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# Beyond National Style: The Innovative Thinking and Designs of the Architect Ion Mincu (1852–1912)

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## Abstract

This article offers a critical reading of the works and thinking of the celebrated Romanian architect Ion Mincu (1852–1912) in relation to the broader cultural and political context of the new nation-state. It investigates the literature on him up until the present day to trace the formation of his image as ‘creator’ of the Romanian (also known as Neo-Romanian or National) architectural style before presenting Mincu’s range of artistic interests, innovative ideas and designs. Even if famous in Romania, Mincu is little-known for an English-language audience and partly to blame is precisely his fame as national architect which has made him a central figure only in histories of Romanian art and architecture. However, the article shows that Mincu harboured a diverse range of artistic ideas and interests, not all related to Romanian national ideology. His understanding of the relation between local building traditions and contemporary architecture was multi-faceted and driven by attempts to reconcile ideas about artistic progress and modernity with those about traditions and cultural identity. Therefore, the article moves beyond the connection between his work and ideas about national identity in order to discern his many artistic concerns and his complex relation to the Romanian architectural heritage.

## Keywords

Ion Mincu; Romania; Bucharest; Neo-Romanian; National Style; Art Nouveau; national heritage; historical monuments.

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# Beyond National Style: The Innovative Thinking and Designs of the Architect Ion Mincu (1852–1912)<sup>1</sup>

**Cosmin Minea**

## Introduction

In a ground-breaking article, quoted over and over again in attempts to overcome the marginal status of central and eastern European art, Piotr Piotrowski noted:

The problem of national or ethnic art historical narratives seems very characteristic of the arts outside the centre. On the one hand, we have the national art histories of particular countries, on the other the international art history. (...) on the one hand, we have artists with an international status, (...) while on the other hand, there are artists who remain specifically national (...). This reveals tensions of a geographical kind: on the one hand, there are Paris and later New York as international centres of culture, on the other, regional capitals placed in national contexts, such as Belgrade, Copenhagen, Oslo, Prague, Vilnius.<sup>2</sup>

Piotrowski described a problem omnipresent for historians of modern art outside the globally-recognised artistic centres: its detrimental association with national art histories. Even if the idea of national art has been a source of pride for smaller nations, it has also indirectly led to their marginalisation. The career of the nineteenth-century Romanian architect Ion Mincu (1852–1912) is one of the best illustrations of this. He is recognised as a highly innovative artist in Romania and revered as ‘the father’ of modern Romanian architecture, but outside the country he is seen as another architect of the ‘national styles’ of central and eastern Europe. This latter focus reflects a wider phenomenon. In the 1990s, when there was a rapid growth in scholarship on the region, a primary concern was examination and critique of national ideologies. It was an emphasis that would also shape analysis of modern architecture in central and eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup>

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1) This article was written during two generous postdoctoral fellowships: The Swiss Excellence Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Chair for History and Theory of Architecture Prof. Maarten Delbeke, ETH, Zurich (2021–2022) and the postdoctoral position in the ERC StG-802700 *Art Historiographies in Central and Eastern Europe. An Inquiry from the Perspective of Entangled Histories*, principal investigator Ada Hajdu ((1978–2020), at the New Europe College-Institute for Advanced Study, Bucharest (2020–2021).

2) Piotr Piotrowski, ‘Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde,’ in Sascha Bru, ed., *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009, 56.

3) Bratislav Pantelić, ‘Nationalism and Architecture: The Creation of a National Style in Serbian Architecture and Its Political Implications,’ *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 56: 1 1997, 16–41; Carmen Popescu, ‘Un patrimoine de l’identité : l’architecture à l’écoute des nationalismes,’ *Études balkaniques*, 12 2005, 135–71; Ada Hajdu, ‘The Search for National Architectural Styles in Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to World War I,’ in Roumen Daskalov et al., eds, *Entangled Histories of the Balkans. Volume Four: Concepts, Approaches, and Self-)Representations*, Leiden: Brill, 2017, 394–439; David Crowley, *National Style and Nation-State: Design in Poland from the Vernacular Revival to the International Style*, Manchester University Press, 1992.

In maybe the most geographically comprehensive and extensive surveys of art nouveau in Europe, Mincu and Romania are completely ignored.<sup>4</sup> Examples from eastern Europe are few and usually limited to the better-known cases of Finland and Hungary.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, a tight relation between a national ideology and a particular architect or architectural movement seemed to have functioned as barrier against their wider international recognition, and for a number of reasons. First, there is the view that national styles developed according to the same principles and thus there is generally the same story to be told, no matter if it is located in Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria. Second, to speak about ‘national style’ and not ‘art nouveau’ indirectly means to diminish the artistic value of the former and emphasize rather its ideological rationale, therefore confirming the value hierarchy described by Piotrowski. As Carmen Popescu has also remarked, concepts such as national school, national geniuses or national style, are a reason for the unequal relations between the allegedly ‘young’ cultures of central and eastern Europe and the ‘mature’ ones of western Europe.<sup>6</sup>

But Mincu also suffers from another type of marginalisation. In Romania, studies have mostly analysed his career as part of the long-lived National Romanian or Neo-Romanian architectural style. As a result, just a limited part of his oeuvre – those works that exemplified the national style – tends to be included in historical analyses, and even when they are discussed, it is generally in the context of wider surveys of many other architects and buildings.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, and despite his supposed importance, no monograph or extensive studies about Mincu have been published in any language since the 1970s.<sup>8</sup>

It is the aim of the present article to offer a reading of Mincu’s work away from the traditional scholarly emphasis on the development of the Neo-Romanian style, and without the exclusive focus on his connection to Romanian national ideology that has marked so much writing on him until now. This is not only to change the methodological paradigm but also out of recognition that other perspectives are also appropriate for understanding his works and career. For the creations of Mincu broke with established architectural norms and managed to create for the first time in modern Romania an original artistic language. Active in the decades before and after 1900, he had the same preoccupations as many other artists and architects of his time, and he also managed to reconcile contrary ideas about tradition, identity, modernism, artists and architecture in a distinctive way.

Mincu had a keen interest in local Romanian artistic heritage, but that interest bore similarities to more widely-shared ideas associated with art nouveau, such as: opposition to established architectural styles; preference for unusual or non-European architecture (such as

4) Jeremy Howard, *Art Nouveau: International and National Styles in Europe*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996; Paul Greenhalgh, ed., *Art Nouveau 1890–1914*, London: V&A Publications, 2000.

5) Jean Lahor, *Art Nouveau* London: Grange Books, 2007; Klaus-Jürgen Sembach, *Art Nouveau*, Köln: Taschen, 2002; Gabriele Sterner, *Art Nouveau: An Art of Transition-From Individualism to Mass Society*, New York: Barron’s, 1982.

6) Carmen Popescu, ‘Cultures majeures, cultures mineures. Quelques réflexions sur la (géo)politisation du folklore dans l’entre-deux-guerres,’ in *Spicilegium. Studii și articole în onoarea Prof. Corina Popa*, Bucharest: UNArte, 2015.

7) Maria Camelia Ene, *Stilul național în artele vizuale. Artele decorative*, Bucharest: Noi Media Print, 2013; Ruxandra Nemteanu, *Vila în stil neoromnesc. Expresia cautarilor unui model autohton în locuința individuală urbană*, Bucharest: Simetria, 2014; Ada Ștefanuț (Hajdu), *Arhitectură și Proiect Național Stilul Național Românesc*, Bucharest: Noi Media Print, 2010.

8) Mihail Caffé, *Ion Mincu*, Bucharest: Meridiane, 1970. Just an album of his drawings has been more recently published Elena Olariu, Ioana Maria Petrescu and Andreea Pop, *Repertoriul desenelor de arhitectură – Ioan Mincu*, Bucharest: Muzeul Național de Artă al României, 2015.

Arab, Venetian or Romanian architectural monuments); interest in the design of interiors and furnishing; the use of non-conventional materials in architecture such as ceramics, stained glass and wood; an interest in dialogue between architectural design and the vernacular building traditions, climate or geography of a place; and a general desire to create new forms, interpret and manipulate the past, all as an expression of the individual creativity.

Far from being limited to the national context, Mincu was part of the cosmopolitan artistic society of late nineteenth-century Romania, among well-travelled and well-connected individuals, fluent in French and Romanian at the very least, who spent a considerable amount of time in cities such as Paris, Vienna or Berlin. Geographical distances, which have come to be interpreted as establishing distance in style or value, were in fact not as significant. As the Romanian-based French architect, André Lecomte du Noüy, noted in 1890: ‘Anyone can board a wagon-lit in Paris and alight in Bucharest as if they had not travelled at all.’<sup>9</sup>

At the same time though, Mincu cannot easily be categorised as an ‘art nouveau’ architect, simply because the Romanian context was palpably different from that in, for example, Brussels, Paris or Glasgow. Romania was not an industrialised nation, it did not have historic institutions of learning with well-established artistic norms such as the classical canon, and almost all artists or architects were part of the rich, land-owning elite. Mincu himself came from a boyar’s family and held important state functions such as university professor and member of the Romanian Parliament between 1895 and 1899. Therefore, in contrast to peers such as Victor Horta or William Morris, the architecture of Mincu was not driven by some critical stance towards the market economy or industrialisation. Furthermore, the romantic ideal of a return to medieval craftsmanship, folk art and to an unspoiled rural landscape, that characterised art in many European nations, had little appeal in a largely rural country, where wild natural environments and century-old ways of life were lived realities, even for city dwellers. This explains why Mincu, in contrast to many contemporaries, had little to do with folk art revival of the 1890s, but instead referenced in his creations predominantly courtly or ecclesiastic architecture of the past.

