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OCTAVIAN SMIGELSCHI
THE MAN, THE ARTIST, THE OEUVRE
Abstract of the Doctoral Thesis

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	4
1.1. Argument	4
1.2. Visual and textual references	8
1.3. Research structure	11
1.4. Research questions and methodology	14
1.5. State of the art	18
2. SMIGELSCHI – THE MAN – A RECONSTRUCTION	26
2.1. A short chronology	28
2.2. Family object and subject	35
2.3. Representations and self-representations	42
2.4. „Greetings from your old friend Smigelschi”	52
3. SMIGELSCHI AND HIS TIMES	59
3.1. Transylvania in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century from a cultural history perspective	59
3.2. Artistic context	64
3.2.1. Painting in Central-Eastern Europe - the second half of the 19th century and beginning of 20th century - Vienna, Budapest, Munich - a short presentation	64
3.2.2. The evolution of painting in Sibiu– the beginnings of modernism - Carl Dörschlag group- short presentation	78
4. SMIGELSCHI – THE ARTIST – A REEVALUATION	93
4.1. Monumental art	94
4.1.1. Genesis of religious monumental painting	94
4.1.2. Mural painting	114
4.1.3. Iconostasis painting	164
4.2. Lay painting	189
4.2.1. Rákóczi Chapel	189
4.2.2. <i>Prince Rákóczi calls to fight the Hungarian nobles at Szabolcs</i>	214
4.3. Landscape	217
4.4. Art with a national message	229
4.4.1. General framework	229
4.4.2. <i>Stall singers</i> - Romanian identity between belief and tradition	237
4.4.3. Types of peasant women from Transylvania	244

4.4.4. Ancient glory – The <i>National Triptych</i> 1906	252
4.4.5. Traditional motives in Smigelschi’s art	262
4.5. Symbolist paintings	263
4.5.1. <i>The Quartet</i> – genesis of a painting series	265
4.5.2. Reevaluating the <i>Angel of Death</i> series (1892-1912)	287
4.6. Tradition and innovation	312
4.6.1. Sculptural models, photography, collage as an alternative study in Octavian Smigelschi’s creation	312
4.6.2. Cement marble or the new technological process of mural painting by professor Octavian Smigelschi	321
4.6.3. Glass mosaic	330
4.7. Book illustrations	333
5. SMIGELSCHI SEEN THROUGHOUT DEFORMING MIRRORS	
ISTORIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES	342
5.1. Smigelschi in periodicals 1887-1914	349
5.2. Octavian Smigelschi in art history antechamber. Press articles 1918-1948	376
6. CONCLUSIONS	385
BIBLIOGRAPHY	403
ANEXES	446
ILUSTRATIONS	525

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Summary

A specific mind frame of our time is to reconsider the process of artistic creation. The researchers, art historians and critics, attempt to establish new systems of evaluating visual art and are presently inclined to assign new value for preliminary artistic products such as sketches, drawings, or embosses, elevating them from the state of mere attempts, to that of works in progress.

The present research aims at reevaluating Octavian Smigelschi's creation by including his preparatory sketches, *ébauches*, and *croquis* that can be used as evidence for the development of his perception of his chosen subjects. Such an analysis eases the establishment of a chronological succession of the composition and character studies, following the series' inner logic, and aids in one's clearer framing among the artist's other works. Thus, I intend to reach an understanding of the creative process behind Smigelschi's works, to reconstruct the working methods he adopted in order to reach his goal and the way in which the artist reached a specific expression, adapted to his personal concerns, by borrowing stylistic or compositional elements from the artistic environment of his time. My doctoral research helps in reconstructing the development of his work and the manner in which important elements of his personal life had an impact on his various series of works. The genetic file of this topic consists of his family's archives, the artist's correspondence, his sketches and works preserved in the collection of the Brukenthal National Museum, The Art Museum in Cluj-Napoca, but also those published in exhibition catalogues, testimonies of members of his family and the specialized bibliography that includes mentions of his topics.

