Bucevschi’s Portraiture

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Abstract: Epaminoda Bucevschi was a painter who approached, with more or less success, numerous plastic topics. Even if a part of his plastic activity adopted an academic shape, sometimes impersonal, and Bucevschi lost his creation’s identity in the immense mass of the international academic field, a great part of his talent "brings improvement to the aboriginal iconographic repertoire and, most of all, in the successive portraits of certain personalities of the time." His paint brush oscillated between the religious painting subjected many times to the spatial limits given by the fix surfaces (panels from iconostases, monumental parietal surfaces of different shapes – circular, rectangular, rhombic – etc.) and laic painting of easel. The artistic destiny carried Bucevschi far from the quartering within a singular topic, did not form a style, he followed his endowment, painting both portraits, religious or allegoric compositions, landscapes or genre paintings.

Keywords: Epaminonda Bucevschi, portrait, art history.

1. Bucevschi’s Portraits

The portrait is Bucevschi’s favourite genre. Besides the portraits in the museums or other locations I have researched, the two albums from the Print Room of the Romanian Academy containing the photographic reproductions of Bucevschi’s works are proof of the talent as a portrayer of Epaminoda Bucevschi.

Bucevschi’s portraits unfold on an extended thematic itinerary and hold an unequal quality. Bucevschi paints both legendary figures, historical and real faces, he shifts from portraying the characters of the mystical sphere to real portraits, intellectual or rustic, of his contemporaries, and to the creation of symbolic portraits.

Throughout the whole 19th century, the European portrait was in a period of transition. If in the 17th century the portrait was seen as an inferior genre, included mostly in the case of group portraiture, in the 19th century it becomes established, individual. The bourgeois customers order portraits in order to reflect their ego, the exact reality, without subtle details of vision or style. Simultaneously with the immobile, static realism, bound to certain painting techniques assumed irreproachably, the portraitists take refuge in creating certain romantic characters where their imagination tries to surpass the limits of reality. However, these romantic portraits more often than not fail: "The romantic painting is a world of imaginary representations, but by excellence, literary. The romantic person did not see himself individually transfigured through the poetic ecstasy. The romanticism of the faces and the costumes was attached to an unchanged silhouette. The person changes, but the scenery stays the same. He cultivates his dreams, but does not remake the world." Most of Bucevschi’s portraits are made “at order”. The trend set in Paris, with a delay of a few years, required that the richer, educated families decorate their interiors with the portraits of the family members. These portraits having become individual represented the social statute of the family and replaced the photographs, which were much smaller in size and achromatic. It was an art of mimicking the reality and did not offer an artistic ideal. Nowadays, these portraits have a documentary role, they speak of the social hierarchies, the people of those times, their lives and the conditions they lived in, they represent proof of the past of Bucovina.

The presence of the easel painters in the urban or provincial life accommodated the high class society with their creations. If the painters, eager to affirm themselves and become richer gathered mostly in the capitals of the principalities, the good, honest craftsmen wasted their talents in portraying the members of the local families. When the painter, throughout his creation managed to please the first client, the latter recommended him to his acquaintances and, in this way, the painter having become

fashionable had so many orders he could hardly handle. This happened to Epaminoda Bucevschi, as well. The necessity to sustain his family financially at a given moment put Bucevschi in the situation of answering all the solicitations for creating family portraits.

Due to the fact that the environment he came from and lived in was mostly a religious one, the majority of the family portraits painted by Bucevschi represent priests, parish priest, archimandrites, metropolitans, teachers and their wives in the area of Bucovina.

### 1.1 Male Portraits

In the case of the male portraits, Bucevschi approaches differently the artistic picturing of the characters. The portraits of historic figures such as the one of Stephen the Great or the portraits of church representatives with higher positions have a more complex compositional structure than the ones of simple priests or teachers. The archimandrites and the bishops (figure 1) are painted entirely (the entire figure) and are situated in a complexity of plans in depth and height, surrounded by religious or symbolic objects. Their clothes are rich and precious, ornamented according to the Orthodox Church canon and become a good pretext to dynamite chromatically the surface.

