years of his studies in Paris, he wrote *Introducere în studiul arhitecturii / Introduction to the Study of Architecture*, published in 1926 by Socec Press in Bucharest. The 1928 study about the life and work of the Venetian architect of the 16th century Andrea Palladio reveals the attachment of the Romanian architect for the internal harmony and his valuation of the creative freedom in manifesting the superior life of spirit that persists over time⁴.

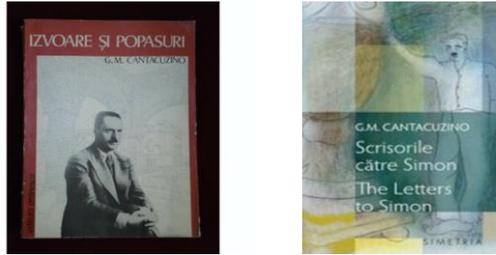
Together with August Schmiedigen, in 1929 George Matei Cantacuzino published an album with sixty-four plates, entitled *Palais de la Banque Chrissoveloni, Bucarest. Un texte et 64 planches*⁵. In the “Introduction” of the book, Cantacuzino briefly exposed his philosophical ideas on architecture.

During his life, Cantacuzino published the following volumes: *Arcade, firide, lespezi* (1932); *Izvoare și popasuri* (1934); *Pătrar de veghe* (1938); *Despre o estetică a reconstrucției* (1947). The volume *Scrisorile către Simon / The Letters to Simon*, posthumously published in several editions⁶, represents a kind of diary of the period 1955 to 1959.

⁴ See George Matei Cantacuzino. 1928. *Palladio. Essai critique, avec douze dessins de l'auteur*.

⁵ The album was published in Paris, at “Ancienne Maison Auguste Vincent”, Vincent, Fréal (eds.), after the building completion of Chrissoveloni Bank Palace in Bucharest. The Letter that prefaces the book, signed by the French architect Georges Gromort, mentions that the construction is a palace of Palladian inspiration with a strictly utilitarian purpose, conceived in a neoclassical style, likening a “palazzo of Vicenza”. www.arhitectura.tuiasi.ro/facultate/g-m-cantacuzino [accessed: 20.09.2018].

⁶ G. M. Cantacuzino, *Scrisorile către Simon*, Cluj-Napoca: Dacia Publishing House, 1993; G. M. Cantacuzino, *Introducere la opera lui Vitruviu. Scrisori către Simon*, Bucharest: Meridiane Publishing House, 1993; a bilingual edition: G. M. Cantacuzino, *Scrisorile către Simon / The Letters to Simon*, Bucharest: Simetria Press, 2010. With Preface by Nicolae Florescu, containing drawings, watercolors and oils signed by G. M. Cantacuzino, and portrait sketches of the author made by his granddaughter Iilca Cantacuzino. The English version belongs to the author's daughter, Marie-Lyse Cantacuzino-Ruhemann.



Book covers of *Sources and Stopovers* and *The Letters to Simon*

As an architect working mostly in the inter-war years of the 20th century, George Matei Cantacuzino was keenly insightful to the main tendencies that have marked the Romanian architecture: the modernism illustrated by Marcel Hermann Iancu / Marcel Janco (1895-1984) and the neo-Romanian manner continuing the trend imposed by Ion Mincu (1852-1912). But he remained equidistantly between them and he created his own architectural style, called by Dan Teodorovici (2014) the “hybrid modernist”.

Briefly commenting his work, there is a co-existence of the following directions: “Renaissance / Palladian, New-Romanian / Brâncovenesc, and Functionalist” that “led to place his architecture between tradition and modernism ..., in classical approaches of functionalism.” (Bostenaru Dan et al. 2015, 150)

Even during his studies in Paris, G.M. Cantacuzino started working on the restoration of Mogoșoaia Palace built in the “Brâncovenesc style” (the Romanian Renaissance style).

Initially, the young Cantacuzino served his apprenticeship with the Italian architect Domenico Rupolo who, in 1912, was hired by the owner Martha Bibescu to bring the palace to its full glory. The work was interrupted during the World War I. Since 1920, the restoration work was taken over and it has been finalized, in 1945, by George Matei Cantacuzino (the nephew away from the older sister of Prince George Valentin Bibescu who had given the palace to his wife, the poet and writer Martha Bibescu). Actually, the restoration of Mogoșoaia Palace is the creation of G. M. Cantacuzino, who succeeded to harmoniously mix the Wallachian-Byzantine style with the Venetian architecture, fully according to his very own philosophy

of architecture that reaches its maturity until the completion of such a great difficult work⁷.



