A Romanian-French Season

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Abstract: Starting from the deep artistic relations between Romania and France, this project aims to highlight the current methods of visual communication through fashion and the multiple connections established by costume design with other artistic fields. Today, communication through images, and especially through human image, represents a particular pursuit, fashion being an expanded, highly promoted domain with huge addressability to the young generation. The celebration of the two great events, namely the formation of the Romanian national unitary state and “The Armistice Day” that marks the end of the World War I, inspired the Fashion Design Department to come up with a series of creative themes. The tasks proposed by the teachers led the students to various explorations: from the runway collections to the performance costumes, from clothes gathered in art installations to garments as works of art. Therefore, students were trained to create commercially valuable pieces, but also wearable art for a series of unconventional experiments integrated into contemporary art. This complex project concluded with five different collections, unitary through their artistic message and value: Malmaison, Looking up to Dubuffet, Hasard, Blue Consensual and La Petite Robe Noire. The exploration of these subjects involved gathering extensive documentation about the 20th century artistic avant-garde, as well as a personal point of view on the different characteristics of the European cultural interference. The study contributes fundamentally to the development of each student's creativity.

Keywords: *Romanian-French Season; fashion; garments; contemporary art; artistic message.*

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The Romanian-French Season, one of the great programs we are all involved in this year, is a good opportunity to turn our attention to the great creators born and trained in Romania, who, in a 20th century marked by tragic turbulence, found a favorable refuge on the coasts of the Seine. Of course, we refer to the geniuses of sculpture and music like Brâncuși and Enescu, to the avant-garde playwright Eugene Ionesco or Emil Cioran, the famous philosopher, as well as to many other Romanian artists. But it is, equally, a moment of cultural exchanges between Romanian and French artists, a moment of absolute creativity highlighted by themes of common interest.

Through a kind of *objective hazard*, referring to an André Breton's concept, we have to answer, in the coming years, to a set of unprecedented challenges: The Romanian Presidency at the Council of the European Union, with a program of cultural events associated; Europalia 2019, where Romania is invited, and the marking of the Great Union centenary, a moment that coincides with the onset of Romania France Season.

1. Malmaison - A new aesthetic

Therefore, we will participate to a creative effort, both challenging and promising of ebullience period, a moment in which we acutely need a spirit of finesse and, equally, a one of geometry, as distinguished and defined by another great thinker of France, Blaise Pascal.

If ten years ago the analysis was made from the perspective of a fashion practitioner, who was studying the postmodern period, today the experience is presented from a different angle, that of the coordinator of the Romanian cultural diplomacy.

To explain this new approach, we start by mentioning Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979), who uses (in *The Postmodern Condition*) the concept of *great narration* (sometimes *metanarration*). The great narratives would characterize the cultures of the epochs before postmodernity. Somehow analogous, also a field like cultural diplomacy operates with certain paradigms (a kind of infra-narrative). The classic one could be formulated as follows: the state resorts to national cultural values to attract symbolic capital (prestige), in order to achieve its foreign policy objectives, and the focus is on high culture, established canonical values, and traditional art (the roots, identity elements).

In a *modernization* of this paradigm, avant-garde creations arise (predominantly those already validated historically in the art market), as well

as emerging productions, and culture is no longer perceived as an instrument in a state approach, but appears as a value in itself (Mackrell, 2005).

Postmodernism takes over the (modernist) interdependence between aesthetics and function (also the case of cultural diplomacy) and relativizes distinctions such the one between high cultures and mass culture.

There is also a widening of the area of cultural diplomacy in which fields of art, like creative industries and fashion design, acquire new values (indicative of this trend is the acquisition and interpretation of folk elements in contemporary outfits).

At the *metanarrative* level, the state, as a diplomacy agent, realizes its position as actor within a wider, multidimensional cultural dynamic, rather than a role of arbitrator, or instance of validation.

As noted by Gegzy and Karaminas (2012) in *Fashion and Art*, postmodernism denies and abolishes patterns, censorship, stereotyping, hierarchies, replacing them with concepts such as freedom, originality, blending styles, tolerance. The Romanian-French season, having as a slogan the removal of clichés, invites us to a postmodern approach to the classical, metanarrative themes.