Elements not lacking from the portraits are the crosses, the symbols and religious badges of rank sustained by gold chains (for example the portrait of Silvestru Morariu Andrievici, figure 2). These are painted in detail, containing miniature images, created with great precision and accuracy. Their faces are severe, framed by the ever present beard painted extremely realistic and the kamelaukion on the head. The eyes are expressive and their well studied hands hold religious objects or find support on church objects.

In many cases, a compositional structure is repeated, with small adjustments: the most frequently used method is composing the space so that the perspective effect is rendered by using in close-up view, in the lower part of the painting of a pavement composed of white and black squares, of a socle with diverse objects on it, positioned in the second plan and in the background with draping and, sometimes, with a part of the sky. Everything is created after well designed and documented scenery; the entire work is composed of axes and has well studied centers of interest. The same type of compositional construction is found in the case of the portraiture of the ruler Stephen the Great (figure 2).

The light plays an important role in Bucevschi’s portraiture. The painter offers through these portraits the illusion of three-dimensional reality; he plastically models the faces with the help of the light and of the chromatic shadows.

The portraits of priests and of teachers (figure 4) are reduced to a sobriety and simplicity taken to extreme. Their garments are classical, in dark colours and without any ornamental details. Only in the case of the portraits of teachers (for example Samuil Isopescu, Clementie Popovici, Ioan Bumbac, Niculai Hacman) the shirt collar and sometimes the bow tie is rendered. Here the background is painted plain, without any spatial decorations, with a mild tinting from a lighter nuance to a darker one so as to emphasize the alternance of light and shadows on the face. In their case, the hands do not represent points of interest for the painter; therefore, they are not the object of the pictorial representation.

In contrast with the sobriety of the clothes, the faces are the only pretexts for Bucevschi where over a sure anatomical drawing the colour could vibrate in a constructive way.

From our point of view, the most liberal approaches in Bucevschi’s male portraiture are rendered in the portraits entitled: “Doge” (The Doge), “Moșul” (The Old Man) and “Vasile Ştefaniuc” (figure 5). Here Bucevschi detaches from the discipline (having roots in the Austrian style), of the self-imposed order in portraying the faces of priests.

Similar to the way in which “the elders, retired in meditation and in the shadow” of Rembrandt or the ascetic faces of El Greco show us psychological subtleties which refer to the intimate personality of the painted characters, Bucevschi’s “Doge” (The Doge) is a portrait which opens the way towards a different type of perceiving the human silhouette, suggests us the model of the great masters. This work is based on the contrasting alternance between light and darkness, between light and dark, between chromatic and achromatic, between material and immaterial.

The watcher’s eye is seduced by this duality. The light projected from the sideway frames on the old man’s face, dissolves the character’s profile, melts the anatomic shapes and vanishes

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Fig. 1. Portraits of archimandrites and bishops.
**Fig. 2.** The Metropolitan Silvestru Morariu Andrievici

**Fig. 3.** The Portrait of Stephen the Great.

**Fig. 4.** Portraits of priests and teachers.
in the beard and the hair that holds the immaterial light towards the background. The cap on the head, painted with a palpable materiality holds the mark of time and becomes a pictorial spot, rich in plasticity. The gaze of the doge, rather tired, travels far away, idles or maybe follows a thought... an idea, a memory of the Venetian waters?

"Vasile Ștefaniuț" discloses a powerful personality. He is honest, aware of his value, confident and proud. Apparently he has nothing to hide. His direct, haughty gaze has the watcher as target. A small smile hidden in the white mustache reveals his secret: the joy to live. The collar of the sheepskin coat, tall, fluffy gives the character an almost bohemian nonchalance. The portrait, framed by an oval shape, enjoys the same compositional beneficial duality between the dark and light tones, between light and darkness.

The prototype of the peasant from Bucovina is found in Bucevschi’s work entitled "Moșul" (The Old Man). As a matter of fact, most of the painters from Bucovina at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 21st century centred their artistic research on studying the facial expressions in the idyllic world of the life in the countryside in harmony of the cultural vision previous to the sămânătorism (ideological current at the beginning of the 20th century). Eugen Maximovici (1857-1926), Mihai Teliman (1863-1902), George Löwendal (1897-1964) are only a few examples.