Mogoșoia Palace (restoration)



Mogoșoia Palace detail with the Brâncovenesc architectural style
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mogoșoia_Palace)

Together with August Schmedigen, he designed the Chrissoveloni Bank Palace in Bucharest (1923-1928), in Renaissance style, which still imparts an air of stateliness and elegance.



Chrissoveloni Bank Palace, Lipsani Street, Bucharest: the outside of the building and the main hall
(Category: Chrissoveloni Bank Palace)

Cantacuzino has explained his conception in the album *Palais de la Banque Chrissoveloni, Bucarest: Attempting to realize „a harmony between useful and beautiful”*, he made „a palace of Palladian

⁷ See G. M. Cantacuzino, *Introducere la opera lui Vitruviu*, Bucharest: Meridiane Publishing House, 1993, pp. 146-160, wherein we find the detailed exposure made by the Romanian architect himself.

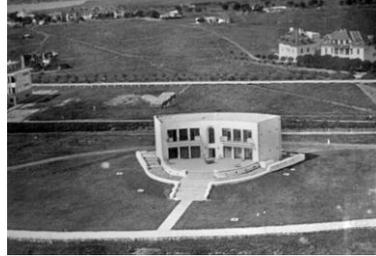
inspiration with strictly utilitarian function” (Cantacuzène, G. M. 1929). The inside of the building is marked by an innovative solution belonging to G. M. Cantacuzino: the difficulties posed by land are removed by introducing a key-rotunde that is going to open up the room desks, which is designed on two levels on the pattern of Loggia del Consiglio in Verona. The entire edifice of Chrissoveloni Bank developed on six levels has white and green marble finishes, and it is equipped with an internal mail system – a first one for that time. Another influence is supposed to be Otto Wagner’s Länderbank in Vienna, featuring a dramatic conception of the spatial sequence around a central hall.

In a selection of the main architectural works of George Matei Cantacuzino, we mention the series of summer villas (Aviana; Prince Bibescu; Crinul; Egreta; Anemona, and many others) in the town of Eforie, on the Black Sea Coast, and the so ingenious and imposing Bellona Hotel planned in the avant-garde modern style, within the urbanism plan for Techirghiol-Eforie Nord resort he has designed between 1930 and 1934.

Relating to the summer villas, and in particular the Aviana Villa, Ruxandra Nemțeanu observes that

In the parcellation, G. M. Cantacuzino, a true aesthete and aristocrat of the arts, drew upon a synaesthetic concept such as is rarely met in architecture, based on visual, auditory and olfactory sensations in particular. The combination of an infusion of marine suggestions with the strong lines of the lanes in the layout of the parcellation, which suggest a symbolic representation of an aeroplane, the body of a seagull with outspread wings, or a protective eye gazing at sea and sky, was also transmitted to the Aristide Blank Villa. Given the special shape of its plan, which embraces the sea, and its name, Aviana, it also awakens senses other than the visual, and the unusual concept aims to stir the affective participation of the viewer. (Nemțeanu 2012)

Aviana Villa is like a big loggia open to the sea, with free circulation between indoor and outdoor on a unique compositional axis; the spatial communication being made by two terraces. The classic manner of facades shows verticality on the main side towards the sea and horizontality for the secondary one coming from the town. At the superior level, two arches make the openings of the building.



Aviana Villa (1930), Eforie Nord, Constanța County

Bellona Hotel represents one of the masterpieces of the Romanian architect who „frequently made use of metaphoric shapes to endow the built space with meaning” (Ibid.). The form seems to be a ship ready for water launching. The construction has an optimal distribution of rooms and functions. Two diachronic principles are applied: the Palladio’s one to highlighting the landscape, and the functionalist language through the mechanical analogy of porthole windows and booths organized in a modernist architecture overall concept. The vertical axis assures the connection „from bow to stern”. A fair balance between fullness and emptiness, and also the existence of terraces as mediation between the inside and outside demonstrate once again the classical spirit with regional particularities G. M. Cantacuzino has cultivated.