In order to flesh out these ideas, this article addresses a number of themes, starting with the process whereby he became known as the creator of a national style *after* his death. It then examines Mincu’s interest in cultivating a personal creative language that was distinct from prevailing trends in Romania or elsewhere and that included a connection to the architectural heritage of Romania. Finally, it considers his unconventional way of restoring and reinterpreting the historical monuments of Romania. On the whole, the present study attempts to analyse the little-known, albeit highly original, architectural creations of Mincu without relying on the pre-defined and overused hierarchy based on the dichotomy of national (eastern European) and international (western European) architectures.

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9) ‘Letter from Lecomte du Noüy to Revoil,’ March 20, 1890, 12:1, MXXXI, *Lecomte du Noüy Archive, Manuscript Cabinet, Romanian Academy Library, Bucharest*.

## The making of a national icon: Ion Mincu as founder of the national Romanian architectural style

1912, the year of Mincu's death, marked also the completion of his final building design, the long-envisioned museum of religious art and architecture in Bucharest. Mincu noted that the architecture of the museum was inspired by the monument standing next to it, the Stavropoleos church of the early eighteenth century, which he had himself also restored. The museum was conceived as a modern cloister for the church, with three distinct parts: an L-shaped two-storey building, a bell-tower of equal height and a covered walkway surrounding the inner courtyard (**Figure 1**). The only obvious references to the architecture of the church is in a row of trefoil arcades along the walkway, supported by stone pillars with sculpted capitals displaying a richly-decorated polychrome ceramic freeze under the extended cornice. The trefoil arcades are copied after those of the entrance porch of the church, as is the red-tiled roof that is in itself a new addition by Mincu during the restoration of the church.

Despite the reference to an Orthodox monument, it has been noted that the courtyard shows similarities to the cloisters of Catholic monasteries; one recent analysis has even suggested monastic cloisters from Spain and Italy as a direct source of inspiration.<sup>10</sup> Mincu added other references to European architecture outside of Romania, such as classical ornaments above the first floor windows of the main building and a projecting wooden cornice, which evoke Italianate villas. Mincu also alternated a frieze of ceramic tiles in shades of green on the exterior façade, with one of coloured wood installed under the cornice on the interior façade. In essence, the building is a highly eclectic design that shows the architect experimenting with multiple artistic sources, with motifs referencing the Orthodox heritage of Romania combined with references to other buildings and practices, placed in an original context, namely a building that is neither a museum nor a proper monastic cloister.

This design has been largely ignored in studies about the architect and one reason could be that it does not fit into the established paradigm of Mincu the creator of the national style. The building has hardly any resemblance to his more famous creations; it mixes references to western European traditions with those to Romanian architecture, and ends up being a highly eclectic design precisely at the moment when some began to praise the architect as creator of a new (national) style. Indeed, Mincu's designs are diverse and vary from building to building, escaping established artistic categories and, more importantly, contradicting scholars who saw his creations as working towards defining a single unified style. He did not use the architectural heritage of Romania in a programmatic way, in the manner of architects that followed him such as Grigore Cerchez (1850–1927) or Toma Socolescu (1883–1960). Rather, he used it in an instrumental fashion, as a set of resources for his own thinking and creative practice.

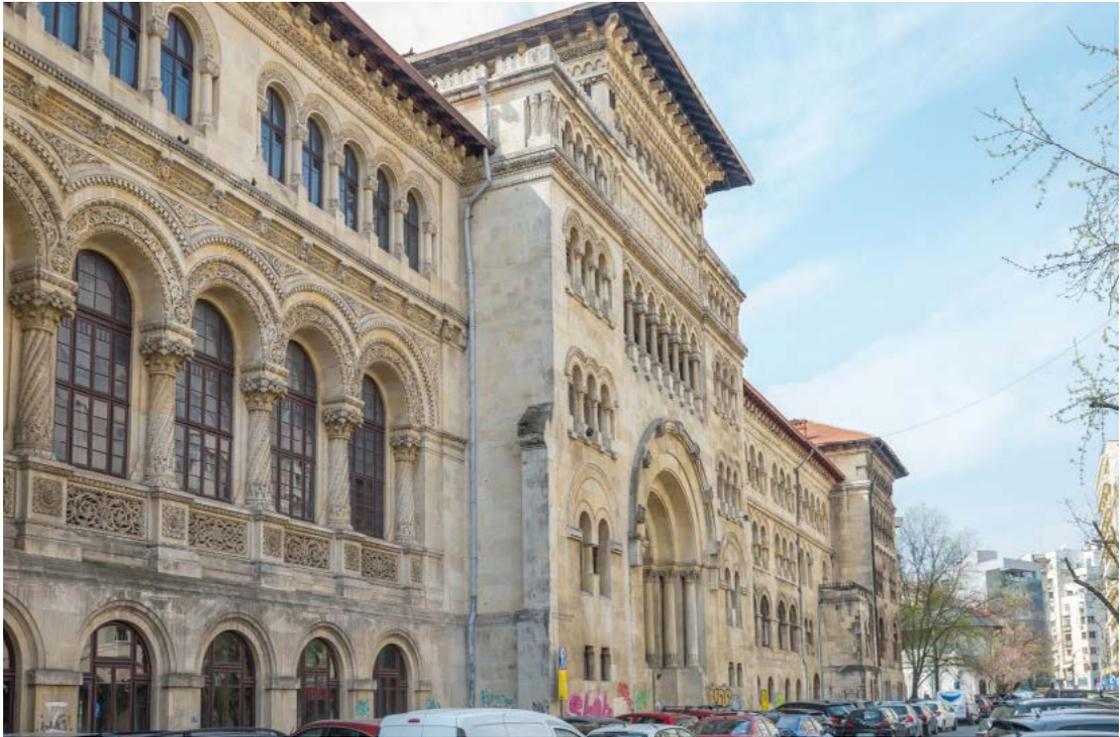
The historical heritage and artistic developments of modern Romania remain little-known internationally, but the idea of the 'National Style' has received considerable attention, with one book and several articles dedicated to this phenomenon, all which see Mincu as the

10) Irina Băldescu, 'Restaurarea Din Pragul Secolului XX. Materie și Imagine între Conervare și Retușuri. Restaurarea de La Stavropoleos și Contextul Cultural,' *Stavropoleos Monastery Archive*, 2002, Bucharest, unpublished manuscript, 1–20, 17.



Figure 1: Ion Mincu, Stavropoleos monastery after the restoration, 1904–1907 / courtyard of the monastery, Bucharest, 1912.

Source: Fusion-of-horizons, Flickr; Luca Volpi (Goldmund100).



**Figure 2: Grigore Cerchez, Institute of Architecture, Bucharest, 1921–1927.**

Source: Ștefan Trăsnea, <http://merg.in/bucuresti>

founder of the style.<sup>11</sup> Buildings described as being in the ‘National Style’ or ‘Neo-Romanian’ tend to be those from the first three decades of the twentieth century that interpret or copy a variety of architectural forms specific to monuments from the time of the reign of the Wallachian Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu (1688–1714), a heritage that will be described in more detail later in the article. The style was mostly used for private villas, although the most well-known examples are prominent public buildings, such as the Institute of Architecture in Bucharest (1921–1927) by Grigore Cerchez (**Figure 2**). The central elements of the building include a raised watchtower (known in Romanian as a ‘foișor’), a multitude of rich stone-sculpted decorations, open balconies with sculpted capitals, rows of trefoiled or round arches, an extended roof that covers a richly-ornamented cornice, massive stone or brick structures.