Bucevschi excelled “in the art of conferring nobility of certain peasant faces from Bucovina”. “Moșul” (The Old Man) is the image of the gentle grandfather from the countryside, wearing a sheepskin coat and a shabby hat in the head. In comparison with the portraits commented previously, where the figure is positioned straight and looks directly towards the watcher, here the head leaning mildly and the melancholic look pointing further away emphasizes the fact that Bucevschi tried to show the spontaneous, natural side. He painted the wrinkled face, he studied its expression with the same sensuousness with which many other painters of portraits have done along time, beginning with the Renaissance representatives and up to the modern painters. The same figure appears in the sketches drawn in pencil found in the personal notebook of Bucevschi. It seems that this old man was often near him, fact which enabled the artist to create many sketches. In these studies of expression which show the human diversity, Bucevschi manages to distance himself from the realistic, formal, social painting.

A male portrait representative for Bucevschi may be considered the portrait of his father (which can be found in the Art Museum in Cernăuți). In this work (figure 6), the artistic spirit unites with the filial love. The figure of the old father fills three parts of the surface and is perfectly centred bilaterally in the space of the painting. The character is built on a stable structure, triangular, with the base given by the open book and with the peak above the head and the peak above the head. The chromatic dominant is given by the cold greys of the background and of the clothes, dark as value. The light ochre tones of the face centres the work and are balanced in the lower part by the orange used for the pages of the book. Dimitrie Bucevschi looks at you exactly straight, with the eyes relating to the ones of the watcher. The face is expressive; it emits an internal light which goes beyond the marks of the passing of the time, visible in the wrinkles and the grey hairbreadth in the thick beard. In the foreground, the hand on the holy book has a symbolic value. The book is open at the middle and the worn pages prove its intense usage. The book shows the importance the father Dumitrache gave throughout his entire life to education, culture. He fought not only for schooling his children, but of all the little villagers in Ilișești. It is interesting to signal the lack of the self-portrait among Bucevschi’s work. In general, the majority of the painters have an inner calling to paint themselves. Was Bucevschi so modest he could not care at all for himself?

1.2. Feminine Portraits

In portraying the wives of the priests or of the teachers, Bucevschi adopts simple solutions. The feminine faces portrayed (figure 7, 8) are objective, they show seriousness, sometimes maybe conventional, in conformity with of their husbands’ position. The paintings are created in a realistic style and from a compositional and chromatic point of view; they are more “obedient”, without concurrent constructive spaces, without powerful colour emphasis. The atmosphere created by Bucevschi is the result of what the buyers wanted: a static portrait, almost still, classical, with a facile perception of the subject, without great compositional difficulties.

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Fig. 5. Portraits of Old Men ("Doge", "Bătrân", "Vasile Ştefaniuc", "Moşul")
The clothes of the portrayed persons are chosen with great care in order to be as sober as possible, without many adornments. A few laces and ribbons appear seldom. The arms are covered entirely. Some faces represent women from the countryside, wearing scarves. The eyes in this type of portrait fixates the watcher, but does not reveal much of the inner feelings and rather emits a certain severity imposed by the necessity of leaving as inheritance to the family a moral, serious portrait. We can talk in this sense of a portrait with didactic valences.

The chromatic is bound to the same style: the colour blotches are set uniformly, without relief, vibration or powerful tone breakage. The chosen range in the majority of the feminine portraits is a major range with dominants such as ochre and browns which balance and gives unity to the paintings.

It is interesting to observe in these portraits the absence of hands. It is known the fact that hands speak of the inner life of the character sometimes more than the face. Did Bucevschi abscond from introducing them because he had to allocate more to the study – this type of realistic portrait asked great patience on behalf of the painter – or did the persons having ordered the portraits considered that their hands do not deserve to be a part of the painting?!

In the case of „Portretului domnișoarei Flondor“ ("The Portrait of Miss Flondor") (figure 9), Bucevschi has a free hand. It is a painting (610/490 cm) created in oil paints, on a base of cardboard onto which canvas was attached.

The painting is narrative and renders a woman of around 30 years in natural size, bent a little on one side. The clothes were chosen with great care and they characterize the city fashion, lightly contaminated by the Western fashion, specific to the second half of the 19th century. The portrayed woman has a luxurious dress, low-cut, with uncovered shoulders, edged by gentle laces lightly ornamented and in the middle of the chest a pink rose. She wears a locket on her neck. Her face that renders certain sadness, it may hide an inner drama: her eyes idling outside the painting, and her mouth shows a light stillness. Her hair is combed towards the back, in conformity with the fashion of the time.