Bellona Hotel (1934) in Eforie Nord, Constanța County

In collaboration with other architects, George Matei Cantacuzino has designed many projects, such as: the Industrial Complex of the Aircraft Factory / I.A.R. in Brașov (1930-1933), together with Octav Doicescu; Block of flats Emanoil Kretzulescu, Block of flats D. D. Bragadiru in Bucharest (1934-1935) and Hotel Rex in Mamaia, Constanța County (1936-1940), together with Vasile Arion. In 1934, he coworked at the Master Plan of Bucharest, too.

His multiplex creativity in designing by harmonizing Renaissance and Brâncovenesc styles, but permanently on the ground of his classic attitude, is revealed by Tudor Arghezi Memorial House / „Casa Mărțișor” (1930-1932), Villa N. Mavrocordat (1930-1933), the Office Building of the former Industrial Credit Company and Villa Florica Policrat (1934-1935), Villa Nae Ionescu (1936) in Bucharest; Octavian Goga Mausoleum of Ciucea, in Cluj County (1938), etc.



„Casa Mărțișor” / Tudor Arghezi Memorial House, Bucharest



Villa Nae Ionescu, Bucharest



Octavian Goga Mausoleum, Ciucea, Cluj County

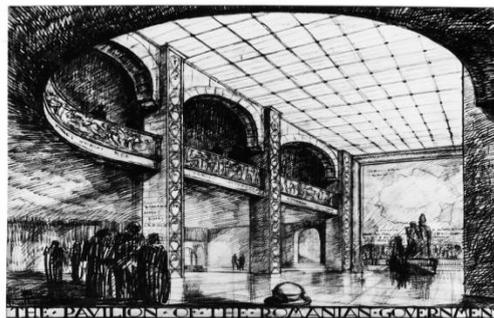
Perhaps the greatest freedom of expression of G. M. Cantacuzino remains the project of the Romania Pavilion at the New York World's Fair 1939-1940. On that occasion, the Mayor of the great American metropolis Fiorello H. La Guardia made him an Honorary Citizen of New York City.

George Matei Cantacuzino has realized an assembly dominated by classical lines and modern simplicity, by re-utilizing the primary form of the cube with a side of thirty meters. The main component of the construction was the hall with a gallery cube on two levels. The principal entrance was an upper floor delimited by three monumental columns.



Romania Pavilion at the New York World's Fair (1939-1940)

The elevation in three registers and the marble tiles from the elegant natural stones of Rușchița, the interior perforated boards of Brâncovenesc style, the ogival arch of the entry, the middle foyer bordered by skylights on top and the engraving iconographic map of Romania are just a few elements speaking about the beauty, grace and spiritual flourishing of Romanian society between the wars. Modern elements meet Roman and Byzantine motifs of the central plan and arches, in a classic harmony.



G. M. Cantacuzino's design of the Hall - Romania Pavilion at the New York World's Fair

The last work of George Matei Cantacuzino is the monumental assembly of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași. Two main buildings, monumental staircases, the Florentine room and the Moldavian emblems of Carpathian bison, founts, etc. have been built. Under his supervision, the guest house and the dining room, the Cathedral façade with the fifty stairs and paved terrace, the whole park, fountains and annexes pavilions⁸ have been created.



Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași (left). The two outside buildings designed by G. M. Cantacuzino (right)



G. M. Cantacuzino's Pavilions of the Metropolitan Cathedral, Iași

The entire work at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași is a model of simple architecture of Palladian style with elegant proportion, using the benefits of the natural landscape, and perfectly integrating itself in the Romanian “city on seven hills”: Iași.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION

Beyond any conventional attempts of scrutinizing the architectural work signed by George Matei Cantacuzino – actually, impossible -, it

⁸ See Paul Mihail, „Postfață” / „Postface”. In G. M. Cantacuzino, *Introducere la opera lui Vitruviu. Scrisori către Simon / Introduction to Vitruvius' Work. Letters to Simon*. Edited by Zamfira Mihail. Bucharest: Meridiane Publishing House, 1993, pp. 314-315.

is obvious the originality of his creations that carry neoclassical and Renaissance influences together with the functionalism modern requirements, in accordance with a contemporary approach of the traditional Romanian style. Having a vast and deep culture about the universal and national architecture throughout history, being receptive to the world's new trends and, no less, being a well-versed in the particularities of the Romanian craft of building, the architect has orchestrated his own manner of expression.