Mincu was, admittedly, the first to reinterpret the Brâncovenesc heritage in modern Romania, but the key moments in the development of what has been called, since Communist times, the ‘Neo-Romanian’ style are, curiously, not related to its supposed founder at all. Scholars agree

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11) Carmen Popescu, *Le style national roumain: construire une nation à travers l'architecture, 1881–1945*, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2004; Shona Kallestrup, ‘Romanian “National Style” and the 1906 Bucharest Jubilee Exhibition,’ *Journal of Design History*, 15: 3, 2002, 147–62; Hajdu, ‘The Search.’ Carmen Popescu, ‘Digging Out the Past to Build Up the Future: Romanian Architecture in the Balkan Context 1859–1906,’ in Gábor Klaniczay and Patrick J. Geary, eds, *Manufacturing Middle Ages: Entangled History of Medievalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Leiden: Brill, 2013, 189–216. The only English-language survey of the arts in Romania in the modern period is Shona Kallestrup, *Art and Design in Romania 1866–1927: Local and International Aspects of the Search for National Expression*, Boulder, Colorado: Eastern European Monographs / Columbia University Press, 2006. On the Romanian architectural heritage, the most complete survey of Byzantine architecture in the English language only analyses Romanian monuments on four pages: Cyril Mango, *Byzantine Architecture*, History of World Architecture, London: Faber/Electa, 1986, 168–72.

that the style became widespread after the Romanian General Exhibition of 1906 and peaked in popularity after 1918 with the formation of Greater Romania and the acquisition of Transylvania, Bukovina and Bessarabia.<sup>12</sup> But Mincu's career was almost over by 1906. He was not involved in the 1906 exhibition, commonly regarded as the first public moment of celebration of 'Romanian' architecture, and he was also not involved in the earlier struggles to form a school of architecture and a journal for the promotion of Romanian architects. *Analele arhitecturii* (Architectural Annals), the first architectural journal in Romania, that was founded in 1890, did not feature any of the architectural designs by Mincu and only once furniture design.<sup>13</sup>

Why, then, is he considered the creator of the National style and the country's 'national architect'? As the following shows, his image was essentially constructed after his death, by his friends and former students, for reasons also related to the politics of art. While the importance of Romanian architectural heritage for Mincu's practice is beyond doubt, his coming to fame as national architect relates to the promotion of the idea of Romanian architecture in the nationalist-fuelled climate of the early twentieth-century.

There are a few suggestions that Mincu was recognised as creator of a new style before the First World War. In 1912 an issue of the literary journal *Flacăra* ('The Flame') was dedicated to the promotion of Romanian art and several articles praised Mincu as the creator of the Romanian architectural style.<sup>14</sup> But the main reason for this sudden outburst of tributes was that the architect was gravely ill and his entourage was keen to praise his career while he was still alive. Mincu indeed died just a few months afterwards, provoking a renewed series of articles and obituaries celebrating his personality and architectural designs.<sup>15</sup> Mincu himself referred to a connection with Romanian heritage in the same year. His much – quoted brief remark, which he delivered on the occasion of his final birthday, and even carved on the cross on his grave, was taken as testament for the creation of a national style: 'I looked and searched alone for small churches, old houses and other similar things that for most seemed insignificant. But I believed something special could be created out of them. They were like the healthy roots of a fallen tree.'<sup>16</sup> On that occasion, Mincu was surely responding to those who conferred upon him the label of creator of the Romanian style but at the same time preached the importance of creative interpretations of the architecture of the past.

A number of Mincu's friends and former students, such as Ion Socolescu (1856–1924) and Ion D. Traianescu (1875–1964), continued to write about the architect after his death and, especially after 1918, turned him into a symbol and justification of their own practice as architects promoting the national style, responding to the broader nationalist turn that

12) Kallestrup, 'Romanian "National Style"'; Popescu, *Le style national*; Ștefanuț (Hajdu), *Arhitectură*.

13) Ion Socolescu, 'Mobilierul Catedralei de la Constanța,' *Analele arhitecturii*, 5–6, 1892.

14) Ermil Pangrați, 'Cea mai de seamă operă a lui Ion Mincu,' *Flacăra*, 51, 6 October, 1912, 403; Alexandru Țigara-Samurcaș, 'Mincu și Arhitectura Națională,' *Flacăra*, 51, 6 October 1912, 404–05; Ion Socolescu, 'Pentru opera lui Mincu,' *Flacăra*, 51, 6 October, 1912, 405.

15) Ermil Pangrați, 'Discurs la înmormântarea arhitectului Ion Mincu,' *Dimineața*, 29 December 1912; 'Artistul I. Mincu,' *Românul*, 222, 1912, no author, no date, <http://arhivaionmincu.blogspot.com/2017/01/sarbatorirea-lui-mincu-1912.html> (accessed 10 September 2020).

16) *Românul*, 2:222, 9 October 1912, no author, no page numbering. <http://arhivaionmincu.blogspot.com/2017/01/sarbatorirea-lui-mincu-1912.html> (accessed 10 September 2020). See also Simion Vasilescu, *Arhitectul Ioan Mincu*, written probably around 1942 (the author mentions that he wrote it some 30 years after the death of Mincu), Bucharest, Library of the Romanian Academy, Manuscripts Collections, A932, fol. 71; Nicolae Petrașcu, *Ioan Mincu*, Bucharest: Cultura Națională, 1928, 98–99.

characterised interwar Romania. They gradually developed an almost cult-like veneration for the architect, evident in the founding of the ‘Ion Mincu Circle’ and the performance of solemn religious ceremony at his grave on the tenth anniversary of his death.<sup>17</sup>

The discovery of Mincu in the second decade of the 20th century was connected to a broader turn towards native values and national culture in Romanian society. Around 1900 several cultural journals, such as *Literatură și artă română* (Romanian Literature and Art), *Ileana* and *Semănătorul* (The Sower), championed Romania’s folk and religious heritage against what they saw as undesirable foreign influences.<sup>18</sup> The historian Nicolae Iorga (1871–1940) was perhaps the most influential promoter of nationalistic Romanian values in the first half of the twentieth century. He rose to fame with a radical discourse against European, especially French, culture that according to Iorga, ‘humiliates and subjugates us, tears our people apart.’<sup>19</sup> The distance from the generation that ruled Romania in its first decades of independence in the later nineteenth century could not have been greater. Just one example suffices to illustrate this. In a famous cultural manifesto of 1868, Titu Maiorescu (1840–1917), founder of the *Junimea* (Youth) society, contrasted Western nations, or, in his words, ‘the light from the fountains of knowledge from France and Germany,’ with the native culture of Romania, what he called *barbarie orientală* (Oriental barbarity).<sup>20</sup>

In contrast, Iorga argued for the value of the entire history of Romanian culture. As part of this broader project and likely influenced by Mincu’s growing circle of followers, he sought to rehabilitate ‘Brâncovenesc’ art and architecture as significant for national history and identity, contributing to the popularity of the national style.<sup>21</sup> This growing national movement was only helped by political developments. In 1913 Romania acquired the region of Southern Dobruja following the Second Balkan War and, in 1918, it gained Transylvania from Hungary following the defeat of the Habsburg Empire in the First World War. These were new territories that the government sought to visually mark as ‘Romanian’ by erecting of public monuments, Orthodox churches and buildings in the new ‘Romanian’ style.

In this context, Mincu’s friends and followers had only to gain from praising Mincu as the creator of the ‘Romanian’ style. Indeed, they tied their career to the idea of this style and used Mincu as their spiritual father and starting point for a new architectural movement. Followers such as I. D. Traianescu (1875–1964) or Toma Socolescu became known as architects of the Romanian style, held important institutional positions and gained lucrative state commissions.<sup>22</sup> Mincu was thus treated both as the creator and as a key moment in a nascent

17) Ermil Pangrati, ‘O vorbă bună’ *Artele Frumoase*, 3–4, 1922, 2–3; I.D. Traianescu, ‘Un pelerinagiu,’ *Artele Frumoase*, 3–4, 1922, 35–38.

18) Shona Kallestrup, *Art and Design in Romania*, 87–88.

19) Nicolae Iorga, ‘O Rugaminte,’ *Epoca*, March 12, 1906. See also Nicolae Iorga, *Lupta Pentru Limba Românească*, Bucharest: Minerva 1906.

20) Titu Maiorescu, ‘În contra direcției de astăzi în cultura română,’ *Convorbiri Literare*, 1868. URL: [https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/in\\_contra\\_directiei\\_de\\_astazi\\_in\\_cultura\\_romana](https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/in_contra_directiei_de_astazi_in_cultura_romana) (accessed 22.06.2019)

21) Nicolae Iorga, *Cultura română supt Fanarioți. Conferință ținută la Ateneul român în ziua de 8 Februar 1898*, Bucuresci, 1898. See as well Cosmin Minea, ‘From Byzantine to Brâncovenesc. The Periodization of Romanian Art in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century,’ in Shona Kallestrup et al., eds, *Periodization in the Art Historiographies of Central and Eastern Europe*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022, 48–67.

22) See the website *Restauratori romani: arhitectul Ion D. Traianescu*, <https://trajanescu.patrimoni.ro> and <https://arhivadearhitectura.ro/arhitecti/victor-stefanescu/>

narrative for the history of modern Romanian architecture, for which many were searching for a point of origin.

The writer Nicolae Petraşcu (1859–1944) provides another good example of how professional involvement in promoting a Romanian national narrative also influenced the way Mincu was presented. Petraşcu was an active figure in conservative circles, member of the Junimea Society and founder of the previously mentioned nationalist literary journal *Literatură și artă română*. He also specialised in writing romanticised monographs of what are today canonical figures in the history of Romanian literature and arts: the poet Mihai Eminescu (1850–1889), writer Vasile Alecsandri (1821–1890) or the painter Nicolae Grigorescu (1838–1907), among others.<sup>23</sup> He therefore dedicated his life to define and promote national artistic icons for Romania and Mincu was part of this career objective.