A recent visit to Malmaison Castle, an edifice located in Rueil-Malmaison, town that has been twinned with Timisoara for several years. The former residence of Emperor Napoleon and his wife Joséphine inspired a theme to achieve by students. The practical works resulting from this study may represent any time, through interpretation in a modern point of view of architectural elements and specific garments of the place, both a new interesting approach, from the perspective of a new generation of artists, but also the subject of an event of cultural diplomacy.

The main directions of this project were the juxtaposition of new, contemporary materials with elements and textures characteristic to the garments of the time, portrayed by famous paintings exhibited at Malmaison, the taking over of some pictures in digital prints and the integration of them into a new context, with emphasis on interculturality and discontinuity.

A different perspective, a postmodern interpretation, deliberately emphasize the idea of fragmentation, splitting, multiplicity, which proved (at the end of this theme) to be novel, spectacular, experimental with messages of seemingly incoherent, but certainly bearers of aesthetic, symbolic, creative valences. The relativity of some distinctions, considered to have been established forever, the penetration of some elements of the luxury of the Napoleonic era in prêt-à-porter fashion, trigger, beyond the stylistic eclecticism proposed by this theme, the *essential act of thinking* from the perspective of integration into everyday life of *disparate information* (as

surprised by Lonergan), the essential aspect of an authentic postmodern approach.

Fig. 1. *Malmaison*, coord. Liliana Țuroiu, Photographer Alexandru Mărginean

2. Looking up to Dubuffet

Recently, in the context of the celebration of the Francophonie Year in Bucharest, emerged the opportunity to explore Jean Dubuffet's performance. This remarkable event of the French artist demonstrates with the utmost expressiveness the easiness of combining sculpture and painting with theater and dance.

Our Fashion Department of National University of Arts Bucharest has already made a tradition of integrating the fashion creation into the general phenomenon of visual arts, giving special importance to interdisciplinary events. In these circumstances, we are guiding the students to pass through fundamental stages that aim to a fresh, innovative fashion design.

Within the course *Concept and Expression*, we have proposed an exploratory theme, oriented towards personal development by which the student is challenged to create his own means of expression.

A new approach to his work by Dubuffet himself, called into question the context in which the artist, to the same extent, painter and sculptor, introduced and theorized the concept of *Art Brut* (*Raw Art*). Dubuffet, one of the most prolific artists after the Second World War, created since 1942 more than 10,000 works in 40 years. Although he started his career late, his Art Brut has become a reference point for the art history.

The expressiveness of his painting shocked the Western artistic world, shadowing the classic ideal of beauty and its graceful ways of expression, proving that art can approach, from a brave perspective, delicate

subjects, using unconventional materials. His orientation towards anticultural subjects, as he himself said, towards disoriented, lost, pathological characters, or to the naïve art of children, offered an unexpected image translated into compelling works full of force and expressivity.

In the last period of his career, 1962-1974, the artist reconsidered his aesthetics, reinventing himself in a series of surprising works in which he confines himself to a restrictive chromaticity made up of white, black, red, and blue. In this cycle, the artist has developed a unique visual vocabulary, being interested in creating a series of paintings and sculptures that seem to be multiplied endlessly. *L'Hourloupe* is the name that Dubuffet gave to this series of paintings, sculptures, object-characters, assemblages.

The large dimensions works are created using new materials, such as painted polystyrene. This was a beginning not only for small sculptures, but also for monumental works with architectural-environmental valences, around and in which one could walk. From this point, the artist takes the step towards the performing *Coucou Bazar*, or *Bal de L'Hourloupe*. The display of the works in time and space becomes the complete expression of this series, that benefited from three memorable performances at the Solomon Guggenheim Museum - New York, followed by the one at Georges Pompidou - Paris and the last, a real show, in an absolutely new version, in Turin - 1978.

On the whole, *Coucou Bazar* proposes to the spectator a living picture, containing a surprise. In the background, it can be seen a large, restless composition lacked by the rigor of the perspective, made of resembling characters-statues. Initially, these seems to be just oversized sculptures, but in a certain unexpected moment, performers hidden inside them start dancing. This movement releases a rhythmicity of the performance sequences, adding a plus of compositional vibration and dynamism in relation to the dense background net-drawing. The bodies, although unseen, play an essential role, being a “medium of formal and aesthetic inquiry” (O'Reilly, 2009). The sudden movement of the *carriers sculptures* also involves directly the audience in Dubuffet's artistic act, generating a transfer of energy in all visual show.