The chromatic is sober; however the small luminous accents of the adornments, the decorative rhythm created on the dress edge, as well as the centred pink rose make the portrait captivate the watchers' attention. The entire figure is lit from the front and therefore, detaches lightly from the dark background as value.

In the same narrative manner it is painted in oil paints on canvas (440/335 cm) the portrait entitled "Femeie tânără" ("Young Woman") (figure 10).

Here the woman is portrayed from the side and is centred in an oval shape in the style of a medallion. In this painting, on the dark background with warm nuances of green, the face of the woman is portrayed lit from the front. The floral ornament from the lock of braided hair which frames the head becomes the painter’s pretext of enriching the surface with blotches of lively colour.
Fig. 8. Feminine Portraits 2.
The suave pink carnation is chromatically close to the nuance of the face, becoming a luminous accent which interrupts the itinerary of the colour shading towards the dark background from behind the feminine profile. The pearls at the base of the neck create, through their luminous intensifications, a dynamic, playful rhythm, and the lace collar, with the same tonal value, contrasts with the surface of the background and that of the coat itself, which are painted uniformly, flattened with a fine brush, without emphasis. Everything is painted with knowledge, composed in a directorial way, in conformity with the tendencies of the epoch.

In the Romanian male portraiture, there are numerous faces picturing figures of peasants, without these being composed in a savant way, with symbolic meaning. Beginning with the second half of the 19th century, the Romanian plastic art tends towards the rediscovery of the national identity. The painters, educated and formed artistically in foreign academies, but with a Romanian soul, put into practice the technique gained and the personal talent in view of modifying the mentality existent in the Romanian Provincial groups.

In the same period appear in the Romanian portraiture the first paintings with scenes inspired by the live in the countryside. Even the women in the high class society go back to the traditional wear, leaving behind the luxurious imported garments. The foreign buyers also begin to appreciate the Romanian idyllic characters.

Bucevschi paints far away from home numerous scenes with faces of little peasant girls, little gypsy girls, etc. entitled “Doină”, “Mica florăreasă” (“The Little Florist”), “Secerătoarea” (“The Harvestress”), “Ţigânuş” (“The Little Gypsy”), “Torcând” (“Spinning”) etc. (figure 11), these are just a part of the rustic faces which populate the plastic creation of Bucevschi. Here, his talent as a portrayer is doubled by his longing for the country, the wish to show the world the beauty specific to our area. For creating these idyllic, compositional portraits, the painter uses the multitude of sketches he made during his travels home, in Bucovina.
The archives in the Print Room of the Romanian Academy conserve many sketches made in pencil, coal or watercolours (figure 12). The paintings are proof of the daily artistic search of the painter within the completion of the creating personality without which no artist manages to access the higher spheres. Bucevschi’s sketches are daily resources, proof of documentation responsible for later compositional works. Here, the artistic sensitivity in revealed more easily, the lines vibrate with more force, being spontaneous, expressive and surprise by the momentary state, the feeling, the vital breathing. Some sketches represent details of garments and adornments specific to the traditional Romanian wear; others catch landscapes, peasant houses or scenes from the life of the Romanian peasants. As well as other painters in his epoch, Bucevschi turned his look towards the rustic, idyllic life in the countryside, towards what was already familiar to him. He used in his subsequent compositions numerous elements which originate in the Romanian folk art. His beautiful compositional feminine portraits are wearing “iă” (spangled embroidered peasant women’s blouse - characteristic Romanian national costume), beads and necklaces, flowers at the ears and ornaments specific to the traditional Romanian wear.
Even if a large part of the paintings were conceived faraway from the country, his workshop being in Vienna, his works speak of Bucovina. It might be said about Bucevschi that through his creations he proved to be a true patriot, who managed to maintain traditional values above the trends of the time from the aristocrats’ parlours. Even if some of the pictorial works remain tributary to the Western styles from the beginning of the 19th century (the necessity for money imposing), Bucevschi’s artistic search constantly aims towards the authentic Romanian values.
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