Petraşcu wrote the first monograph on Mincu's career that serves as a good example of the sentimental and romanticised view of his life and work, one which came to be dominant in the interwar period. Published in 1928, the book portrayed the architect as a lonely, misunderstood genius, guided only by his patriotism and interest in old Romanian art. From the very beginning the author referred to Mincu as a semi-divine character, with 'a Christ-like face, something of the features and solemnity of Michelangelo, a steady walk and delicate hands and feet.'<sup>24</sup> In spite of its obvious subjectivism, the book became the main source for Mincu's career ever since. Further reinforcing the aura of genius around him, the Society of Romanian Architects celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its foundation in 1941 with a special issue of their journal *Arhitectura* dedicated to Mincu and the Romanian architectural style.<sup>25</sup> It was followed by two further unpublished monographs glorifying the architect in 1942 and 1958.<sup>26</sup>

Mincu remained a topical theme in Communist Romania, too. Mihail Caffé, a professor at the now evocatively renamed Ion Mincu Institute of Architecture (formerly the School of Architecture) wrote two books about Mincu in which he saw his works as separated from the later development of the national style, that was perceived by the broader scholarly community as a symbol of the oppressive capitalist system. To rescue Mincu from this anti-bourgeois approach, which was obviously in line also with the official discourse of the Communist regime, Caffé argued that, unlike those who followed him, Mincu's creations did not promote the courtly or ecclesiastical 'bourgeois' architecture of the past, but rather the 'folk culture' and 'progressist traditions of national art.'<sup>27</sup> Caffé saw as directly inspired from folk architecture elements such as the open porch or *verandă*, the wooden posts, the steep-pitched roof or polychrome decorations, elements that are in fact also typical for boyar mansions, ecclesiastic architecture or princely palaces.

23) Nicolae Petraşcu, *Mihail Eminescu. Studiu Critic*, Bucharest: I.V. Socecu, 1892; Nicolae Petraşcu *Vasile Alecsandri. Studiu Critic*, Bucharest: I.V. Socecu, 1894; Nicolae Petraşcu, *Pictorul Grigorescu*, Bucharest: Joseph Göbl, 1895; Nicolae Petraşcu, *Ioan Georgescu*, Bucharest: 'Bucovina' I. E. Torouţiu, 1931.

24) Petraşcu, *Ioan Mincu*, 1.

25) *Arhitectura*, 1, January-March, 1941.

26) Simon Vasilescu, *Arhitectul Ion Mincu*, manuscript, no date, Library of the Romanian Academy, Bucharest. Toma Socolescu, *Ion Mincu. Monografie, 1852 - 1912*, 1958, Manuscript, no reference number, Library of the Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urbanism. The last manuscript was recently published as Toma Socolescu, *Ion Mincu Arhitect 1851-1912*, Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2019.

27) Mihail Caffé, *Arhitectul Ion Mincu* Bucharest: Editura Științifică, 1960, 120. A new, shorter version, was published ten years afterwards as Caffé, *Ion Mincu*, Bucharest: Meridiane, 1970.

Even if Caffé offered just some general visual similarities as proofs for the folk sources of inspiration of Mincu, the idea of a close relation between Mincu and peasant architecture became very popular, especially in the midst of a turn towards national and folk culture in Communist Romania. Caffé's first book was published in 1960, two years after the Soviet army left Romania, an event which marked the start of the process of desovietisation, during which the country gradually implemented more independent internal and external policies and turned to an inward search for national specificity.<sup>28</sup> Nationalism in Communist Romania reached its peak in the 1980s during the final decade of the Ceaușescu regime, when, as in the case of Mincu, even writers known for their far-right, conservative views, were turned into promoters of Socialism. For example, the national poet Mihai Eminescu (1850–89) was detached from nineteenth-century romantic literature and turned by one author into a radical Socialist and even a revisionist of Marxism;<sup>29</sup> Iorga, too, was rehabilitated and turned into an anti-fascist, due to his conflict with the 1930s fascist organisation the Iron Guard.<sup>30</sup>

Around the time of Caffé's writings, the term 'neoromânesc' (Neoromanian) emerged to describe the early 20th century architectural movement inspired by the historical heritage of the country. However, in the Communist period it was used in a negative way, to mark the distance between a real, authentic 'Romanian architecture' and a forced, bourgeois appropriation of the style. For example, Caffé refers to Mincu's creations as 'arhitectură românească' and opposed them to the subsequent 'Neoromanian movement' that was the 'expression of a narrow nationalism marked by a 'monumental architecture' and 'false, arrogant and decadent decorations.'<sup>31</sup> The term 'Neoromanian' only began to be used with positive connotations after 1990, but since the ground-breaking publication of 2004 by Carmen Popescu on Romanian architecture, it has been replaced by what the author termed the 'Romanian National Style' in architecture.<sup>32</sup> The new term stresses the ideological motivation behind the style and also points to the modern creation of the idea of 'Romanian' architecture.

Popescu wrote a comprehensive account of the origins and evolution of the style, of which Mincu was seen as 'the father.'<sup>33</sup> Her study was as much a work of cultural analysis of national ideology in Romania as it was one of architectural history, that included very diverse architectural expressions, such as the movement of Mincu's followers, modernism, neo-Byzantine churches and cathedrals, fascist-inspired state buildings. The book understands Mincu as part of a broader political and cultural context but also represents a return to the interwar image of the architect, as creator and father of the Neo-Romanian or National Romanian style. The next significant moment in the historiography of Romanian art was the publication, in 2007, of Shona Kallestrup's *Art and Design in Romania, 1866–1927*, an extensive account of the development of all visual arts in modern Romania, in which Mincu was once

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28) Lucian Boia, *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească*, Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011, 126.

29) Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania*, University of California Press, 1991, 157–61.

30) Boia, *Istorie și mit*, 131–32.

31) Mihail Caffé, *Arhitectul Ion Mincu*, 219.

32) Popescu, *Le style national*.

33) Carmen Popescu analysed Mincu in the subchapter, 'Le père: Ion Mincu' in Popescu, *Le style national*, 51–63 and also on 97–99 and 109–112.

more recognised as planting ‘the seeds of this new style.’<sup>34</sup> This view of Mincu as the founder of a new ‘national’ style and the strong connection between his works and Romanian national ideology was further reinforced by more recent studies in Romania that advanced the same basic idea.<sup>35</sup>

This brief account of the scholarship on Mincu reveals that his image as national architect, together with the concept of a Romanian style, were defined mostly after the architect’s death, by his students and friends. The reasons for his popularity were partly related to the innovative way he made use of historic Romanian monuments as a reservoir of ideas, and partly, too, they were related to the political context and career trajectory of those who wrote about him in the decades following his death. All were promoters of a new Romanian architectural style in a political climate in which assertion of national identity was an important ideological imperative. As the next section will show, however, Mincu’s thinking went beyond the connection to national ideology alone, and touched upon issues of artistic creativity and use of sources, the function of a building and its relation to the geographical place.

## The architect as rebel: personal creativity above rules and established styles

Mincu managed to effect considerable changes to the way architecture was practiced in Romania and to how architects viewed themselves, in a time when this work was traditionally carried out by masons or at best by architects who copied Western European buildings and motifs. Mincu in contrast, preached and practiced the study of diverse sources and nonconformity to the established traditions. He distinguished himself in his student days by being the first ever Romanian architect to complete the full cycle of studies and obtain a diploma at the Parisian *École des Beaux Arts* (1877–83). This was an impressive feat, considering the fierce competition for admission,<sup>36</sup> the limited number of graduates; the status of *architecte diplômé* being achieved by another Romanian, Ion Berindey (1871–1928), fourteen years later. After his studies, Mincu undertook a state-funded one-year study trip across Southern Europe, where he began to develop a unique set of interests in architecture outside the classical canon even if such study trips were normally intended precisely for the study of the classical heritage (as with the eighteenth century grand tours). However, Mincu was mostly interested in examples of architecture outside of this classical canon. He praised, for example, the Byzantine architecture of Italy, in Venice or Ravenna, the Romanesque and Arab architecture of Spain, in Toledo, Sevilla, Zaragoza or Madrid, and the Ottoman and Byzantine architecture of Istanbul.<sup>37</sup>

He admired these monuments because they departed from the established canon of classical art and architecture or because, as Mincu confessed, they ‘broke the most common-sense

34) Kallestrup, *Art and Design in Romania*, 74.

35) Ștefanuț (Hajdu), *Arhitectură*; Nemțeanu, *Vila*; Olariu, Petrescu and Pop, *Repertoriul*. See as well the commemorations marking one hundred years since Mincu’s death, organised by some well-established architects in Romania. Andreea Pop, ‘Morminte ale arhitecților în Cimitirul Bellu,’ *Muzeul Municipiului București*, 20, 364–93, 371.

36) Alexander Griffin, *The Rise of Academic Architectural Education: The Origins and Enduring Influence of the Académie d’Architecture*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019, 155, 159.