These developing images are a selection of the works created with students, this year, costumes that highlight the close connection between art, fashion and performing arts in general.

The experience of working with students, over the years, has proved that the dialogue between visual arts, human body and costumes leads to a creative explosion, having as result a wide diversity of opinions, solutions and directions, from wearable clothing to costume-objects. From an

aesthetic point of view, we considered that Dubuffet's lesson directly offers to us a key, an original artistic language, in which white areas well defined by black resolute lines could be the starting point for the structure of a costume-object.

Now, after this experience, we can say that Dubuffet's modern, artistic language has become an 'up-to-date' topic. This is proven by the openness with which the students participating in this experience, pushed by their skilled curiosity, understood the complexity of the three-dimensional pattern construction, using specific techniques similar to those of the artist, assemblage and collage.

We explored, in a sculptural way, the modeling and the functionality of the textile materials, where the stratification of the surfaces gave birth to new shapes and surprising volumes highlighted in vigorous black touches.

Contemporary fashion has gained the freedom to express itself in countless ways (Welters & Lillethun, 2011), therefore the fashion needs to interact continuously with artist's ideas and visions, evolving in currents called trends or further developing in the artistic environments from where fashion designers extract their most surprising solutions. Both the stylistic and tactile experiment, as the costume asks, can be managed and transposed in different ways: from the show-costume to the costume-object, where the artistic valences prevail over functionality, to the fashion item that become a subject for the development of a whole successful commercial collection.

Fig. 2. *Looking up to Dubuffet*, coord. Alina Griga, Photographer Alexandru Mărginean

3. Hasard

This theme refers to the Dadaist artistic movement, initiated both in France and Germany of the beginning of the 20th century. The theme was

proposed also due to the artist of Romanian origin Tristan Tzara, being one of the theorists and precursors of Dadaism. The hazard principle represented the basis of compounding the first Dada poetry, where the lyrics resulted from a choice of randomly extracted words from various mixed bills. Making a piece of clothing based on this principle allowed students to experiment the design of a garment fortuitous made by combining different fabrics and accessories which they had available, without having to look for the raw material suitable for a certain idea.

The lack of harmony, the brutal contrasts, the new expressiveness of the Ugly, along with the noble, crude or vulgar, eccentric or natural images, are creating the current aesthetics. The intuition of the perceiving spectator does no longer contain any preferences or *parti-pris* (preconceived opinions). *The aim is to emphasize the importance of all the harshness, the dissonances and the pure primordial simplicity for the art*, the theorist of the futuristic movement Filippo Tommaso Marinetti was anticipating ever since the beginning of the 20th century.

As we have already seen, the garment has always represented a non-verbal language and has helped us defining ourselves as individuals and fitting into distinct social groups and categories. Today, the dynamics is reversed (we no longer want to fit into clear social categories) and used precisely to develop a new, narrative clothing discourse, a new one, characterized this time by incoherence, meant to draw attention at any cost and differentiate us (Vincent, 2009). For instance, stylistically combining a pair of jogging pants with a classic jacket and a tie gives birth to an ambiguity of the message transmitted by the wearer regarding their social status, a status that can't be longer perceived easily. The *chronological fog*, resulting from the blending of references from different epochs, is today a synonym of novelty and creativity.

Another direction that creativity approaches regarding clothing incoherence is the disorienting of the viewer by means of an overloading with messages. The multiplication of stylistic contradictions is today the new fashion code, synonym to modernity (Breward & Evans, 2005).

We can sum up this new cultural production era in two processes: recovery and over-positioning. With the emergence of photomontage, art changed forever, and the various creative disciplines become the scene of obsessive passions. The hazard element brought by copy and paste in the creation equation partially explains the attraction that pastiche stirs up inside us, forcing us to accept incoherence and anomalies. This incoherence and these anomalies result precisely from the confrontation of the two *originals*.

Dressing up today is equivalent with substituting, reinventing and restituting the sense, the journalist Adam Wray believes.