G. M. Cantacuzino has taken the creed of the classical architecture and he perceived it as a path of thinking and searching for the essence able to bring together each element of an assembly in their harmony. He has overcome the clash between traditionalism and modernism, affirming a personal theory that is far from an architectural practice of imitating formal patterns without critically filtering out them. He has also manifested against the excessive functionalism, stressing the great importance of the spiritual needs of human being: going into the "spiritual scheme" and not at all to the "picturesque form"⁹.

His entire architectural work means the proposal and development of an original system to integrating the modern functionalism and the lived body of traditionalism, on the ground of the classical composition principles. Herein there is some of his authenticity emergence with an apart insight as regards the capacity of valuing and using the *folk art*, too. George Matei Cantacuzino took the latter as "a lesson and not a model", in the endeavour to "appropriating the essence of tradition", to "interpreting (and distilling) its forms and volumes, but also by extracting the essence of its functionality" (Popescu 2010).

We can get a real precious learning from such an outstanding personality. And we decipher a pathway of reaching to realize new forms able to support, by a built space, the national identity that, finally, confers the uniqueness and beauty in the worldwide architecture. By a moderate modernism, G. M. Cantacuzino has invariably displayed a kinship line linking the avant-garde and the tradition, as a remarkable mediator¹⁰ who never abdicated from a "classic attitude".

⁹ See the orientation claimed by the signatories of the famous *Declaration of La Sarraz* of 1928.

¹⁰ An interesting analysis of the particular place G. M. Cantacuzino has among the Romanian architects of the interwar period is made by Mirela Duculescu in her 2010 book *George Matei Cantacuzino (1899-1960). Arhitectura ca temă a gândirii. Architecture as a Subject of Thought*.

The evidences of a great work led us towards a better comprehension of the dialogue ‘identity-alterity’, ‘synchrony-diachrony’, and the all is unveiling under the auspices of an amalgamated but still so clear architectural vision of a classical spirit in its in-depth completion.

Undoubtedly, the ‘classic attitude’ can be discovered through the very own style G. M. Cantacuzino has conceived his architectural projects, from the volumetric composition and function organization to the harmonious distribution of registers, with semicircular and rectangular windows (e.g., Chrissoveloni Bank Palace; the Office Building of the former Industrial Credit Company), with entrances marked by triangular gables or semicircularly vaulted and accented through removing (e.g., Aviana Villa in Eforie Nord; Policrat Villa in Bucharest). Thoroughly, we can detect the essential elements of the classical architecture’s aesthetics, such as *proportion* and *symmetry* within their particularities, from a wider philosophical point of view: “the symmetry is dynamic, and the proportion is asymmetrical. The ground of them is to be disclosed in the ‘golden cut’, which is precisely the geometric representation of the unity of contraries” (Surdu 2018, 96).

To conclude, it’s worth bringing to the fore a synthetic comprehensive portrait of George Matei Cantacuzino made by the British architect, academic and architectural historian Timothy Brittain-Catlin in one of his “stories” for *The Architectural Review*, namely “George Cantacuzino: Romania’s Forgotten Modernist” (2 September 2014):

An artist and stonemason as well as an architect; a widely read intellectual liberal and teacher, full of Goethe’s ‘lyric enthusiasm’; a cosmopolitan at home in the grand homes and embassies of Paris and London as well as among the aristocrats of Romania; a hardworking and thoughtful architect who inspired what may well have been life-saving loyalty in his builders ... Like many treated as failures by the cruelties of conventional architectural history, he did design a small number of fine buildings at the outset of his career, and these have survived. But this is a story of a noble person, in every sense of the word (Brittain-Catlin 2014).

This article is our modest tribute paid to an impressive personality, one of both rigour and sensitivity, whose name the Faculty of Architecture of Iași took the name, and who represents an excellent role model firstly for the young aspirants in architecture. It is a honorary duty we

can express in the year when we commemorate 120 years since the birth of George Matei Cantacuzino: a real awe-inspiring architect and an eminent dignified personality.

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