37) Petrașcu, *Ioan Mincu*, 4–5, 66–81.

rules.’<sup>38</sup> He later wrote that for him ‘true architects are the ones that are capable of innovation, of conceiving new forms, of bringing to life particular and original works.’<sup>39</sup> and a former student remembered that ‘He did not believe in canons, rules or schemes. Style was for him not something given but a specific architecture at a particular moment.’<sup>40</sup> He also argued in clear terms for an architecture that breaks with established norms, when he defended his proposal to restore Stavropoleos church in Bucharest:

I admire the altered Byzantine style of Stavropoleos church in the same way that I admire the beautiful Roman monuments emancipated from the influence of the *pure Greek* style, or the Greek monuments that moved away from the *pure Egyptian* style. [...] Precisely because it is not made in ‘pure Byzantine style the church represents for us a very precious ‘archetype.’ From the pure Byzantine style, it evolved into the heterogenous style, as named by Mr. Samurcaş, and that I call ‘Romanian style.’<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the best illustration of Mincu’s desire to innovate and depart from established styles is the sheer diversity of his works. They prove his desire to experiment with various forms and sources of inspiration. Many of them can be categorised as ‘eclectic,’ because of the wide range of sources used. The Alexandru Robescu House in Bucharest (1889) was a commission for a building in ‘Florentine style.’<sup>42</sup> Mincu responded by creating an asymmetrical structure, with two wings almost entirely detached from each other; with prominent neoclassical window-frames surmounted by amphoras; and topped by a wooden, rusticated roof with projecting cornice in the manner of Italianate mansions (**Figure 3**). The Administrative Palace in Galaţi (1905) could have been an opportunity for Mincu to put into practice an earlier unrealised project for the Bucharest City Hall but he ended up referencing Venetian-style trilobed arcades, neo-classical window frames, a French Beaux-Arts cornice and roof, a richly-ornate central fronton, all in a symmetrical construction (**Figure 4**). The Commerce Bank of Craiova (designed in 1906, finalized in 1916 by Constantin Iotzu) has a rich and even more eclectic exterior with sculpted small towers, stone balconies, rows of round arcades, richly-sculpted cornice, large first-floor windows and the same type of raised Beaux-Arts roof. The central element of Petraşcu House (1906–1907) is the protruding first-floor balcony, a reference perhaps to the Ottoman mansions in the Balkan Peninsula (**Figure 5**). The exterior decorations are toned-down but noticeable are the same type of Venetian-inspired window-frames on the first floor. A particular set of designs are those that can broadly be seen as neo-Byzantine such as the Funerary Chapels at Bellu Cemetery, the Church in Valea Călugăreasă or the restoration of Stavropoleos Monastery, to which the article will come back in its final part (**Figure 6**).

38) Petraşcu, *Ioan Mincu*, 4–5, 72–73.

39) Ion Mincu, ‘Concursul Camerei de Comerţ din Bucureşti. Palatul Bursei,’ *Literatură şi artă română: Idei, simţire, formă*, 11, 1907, 304–07, 306.

40) Spiridon Cegăneanu, ‘Ion Mincu (1851–1912),’ *Arhitectura*, 1, 1941, 28–35, 29.

41) Ion Mincu, ‘Cronică Artistică – Stavropoleos (Răspuns d-Lui Tzigara-Samurcaş),’ *Epoca*, 83, March 25, 1904) 282–84; See also Ada Hajdu, ‘Arhitectul Ion Mincu în context local şi regional’ in Ada Hajdu, Irina Cărbăuş Cosmin Minea and Vlad Bedros, eds, *Ion Mincu. O Perspectivă Regionalistă şi o Abordare a Inserţiei Locale*. Premiul Ion Mincu, Manuscript, Bucharest, 2014, 7–48, 24, 67.

42) Oana Marinache, ‘Case bucureşteneg uitate din creaţia arh. Ion Mincu,’ *Adevarul*, December 28, 2012, [http://adevarul.ro/news/bucuresti/case-bucurestene-uitatedin-creatia-arh-ion-mincu-1\\_50de00a4596d72009147d7db/index.html](http://adevarul.ro/news/bucuresti/case-bucurestene-uitatedin-creatia-arh-ion-mincu-1_50de00a4596d72009147d7db/index.html) (accessed 12 July 2020).



**Figure 3: Ion Mincu, Robescu House, Bucharest, 1889.**

Source: Oana Marinache, 'Case bucureștene uitate din creația arh. Ion Mincu' *Adevarul*, 28 December 2012.

What is remarkable about all the examples above is the absence of clear references to Romanian heritage, for which Mincu is mostly known. Those writing about Mincu have focused instead on three buildings that will be described in more details later on: Lahovari House (1886), the Central School for Girls (1888–1890) and Romanian Restaurant (1888), all in Bucharest (**Figures 7, 8, 9**). Together with the Robescu House in Galați (1896), these are the only buildings displaying elements that were later seen as creating the 'Romanian style' namely trefoil arches, coloured ceramic decorations on the façade, an open, front-facing balcony, wooden columns and a steep-pitched roof.

The teachings of Mincu, as professor at the School of Architecture in Bucharest, further reveal his interest in original creations and explain to a good extent his later fame. Many of his students later remembered how they were allowed a great degree of freedom and given time to develop their own personality.<sup>43</sup> Mincu was mostly interested in new, innovative designs and urged them not to copy architectural motifs.<sup>44</sup> He departed from the classical canon by focusing on monuments that were the easiest to study live, in other words, the heritage of former Wallachia. Mincu also went beyond canonical architectural monuments in his classes, in order to study furniture, folk woodcarvings, roadside crosses, religious objects.<sup>45</sup> He indeed

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43) Trajanescu, 'Fresca,' 110.

44) Ion D. Trajanescu, 'Cuvântare,' *Arhitectura*, 4, 1925, 19–21, 20.

45) Cegăneanu, 'Ion Mincu,' 30. Trajanescu, 'Fresca înaintașilor noștri,' *Arhitectura*, 1, 1941, 107–112, 110.



**Figure 4: Ion Mincu, Administrative Palace, Galați, 1905.**

Source: Baditastefan.



**Figure 5: Ion Mincu, Petrașcu House, Bucharest, 1906–1907.**

Source: Joe Mabel.



**Figure 6: Ion Mincu, Georgiev Chapel, Bellu Cemetery, Bucharest, 1902–1907.**

Source: Alexandra Hegedus.



Figure 7: Ion Mincu, Lahovari House, Bucharest, 1886. Front façade / detail with the front porch.

Source: Ionuț Tudose.



**Figure 8: Ion Mincu, Central School for Girls, Bucharest, 1890. Inner courtyard.**

Source: Claudiu Nh / Alexandru Dolea.

proved to be particularly innovative in the domain of decoration, for as many of his buildings consist of rather unremarkable general shapes but with intricate and innovative exterior decorations.

Further evidence of his eclectic approach and of his interest in the creative mixing of sources and styles is his own house in Bucharest, a long-time work of interior design (1890–1914). There, Mincu combined Romanian and Turkish carpets with wooden Orthodox icons, stained glass, mirrors with Arab decorations, Ottoman sofas, medieval wooden panelling and neoclassical marble columns.<sup>46</sup> His house is also indicative of the cultural orientation of the Romanian bourgeoisie at the time, perfectly attuned to the latest European professional trends but also influenced by a more traditional Oriental culture in their daily and domestic life.

## **The Importance of building types and their function**

Mincu might appear so far to have been more an artist and interior designer than an architect, given his interest in shapes, colours and creative ornament rather than in building and their structures. This was nevertheless only partly the case, for he was also alert to the significance of the function of a building and was aware that many institutions or businesses required

46) Petraşcu, *Ioan Mincu*, 22–23. Raluca Zaharia, ‘Amenajări interioare istorice 03– Neoromânescul,’ *Medium*, 16 July 2016, <https://medium.com/@raluca.zaharia/amenaj%C4%83ri-interioare-istorice-03-neorom%C3%A2nescul-c5e6266451a> (accessed 3 June 2020).



**Figure 9: Ion Mincu, Romanian Restaurant, 1888. Elevation for the Romanian Pavilion at the 1889 Paris World Fair / front façade / side façade with the first-floor balcony.**

Source: National Arts Museum of Romania, Bucharest.

a certain *type* of architecture. On one occasion he openly criticised the proposed designs for a new Palace of the Stock Exchange in Bucharest because they did not respect the established type of building:

Whoever knows what a stock exchange is, will recall the countless examples from the past: the old Roman basilicas, the medieval stock exchange edifices, the Loggia dei Lanzi of Florence, the Loggia dei Mercanti of Genoa, the London Stock Exchange, or modern ones such as the stock exchange of Bordeaux. (...) these examples are enough to guide the skilful expert in the design and practical distribution of interior rooms as well as in the aesthetic characterization of the exterior which should allow the reading of its purpose and destination without any written instructions.<sup>47</sup>

47) Ion Mincu, 'Concursul Camerei de Comerț din București. Palatul Bursei,' *Literatură și artă română: Idei, simțire, formă*, 11, 1907, 304–07, 306–07.