As it's highlighted in *Fashion and Imagination* by Arts & Calefato (2009), through the chameleonic changes it passes today, fashion becomes virtually limitless. Correlations of different elements go beyond the agreed and accepted limit of bizarre. In their collections, fashion designers juxtapose today *the sublime poverty, the platitudinous grace, the delicate rudeness, the hollow fullness, and ultimately the nonsense with sense.*

All contradictory twinning types are now possible. Today's both fashion and art are characterized by this nonsense to which a sense is given. Any artwork comes to be almost mathematically mentally created, with the sole purpose of obtaining the supreme nowadays' value - *Novelty*. The principle of novelty can rather be illustrated by a formula such as *what does not fit with what*. The exaggeration, the disproportion and the disagreement represent the new lexicon of current fashion. The illogical takes the place of logics.

The moment of a configuration becomes essential to the artistic form developed based on these principles; thus, incoherent creation necessarily requires a similarly incoherent framework, but necessarily not belonging to the same family, otherwise the environment and creation would become coherent.

Umberto Eco considers, for instance, that if the whole configuration is enlarged or diminished in all its components, then the proportion itself would remain the same and, as in the case of Swift characters, it would not create ugliness. There must necessarily be a rupture between exaggeration and the context in which this occurs.

But when a part of the whole stands out in a way that cancels the normal proportions, then, as this part continues to maintain itself in relation to the others, a whole's dislocation and an imbalance are born, being ugly, Umberto Eco says.

Fig. 3. *Hasard*, coord. Venera Arapu, Photographer Alexandru Mărginean

Disproportion always forces us to understand the proportional form. As Craig suggest in *The Face of Fashion* (1993), without rupture, the novelty does not exist. Often the incoherence (the combination of ugly, bizarre, and lack of unity) may happily replace beauty (made up of harmony and unity). Thus, nowadays, the ugly was able to take the place of *the beautiful*.

4. Blue Consensual

The French writer Michel Pastoureau (2006), medieval historian and specialist in the symbolism of colors, is the one who has clarified several aspects concerning the history of blue.

Pastoureau's references (2006) are related to the plastic arts and literary creation, but also to the evolution of the costume over the centuries. In his books, the author explains how and why people have changed their perception towards the colors.

Back in the Antiquity and also in the early Medieval Age, there was a total lack of interest for the blue color. Only since the XIIth century a consistent valorization of the blue tones began, its use following a gradual evolution, therefore becoming a fashionable color in the daily outfits, but especially in the artistic creation. The ascension of preferences for blue tones has made its presence felt, first in religious icons painting, being the color of the Virgin Mary, thus contributing to the rapid penetration of this color in other creative areas as well.

Thanks to the glass painters, the shades of blue of Saint-Denis, the Wedgwood blue, the blue of Chartres and the Blue Mans, have become famous, and new and new tones have diversified.

Thus, blue, the color of the barbarians, as counted in Antiquity, became, for centuries, emblematic for the Christian Occident. In medieval religious art, blue was the color of the Holy Spirit and eternity, present in the cathedrals, appreciated by the people of the Church. This explains why places of worship were painted in blue, so that by the late sixteenth century Moldavian monasteries, and especially Voroneț, gave the famous blue name.

In the Middle Ages, also the artists fell in love with this color, helping to widespread use of blue in the visual arts. The kings of France also adopted the celestial color (*royal blue*), followed closely by the nobles of the Court, the blue became a symbol of aristocratic clothing fashion. Such an application had to be honored, so there were also significant advancements in the field of technique of obtaining shades that were more and more surprising. Blue was first generated mainly in pastel, indigo, lapis and later scientists found tones and nuances increasingly different.

Also interesting are the explanations regarding the French vocabulary, the blue becoming a magical, soothing, dream-inducing word. Symbol of loyalty, joy, peace and well-being, blue has helped to increase the sales of many products, places or artistic creations.

Philosophical and cosmogonic meanings of this color point to spirituality, freedom, eternity, idealism, favoring contemplation.

Once covered the deep meanings of the colors and its importance in our lives, because it is the color of the planet on which we live, the air we breathe, sky and water that we nurture and starting from the beautiful nature of Balchik which inspired so many Romanian painters at the beginning of the 20th century, a collection of garments was conceived.