I analyzed a large number of works, monumental projects, compositional and character studies elaborated by Smigelschi between 1886 and 1912. Thus I offered a retrospective over his religious projects executed for numerous churches in Transylvania, recuperating information about his unfinished monumental projects from Blaj and Sibiu. The structure of the thesis follows three important parameters that define a work of art: the artist's biography - the personal context, the general cultural and artistic context that influenced his artistic productions and the analytical approach of his works. The theses presented the particularities of Smigelschi's biography, the relation with his family members, his close circle of friends that had a major impact on the subjects the artists choose for his works. The

research offers information about the particularities of Transylvanian painting for the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, insisting over the Sibiu group of artists lead by Carl Dörschlag. Octavian Smigelschi was an isolated case in Transylvanian painting, but through his theoretical education and research trips he rather found kindred spirits among European artists. In the manner in which Smigelschi deals with his topics, one can identify all the stages that he went through during his artistic education. In a first state he chose a naturalistic approach, under the influence of German Romanticism, while later he adopted means of expression typical to Symbolism and the new *Secessions*, under direct influence of his research trips in Munich (where he first came in contact with Arnold Böcklin's works), Vienna, Dresden, and later on to Italy, in Venice, Florence, Ravenna, and Rome. The Hungarian cultural environment in which Smigelschi studied was under the direct influence of the Fine Arts Academy in Munich that in fact dominated the entire East-Central European area in the beginning of the twentieth century

Octavian Smigelschi showed special interest in Symbolist topics, mainly during the period between 1894 and 1912. Such works were grouped in several thematic series such as *The Angel of Death*, *The Quartet*, *Hora ielelor (The Dance of the Fairies)*, and *Spring*. The new chosen topics and their approach attest to the artist's intention of creating a new type of art, that would surpass the artistic canon imposed by the Transylvanian community whose members were not aware of the new developments in western art but preferred genres such as portraiture, landscape, religious topics, and especially the large compositions depicting historical or national subjects. In creating his works on Symbolist subjects, the artist employed the means and knowledge acquired during his studies; his works can be included in the aesthetic paradigms and visual language typical to European Modernism with the peculiarities of the East-Central European artistic environment.

The research analyses also his working method and technical means adopted for making the compositional and character studies which are highly sophisticated. Smigelschi used photography and saw the photo camera as an instrument that might ease his process of composition elaboration, even more since it was a priority to for him to render reality in a naturalist manner. As a novelty the theses presents the new working techniques he invented as an alternative for mural painting: the glass mosaic and the cement marble. In order to reconstruct the technological process I used inedited documents from his family archives.

Similar to other artists from Austrian-Hungarian Empire, and especially from Hungary Smigelschi was mostly preoccupied with monumental compositions, historical and religious scenes, either on murals or on panels, aiming to create a national art, typical to his

homeland, and to find the proper means of expression in order to elevate art level in his region to meet the standards of Western European cultural heritage.

Smigelschi accepted modern influence in both painting topics and characteristics, but his acceptance was still moderate. He was inclined also towards rejecting the newest ideological and technical discoveries of impressionism, post-impressionism, neoimpressionism since he had to create for an inexperienced public. Central-European artists received an artistic education abroad, but when they returned to their own regions were forced by local society, still under the influence of traditionalism, to adapt their new style to the taste of their patrons and clients. In the case of Transylvanian society one can state that the new artistic ideas slowly made their way in, first among artists and intellectuals who further promoted them through written propaganda in the most important periodicals

He started elaborating his works being interested in emphasizing the decorative characteristics of the artistic object, using folk art and national mythology as inspirational sources, the same beliefs that guided the creation of Pre-Raphaelites and afterwards the symbolists.

He used a metaphorical language borrowed from the new trends of European art, through the way in which he reached, on a compositional level, for a visual rhythm in order to create the desired atmosphere, Smigelschi proved that he fully understood the principles of modernism and integrated the language of European Symbolism.