When he was himself in charge of designing plans for institutions, he began by studying established European models and typologies. Before designing the Bank of Commerce in Craiova in 1906, for example, Mincu went to Berlin to study different types of banks; his project for the Bucharest City Hall was inspired by the Hôtel de Ville in Paris and Pavia Cathedral, according to a former student.<sup>48</sup>

As such, Mincu's thinking was aligned with European architectural norms of the time. The most influential architectural surveys and manuals of the nineteenth century, in particular those used in France, where Mincu had been trained, classified buildings according to their *types* and not the *style* as the term is understood today.<sup>49</sup> One of the most popular treatises of architecture surveying building types was that of Mincu's former professor, Julien Guadet.<sup>50</sup> The very notion of architectural style was to a great extent connected to the type and function of a building (e.g. style of a city hall or of a bank) besides its association to a geographical territory, as Mincu's followers later preached.

Mincu himself explained the design of one of his most admired works, the Central School for Girls in Bucharest, with reference to the specific function of the building. His design, that included polychrome ceramic decorations on the façade, special characters derived from old Slavonic, and an inner courtyard with an exterior corridor with arches that resembled a monastery cloister, has been praised as one of the most accomplished examples of the new Romanian style (**Figure 8**). But when Mincu presented his plans to the Ministry of Religion and Public Instruction, he mostly referred to the purpose of the building:

This gallery, necessary for establishing a covered way of communication between different parts of the school, was more decorated. I gave it an appearance as joyful and pleasant as possible in order to render less dull the life of schoolgirls, otherwise doomed to spend the happiest years of their life as if in a prison. What inspired me to arrange the courtyard in such a way was the model of our old convents. They are almost always in regions with a harsher climate than the capital, and their inhabitants are mostly elderly and as sensitive to the climate as the schoolgirls.<sup>51</sup>

Mincu's account also touches upon the subject of gender and how girls were considered more sensitive, in this case to the climate, but also subject to the stricter educational system that girls experienced. They were confined to study, sleep and eat in the same building, with little outside social interaction, hence for the architecture to be 'as joyful and pleasant as possible.'

The design of Mincu was initially rejected by the Council for Public Works who disliked precisely Mincu's innovations, that would soon be highly praised. The Council considered that 'the portico of the inner courtyard is conceived in a style neither in harmony with the main

48) Mincu, 'Concursul Camerei,' 306. Vasilescu, *Arhitectul Ion Mincu*, Library of the Romanian Academy, Bucharest, fol. 93.

49) Such as Léonce Reynaud, *Traité d'architecture*, Paris: 1860–63 and P. Planat, *Encyclopédie de l'Architecture et de la Construction*, six volumes, Paris: 1888–95. See details in Nikolaus Pevsner, *History of Building Types*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, 6.

50) Julien Guadet, *Elements et théorie de l'architecture*, Paris: Librairie de la construction modern, 1902–04.

51) National Historical Archives, Bucharest, Fond Ministry of Religion and Public Instruction, Dossier 840/1891, File 58–63, published in Oana Marinache, 'Școala Centrală de Fete, etapa 1892,' *Arhiva Ion Mincu*, January 18, 2017, <http://arhivaionmincu.blogspot.com/2017/01/scoala-centrala-de-fete-etapa-1892.html> (accessed 11 September 2020).

façade neither with the secondary ones. (...) a better portico could be one seen at similar modern constructuins.<sup>52</sup> This official reaction testifies to the very conservative nature of public institutions in Romania, a context in which Mincu's designs are all the more remarkable. The Council rejected his proposed designs just because the addition of some unusual decorations, even if the building respected the general structure of a school (square-shape, inner-courtyard, classrooms communicating via corridors, etc.) and the decorations conformed to the rules of symmetry dictated by the principles of classical architecture.

## An architecture connected to place: regionalism and identity

What brings Mincu closest to the idea of a Romanian style in architecture is his belief that the design of a building should correspond to the traditions, climate and geography of a place. In the journal of his friend Petrașcu, dedicated to the promotion of Romanian art, he levelled strong criticism against the indiscriminate copying of other architectural styles:

In newly built towns such as Sinaia, where we could have continued a tradition and designed an original architecture to express our habits, climate and needs, we compiled a bizarre gathering of badly made copies from the architecture of all countries and all climates that looks downright ridiculous: so called *maison de plaisance* from around Paris, with Flemish houses, miniature Gothic castle and villas from Southern Italy.<sup>53</sup>

His thinking was undoubtedly informed by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, whom Mincu had read ever since he was a student in Paris, and who had defended the idea of an architecture in harmony to the specificity of a place in very similar terms:

In architecture we dream of shapes that seem attractive, before we know if they are suitable for construction or for a need. (...) The respectable bourgeois follow their fantasies and desire houses in the shape of an Italian Villa or an English cottage without knowing if they will be comfortable in them. This is why you see Italian villas in the North of France and Swiss chalets at Nice.<sup>54</sup>

Even earlier, the British architect Augustus Pugin expressed, in a very similar wording, his disapproval of designs simply copied from other cultures or countries: 'We have Swiss cottages in a flat country; Italian villas in the coldest situations; a Turkish Kremlin for a royal residence.'<sup>55</sup> While it has often been seen in relation to architecture in central and eastern

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52) 'Jurnal 340/15/27 sept. 1887 al Consiliului Lucrărilor Publice' in Nicolae Lascu, *Fragment din comunicarea prezentată la simpozionul 'Ion Mincu 150 ani,' Romanian Architects Order*, no date, [https://www.oar-bucuresti.ro/buletin\\_oar/ordinul04](https://www.oar-bucuresti.ro/buletin_oar/ordinul04) (accessed 10 September 2020).

53) Ion Mincu, 'Școalele noastre de arte frumoase,' *Literatură și artă română: Idei, simțire, formă*, 1, 1896, 218–24, 219–20.

54) Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, *Comment on construit une maison* (Histoire d'une maison), Paris: J. Hetzel, 1887, 188–90. See also Eugène Viollet-le-Duc 'Dixieme Entretien: Sur L'architecture au Dix-Neuvieme Siècle. Sur la method' in Ayla Lepine, Matt Lodder and Rosalind Mckeever, eds, *Entretiens sur l'architecture*, 2 vols, Paris: A. Morel et C, 1863, 449–91.

55) A.W.N. Pugin, *Contrasts*, Salisbury, 1836, 301 in Alyson Wharton, 'Armenian Architects and 'Other' Revivalism,' in Ayla Lepine et al., eds, *Revival, Memories, Identities, Utopias*, London: Courtauld Books Online, 2015, 152.

Europe, the project of creating collective artistic and cultural identities characterised the whole continent and at regional as well as national level. Peter Clericuzio, for example, has noted how, at the turn of the century, architects in Nancy affirmed their city identity through their works as an alternative to the Paris-dominated art world and similar processes happened also in places such as Glasgow, Darmstadt or Barcelona.<sup>56</sup>

In Romania, the archeologist Alexandru Odobescu was among the first to mention the possibility of creating a Romanian style in architecture in 1872.<sup>57</sup> More than a decade later, the General Iacob Lahovary (1846–1907), war hero of the Romanian Independence War of 1877–78, decided to express his patriotic feelings through the architecture of his house. For this he turned to Mincu, not coincidentally one of the few ethnic Romanian architects active in Bucharest, whom he asked in 1884 for an expansion of his house ‘in a Romanian style.’<sup>58</sup> Indicative that the idea of this style was an absolute novelty in the country, Mincu was put in difficulty by the request and admitted that he was forced to experiment:

When General Lahovari asked me to design his house in Romanian style, I had only a vague idea about the sources since I just came into the country. I drew inspiration from just a few monasteries that I knew, some mountain houses and some photographs (...). I used polychromy, which is in the nature of the Romanian people and I used ceramic tiles because of their durability and beauty. I believed my creation gave a Romanian atmosphere.<sup>59</sup>

His design was experimental but also bold, seen by Kallestrup as combining vernacular architecture with the refined decorations of Romanian Orthodox churches.<sup>60</sup> Mincu added to the simple construction a large, raised open balcony, with wooden pillars, trefoil arches, a decorative ceramic freeze and a wooden roof with a projecting cornice (**Figure 7**). A few years later he used the same elements for the Central School for Girls, as I described above, and also for maybe his most celebrated work, the ‘Bufetul de la Șosea’ restaurant in Bucharest or what should have initially been a Romanian restaurant for the Paris World Fair of 1889.

Universal exhibitions were events that fuelled the search for national architectural styles in all independent states because the organisers sent out instructions to the participating countries asking that their pavilions and other constructions to be in the national style.<sup>61</sup> When Mincu received from the Government the commission for a Romanian restaurant at the Fair, he probably felt more at ease. In this case he had full freedom to exercise his creativity, experiment and mix a variety of motifs that could be understood as ‘Romanian.’