The beginning of the twentieth century was a prosperous period for the Romanian artists assembled in the Artistic Youth group. They were attracted, among other things, by the beauty of nature, which they immortalized in their works. Among many themes that they approached, it was the sea that captivated everyone, from the French Cote d'Azur to the Balchik's Silver Coast, because most of them lived both in Romanian and French land.

Blue Consensual collection has meant to be an artistic intervention/interpretation, with a fresh and contemporary air, but evoking also the unique ambience of the Romanian culture of the beginning of the 20th century, with strong influences from the West.

In Romania, by the Black Sea, a real school of painting was born. Hypnotized by the beauty of the sea in Balchik, the painters, who were joined by writers, architects and politicians, launched a real artistic phenomenon. All artists, trained in this Black Sea School, had their own

vision of the subjects offered by this place and did not enroll in a particular style.

The marine landscape of the Romanian painters concentrated mainly on shores, harbors or beaches, feeling in their interpretations the spirit of the sea, which predisposes to calmness, meditation and relaxation. There is a great variety, so we see different representations of Balchik, often in the vision of the same artist, as is the case of Nicolae Dărăscu. The painter was fascinated also by the Mediterranean Sea. After spending years on the yacht, studying the change of color and reflection of the light, he discovered a blue that became characteristic of his work.

Following all these interpretations through works that fit in impressionism, expressionism, symbolism and even in Victor Brauner's surrealism, have raised interest in the design of clothing creations that have borrowed from Romanians painters colors of the *Côte d'Azur* and Silver Coast.

Looking to the paintings, we have materialized the effects of constantly changing light from day to day, and even from one moment to the next. The expression of water, in fact its chromatic illusion, was best represented in shades of blue, with its multiple faces in its relation with the light.

The abstract image of the sea was replicated by overlapping tulle fixed with zigzag seams, thus obtaining sensitive and diaphanous structures. Tulle, a transparent material, chosen in different shades of blue and green, was cut in different wave forms, overlapped and fixed sheet after sheet. Each layer above received something from the color underneath, so gradients were formed from one color to another.

Fig. 4. *Blue Consensual*, Alina Gurguță, Photographer Cristiana Apostol

We followed the connection between color and almost diluted form in the general ambience, captured in an underwater photographic session. The conditions of such shooting are difficult to achieve, from the photographer and the model, who must have dive skills, to specialized equipment, which is also waterproof.

Special selected moments and fragments give the feeling of unknown space. At first, it is not clear if the characters are projected in the sky or sunk in the water, but everything is bathed in light and color.

Due to the different wavelengths, the warm-tone shapes appear closer, and those in cold tones, further. This warm-cold and near-far effect has been experienced in a variety of ways by Paul Cézanne, before the Impressionists did. Its famous landscape, Mont Sainte-Victoire, is such an example, in which the mountain in neutral beige and grays is highlighted in blue.

The movement of the garment in water captured by cameras, amplifying its volatility and fragility, reminds Edgar Degas dancers, Odilon Redon's feminine portraits or Sabin Bălașa's cosmic romance.

5. La Petite Robe Noire - Out of the Pattern

At the beginning of the twentieth century, properly considered the century of speed, many aspects of society, including fashion, experienced a considerable transformation. The body, related to the apparel, has gone through the most important change in its history, as in fashion, like in art, the canons followed by academics were overthrown (Howell, 1978).

In this regard, the French designer Coco Chanel had a considerable contribution, her unique style providing her creations with a special force even now, one hundred years after its inception. In close connection with important avant-garde artists who promoted the new, Chanel developed her style in tandem with the visual arts. Thus, geometric forms and simple lines lead to cubism and abstract art, as suggests the French philosopher and sociologist Giles Lipovetsky, (as cited by Davis, 2006). Inspired by men's fashion and sporty outfits, Chanel had the courage and the inspiration to apply various elements to women's fashion, obviously contributing to their release from society's constraints.

In the first decades of 20th century, movement was the main target to which everyone and everything were led. After the end of the First World War, there were major changes also in the social status of women. They have been increasingly active, beginning to take part in public social activities, driving cars, piloting planes, going to dance parties, playing sports. All these

activities, which physically involves the body, have created the need for special pattern to achieve proper clothing, whose characteristics must necessarily include the mobility (Hamilton Hill & Bucknell, 1967).