56) Peter Clericuzio, ‘Art Nouveau and Bank Architecture in Nancy: Negotiating the Re-Emergence of a French Regional Identity,’ *Architectural History*, 63, 2020, 219–256, 221. Klaus-Jürgen Sembach, *Art Nouveau*, Cologne: Taschen, 2002, 34–35.

57) Alexandru Odobescu, ‘Artele din România, în periodul preistoric. Conferință rostită la Ateneul român, la 17 decembrie 1872,’ în *Opere complete*, vol III, București, 1908, 168, 172–73.

58) Spiridon Cegăneanu, ‘Ion Mincu (1851–1912),’ *Arhitectura*, 1, 1941, 31.

59) Cegăneanu, ‘Ion Mincu,’ 31.

60) Kallestrup, *Art and Design in Romania*, 75.

61) Cosmin Minea, ‘Roma Musicians, Folk Art and Traditional Food from Romania at the Paris World Fairs of 1889 and 1900,’ in Joep Leerssen and Eric Storm, eds, *World Fairs and the Global Moulding of National Identities. International Exhibitions as Cultural Platforms 1851–1958*, Leiden: Brill, 2021, 148.

These included the previously employed trefoil arches, coloured ceramics and Slavonic fonts, the open balcony, wooden pillars, wooden roof and the prominent rounded window of the basement (**Figure 9**). A defining feature of this building, which in the end was built not for the World Fair (the organisers preferring a simplified alternative), but as a permanent restaurant in Bucharest, is its asymmetrical design marked by the exterior covered staircase. On this occasion, Mincu clearly referenced the architecture of historical monuments in Romania. The exterior staircase leading to the first-floor terrace (or *foișor* in Romanian) is similar to that of Hurezi Monastery (1693), the rows of trefoil arches recalls Mogoșoaia Palace (1702) while the ceramic freeze is similar to the exterior freeze of Stavropoleos Monastery (1724) (**Figures 10 and 1**). All these monuments were associated with the rule of the Wallachian Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu (r. 1688–1714) and with the architectural heritage of the period, which began to be seen by some Romanian architects as representative of the national heritage.<sup>62</sup>

The so-called Brâncovenesc heritage was appreciated because it was an original style that departed from the classical ideals of rationality and order with its rich decoration, strong colours, new or unconventional materials. As Sterner noted in the case of other architects of the period, Mincu attempted to revive an architectural identity based on a rational, artistic interest and not on a purely emotional engagement with the past.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, a passion for richly-ornated styles can be noticed at the time in the case of the revival of the French Rococo;<sup>64</sup> of Baroque architecture as significant for an Austrian and later Czech identity;<sup>65</sup> or in the revival of the so-called Ottoman Renaissance.<sup>66</sup>

Shortly after the commission for a Romanian restaurant, Mincu received his first interior design order, for the interior furnishing of Constanța Cathedral. The religious edifice harboured a special national significance. It was the first Orthodox building in Northern Dobruja, a Muslim-majority region that had been acquired following the 1877–78 War of Independence. It therefore embodied the presence of Romanian Christian culture on the new lands.<sup>67</sup> The commission was therefore an occasion for designs directly referring to the Orthodox heritage of the country and, for Mincu personally, an opportunity to study this heritage and practice woodcarving. His designs, objects for religious service, wooden chairs and the wooden iconostasis, were inspired by older Orthodox motifs and reinforced the very special status of the monument that was at the heart of wider identity politics in the Romanian state.

Indeed, Mincu had been interested throughout his career in interior, object and furniture design, like other more famous art-nouveau architects. At the time or shortly after the

62) More details in Minea, 'From Byzantine to Brâncovenesc.'

63) Sterner, *Art Nouveau*, 23–24.

64) Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France*, California: University of California Press, 1992, 142–59; Paul Greenhalgh, 'Alternative Histories,' in Greenhalgh, ed., *Art Nouveau*, 41.

65) Matthew Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History: Empire and the Politics of Scholarship, 1847–1918*, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013, 96–108 especially 106–107.

66) Ahmet Ersoy, *Architecture and the Late Ottoman Historical Imaginary: Reconfiguring the Architectural Past in a Modernizing Empire*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, 151–52. See also Ahmet Ersoy, 'Architecture and the Search for Ottoman Origins in the Tanzimat Period,' *Muqarnas*, 24, Brill, 2007, 117–40.

67) See details of the integration process of Northern Dobrogea in Constantin Iordachi, 'Citizenship, Nation-and State-Building: The Integration of Northern Dobrogea into Romania, 1878–1913,' *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian & East European Studies*, 1607, 2002, 1–86.



**Figure 10: Dionisie Tower, inside courtyard of Hurezi Monastery, 1693.**

Source: *Centrul de promovare și informare turistică Horezu.*

commission for Constanța Cathedral, he became professor of wood carving at the School of Arts and Crafts in Bucharest, his first official position in Romania.<sup>68</sup> He was soon commissioned to draw the interior plans and furniture design for the Palace of Justice in Bucharest (1890–1895) and later the same type of neo-Orthodox furniture for Stavropoleos Monastery (1904–1908). Mincu involved his students in these commissions, insisting on the practice of detailed study of small objects of Orthodox heritage, such as roadside crosses, church furniture, or folk woodcarvings. Subsequently, his students even claimed that it was through the practice of studying and copying smaller decorative objects, that they learned Romania’s architectural heritage.<sup>69</sup>

Even if Mincu promoted ideas of Romanian heritage in some of his designs, he was never an outspoken supporter of any new ‘national’ style. This was not the case in, for example, neighbouring Hungary, where Ödön Lechner, considered, like Mincu, the father of the national architectural style of his home country, declared that he had always ‘pursued that ideal of creating a Hungarian national style’ and even saw nationalism as necessary for the country to

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68) Petrașcu, 24.

69) Cegăneanu, ‘Ion Mincu,’ 30. Trajanescu, ‘Fresca înaintașilor noștri,’ *Arhitectura*, 1, 1941, 107–112, 110.

compete on international markets.<sup>70</sup> One can look further afield and see parallels with Antoni Gaudí, too. He was a known critic of contemporary society, which he saw as morally corrupt, and found refuge in ideas of Catalan identity.<sup>71</sup> Like Lechner, Gaudí added overt national symbols, but in a manner never attempted by Mincu. In the Casa Batlló (1904–1906) and Park Güell (1900–1914) in Barcelona, for example, Gaudí made reference to the legend of Saint Jordi (Saint Georges), the patron-saint of Catalonia; at the Casa Vicens (1877–1883), he included the Margallo Palm, native Catalan plant, as a decorative motif, and added the stripes of the Catalan flag at Palau Güell (1886–1888).

Of course, both Lechner and Gaudí showed an exuberant creativity, interpreting a wide variety of motifs in a highly idiosyncratic way. Like Mincu, they combined motifs and sources of inspiration widely shared in Europe at the time, even if they presented them as having specific national meanings, such as polychrome ceramic, glass tiles, wooden panels, decorative frames or pillars. Their designs are also on a much grander scale, testament, above all else, for the size of the Hungarian and Catalan economies as opposed to that of Romania, and size also paved the way for the use of a richer architectural vocabulary. Yet despite some superficial parallels, Mincu was much less driven by nationalist beliefs and values than these better known figures.

## Restoring the past for the present: the Stavropoleos Monastery

Mincu's only restoration project, at Stavropoleos Monastery (1724) in Bucharest, throws a particularly clear light on the significance he gave to the architecture of the past and therefore merits a more detailed analysis. He was asked in 1897 to restore this small church that he already knew well, since he had been inspired by it for other designs, emulating its richly ornamented porch, trefoil arches and coloured frieze. After he studied it more carefully and discovered its bad state of repair, lack of foundations, substandard materials and the 'abhorrent surroundings' of massive and tall modern buildings in its immediate neighbourhood, he advanced the radical proposition that the church be dismantled and reconstructed at another location in Bucharest.<sup>72</sup> The proposal was already surprising enough, especially for an architect who had begun to be associated with concern for national heritage and the preservation of historic monuments. But Mincu doubled down on his advice and also proposed that the relocated church be placed in the centre of a new museum of Romanian architectural heritage, that would be 'in the same architectural style' as the monastery.<sup>73</sup>

In fact, Mincu's plan shows him to be much more concerned with *reshaping* the architectural heritage, promoting it according to the modern principles of a museum, than with an

70) David Crowley, 'Budapest: International Metropolis and National Capital,' in Greenhalgh, ed., *Art Nouveau*, 347; Ákos Moravanszky, *Competing Visions: Aesthetic Invention and Social Imagination in Central European Architecture, 1867–1918*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998, 18.

71) Ignasi de Solà-Morales, 'Barcelona: Spirituality and Modernity,' in Greenhalgh ed., *Art Nouveau*, 334–345, especially 336–341.

72) Report of January 5, 1900 in the Archive of the Ministry of Religion reproduced in Nedioglu, 'Stavropoleos,' *Buletinul Comisiunii Monumentelor Istorice*, 17, October–December, 1924, 147–168, especially 163.

73) *Ibid.*, 163.

unintrusive restoration. He was not interested in keeping the religious function of the building or in preserving the monument intact but, rather, in transforming it into a centre for the study and promotion of modern Romanian art. When he was asked again to restore the monument, four years later, he restated that ‘A simple preservation would not prevent the disappearance with time of many artistic elements. A perfect copy of the church should be built in another place, in order for the next generations of artists to have preserved a detailed example of the last phase of development reached by our domestic art.’<sup>74</sup> Indeed, his restoration proposal illustrates what Greenhalgh noted about much architecture of the time: ‘History was not to be copied. It was there to be manipulated, reinterpreted and, where other models provided better solutions, rejected.’<sup>75</sup>

Mincu’s restoration proposal also went against the thinking of many of his personal friends and supporters and it is therefore remarkable for its audacity. The Commission for Historical Monuments accused him of having no ‘respect for the past,’ while other Romanian architects also criticised earlier the way reconstruction of monuments did not respect national history.<sup>76</sup> But far from wishing to be provocative, Mincu was interested in the development of modern Romanian art based on innovation, creativity and reinterpretation of the past for present purposes rather than conserving the past for its own purpose.

Mincu eventually realised part of his plans. He did not demolish or move Stavropoleos church, but he restored it between 1904 and 1908, and afterwards built what was supposed to be a new museum for religious art next to it, the building described in the first part of this article.<sup>77</sup> The restoration works included replacement and repainting of the exterior decoration, the twenty four capitals, the middle frieze; the rebuilding of a new tower, after the one in the votive painting; the replacement of the roof and the restoration of the inside furnishing.<sup>78</sup> As one of his students remarked, Mincu did not look for historical accuracy but to highlight its aesthetic and artistic quality.<sup>79</sup> Mincu also noted earlier in his career that restorers should focus on visual aspects, copy and replace parts and they do not need ‘vast knowledge of the architecture of that particular historical era.’<sup>80</sup> The heritage of the past was for him not an object of study, conservation or adulation but played a precise role, as aid and instrument for modern day architects.

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74) Ibid., 164. See also Ion Mincu, ‘Cronică Artistică – Stavropoleos (Răspuns d-Lui Tzigara-Samurcaș),’ *Epoca*, 83, March 25, 1904, 282–84.

75) Paul Greenhalgh, ‘Alternative Histories,’ 44.

76) More details in Cosmin Minea, ‘The Monastery of Curtea de Argeș and Romanian Architectural Heritage in the Late 19th Century,’ *Studies in History and Theory of Architecture*, 4, 2016, 181–201; Carmen Popescu, ‘André Lecomte Du Nouÿ (1844–1914) et La Restauration Des Monuments Historiques En Roumanie,’ *Bulletin de La Société de L’Histoire de L’Art Français Année 1998, 1999*, 287–308.

77) The idea of the museum was never fully accomplished. See more details in Cosmin Minea, ‘Medieval Art, National Architectural Heritage and Museums in Late 19th Century Romania,’ *Anastasis*, 8:1, 2021: 109–42.

78) Mincu’s restoration report (16 June 1904) reproduced in Nedioglu, ‘Stavropoleos,’ 165.

79) Toma T. Socolescu, *Fresca arhitecților care au lucrat în România în epoca modernă: 1800–1925*, Bucharest: Caligraf Design, 2004, 108. Petrașcu also compared the restoration with the very radical late nineteenth-century one at Sant’Ambrogio in Milano. Petrașcu, *Ioan Mincu*, 90.

80) Mincu, ‘Școalele Noastre,’ 219.

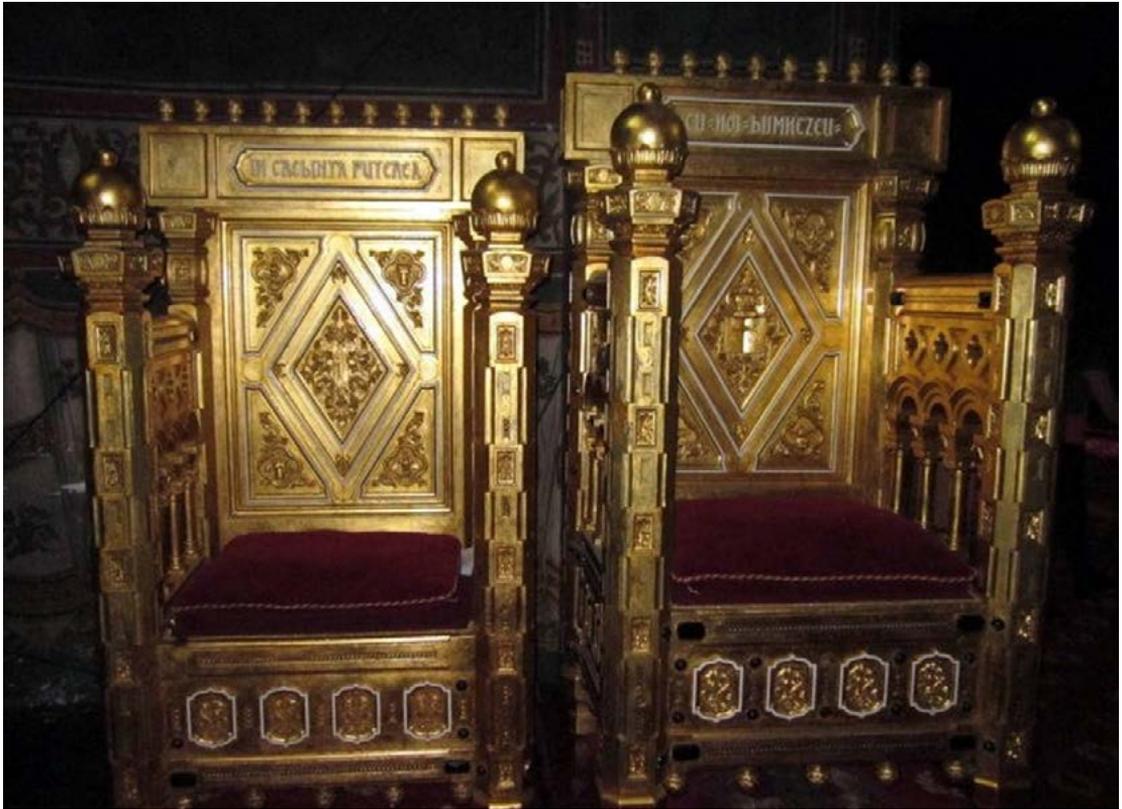


Figure 11: Ion Mincu and his students, Royal Chairs, Constanța Cathedral, 1891–1892.

Source: povestidecalatorie.ro (accessed 10 March 2022).

## Conclusions

Throughout his career, Mincu was interested in the architectural heritage of cultures outside the classical, European canon, such as Byzantine, Arab, Moresque, Ottoman, Romanian. The latter undoubtedly played a special role since the architect was active in Romania almost all his life and he believed architecture should also respond to the building traditions and geography of the place it is constructed. However, Mincu's interest in Romanian architectural heritage does not indicate that he was a 'creator' of the National Style, as the architect has been seen in most of the scholarly literature. As much as he instigated the development of a new architecture inspired by the national heritage, the very same ideas were dictated by patrons, such as general Lahovary and the World Fairs organisers, or have been retrospectively applied to his career by architects or scholars who needed a founding father as justification for their own work.

Mincu was indeed not interested in promoting an architecture out of patriotism or for ideological reasons but one that was at the same time original, appropriate for present needs and in connected to the present and past heritage of a place. This is why perhaps he did not settle with a preferred style and until the end of his career designed new forms, experimenting with a variety of sources. With the restoration of Stavropoleos Monastery and the building of

a new museum he demonstrated a way to reconcile modern architecture with tradition and with ideas about national art. He did not serve, unfortunately, as an example in this sense for his followers who used Mincu to promote an emphatic patriotism and an architecture aligned with the nationalist policies of the time.

Mincu's stance against the supremacy of the classical canon and his ideas about individual artistic creativity were outstanding in the Romanian context, a new nation-state, where all important new buildings were mostly copies of ones elsewhere in Europe and, in particular, France, from where the most important architects came. However, his attempts to change architectural practices are relevant beyond the context of Romania. In particular, his attempts to reconcile ideas of modernity with those about the past and traditions might prove instructive today, in times of resurgent nationalism and the contestation of globalisation. Paul Ricoeur's 1960s predicament, that inspired the theory of critical regionalism in architecture, was up to a point also the one of Ion Mincu: 'How to become modern and return to the sources? How to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization?'<sup>81</sup> Mincu answered with several designs that were highly original, in dialogue with broader European trends and at the same time responding to the needs to shape the cultural identity of the new Romanian nation.

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81) Paul Ricoeur, 'Universal Civilization and National Cultures' (1961), in Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965, 276–277. See also the idea expanded in Kenneth Frampton, 'Towards a Critical Regionalism. Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance,' *Critical Regionalism. Revisited*, OASE, 103, 2019, 11–22.