Specific features as simplicity, weightlessness, lightness, were found in the creations of the most *chic* fashion designer of all the times, Coco Chanel. The clothes she designed were simple and functional, adaptable and comfortable, with simple cuts, skirts long to knees and comfortable materials, therefore offering freedom of movement (Mulvey & Richards, 2007).

Chanel thinks the best design ideas could be found in the street. With a special feeling regarding the trends, she was inspired by the wardrobe of the maids and widows to create the piece of clothing which would become the most iconic of all time – *La Petite Robe Noire*. The dress has been from the very beginning a receptacle of contradictory feelings and desires, worshiped by some, reneged on by others. Among the latter, Paul Poiret, Chanel's opposite from aesthetic point of view, condemned the concept and hence tagged it as “deluxe poverty”, as Troy noticed in *Couture Culture* (2003).

Against these impediments, Chanel put her mark on this piece through the unique way in which she has designed, presented and promoted it. By simplifying and standardizing it, Chanel made the fashion easy to reproduce, therefore much more accessible, even for those who were not rich (Selling, 2000). Built almost architecturally, long-sleeved and with no decorations (considered unnecessary), its accessibility has given strength and confidence to all women since its releasing.

Its aspect almost like a uniform led us to a connection that may seem inappropriate, namely that with feminine clothing from the communist era when, not because they were considered to be all equal, but to annihilate those with personality, the people were pushed to wear more simple and sober apparel. As time went on, the garments became very similar and monotonous, but few people dared to stand out with a different shape, an unusual pattern or bright colors.

Both the versatility and the ease with which it could be approached, made *la petite robe noire* to be an indispensable piece in the wardrobe of the women who lived in the communist Romania. Shortcomings and lacks forced, but stimulated them at the same time, to be inventive in composing their own image of aesthetic value, with very few available resources.

Starting from Chanel's dress, students were challenged to develop *la petite robe noire* and to go beyond the limits imposed by designer in terms of pattern, shape and color. They followed the geometric look of original cut,

changing however the concept by expanding shape and volume, but also by adding color. Inspiration related to this was provided by another French artist, who activated in the field of visual arts, Niki de Saint Phalle. We considered that her style, completely different by Chanel's sobriety, was the proper way to boost student creativity in this project.

Although seemingly different, the two artists resemble in many aspects: both had origins in troubled families, with an unhappy childhood, which has obviously influenced their artistic creation and made them be interested in the condition of women in society, both had links with artists contemporary with them, with many of them also collaborating, both experienced new materials in their works and both created *outsider art*.

Taking over totally different elements from the two French women artists, the Romanian students have successfully made special pieces, that come together in a unitary collection. Their fresh vision has created a contemporary picture of the French *chic*, in which the black of *la petite robe noire* is valued by Niki's strong chromatics and Nanas generous shapes are successfully merged with Coco's perfect cut. By combining these two different concepts, students have learned to take further diverse ideas, mix supposedly different concepts, develop them, but also interact with them.

Fig. 5. *La Petite Robe Noire - Out of Pattern*, Photographer Alexandru Mărginean

The goal to achieve is to take the best from the past and to transform it in such way to send to the future an improved version. The students work carry on a part of history, but also the personal mark of everyone, in close relation to the time and culture in which they live and create. We can assert that this is the only way we could evolve.

La petite robe noire crossed the time, loaded with historicity and being continually enriched. It is a witness of the past, therefore a messenger of it. Brought to life by the ones who create it, but also by the ones who wear it, the existence of the dress is closely linked to that of the woman history, past, present and future, whose extension became.

The creative exercises in fashion acquire another dimension, scattering the disagreement between the *ideal beauty-ideal of consumption* and art, with the argument that the living source of beauty is always the uniqueness, originality, avant-garde art, provocative and experimental. Thus, the integration of fashion in the visual arts phenomenon is, and will be, a constant concern for the Fashion Department of National University of Arts Bucharest. This approach will subsequently develop our students creative and artistic autonomous capacities, making them find solutions in further complex issues.

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