

CITY PORTRAITS.

“THE URBAN LANDSCAPE IN TRANSYLVANIAN VEDUTISM”

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Peisajul urban în vedutismul transilvan [The Urban Landscape in Transylvanian Vedutism] /

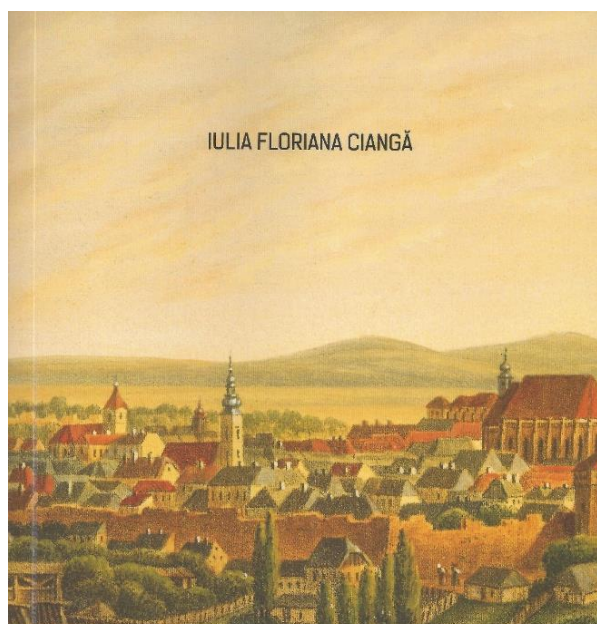
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INTRODUCTION

Cities are fascinating subjects, they seem still but are nonetheless dynamic; they testify to the past, but continuously evolve and enclose our ever changing ways of thinking and living. They are, especially nowadays, our prevalent setting for life, so it comes naturally to want to learn about them, understand them, be it because of our attachment to a place, our curiosity, or our wish to improve and enrich the status quo.



PEISAJUL URBAN

ÎN VEDUTISMUL TRANSILVAN

Between the multiple options we have of knowing a city, an easy one is to try to represent it and our understanding of it. Another one is to explore others' representations and, when the chronological variable is taken into account, the results reveal precious information about city evolution and changes in our understanding it. It is the case of the book “The Urban Landscape in Transylvanian Vedutism” (2011) (a published Ph.D. thesis) by Ph.D. Geographer and Graphic Designer Iulia Ciangă, where she explores the intricate relationship between vedutas – that is representations (usually paintings or engravings) of cities or of their parts – and urban landscape evolution.

Both the evolution of Transylvanian cities and the ways of representing them have been tied to Western European culture due to the political status of Transylvania throughout history, which implied cultural exchanges, colonization of land, imports of

architecture and urban development models. The interest in city representation in Transylvania rises starting with the 17th century and vedutas keep multiplying, together with the number of voyages and evolution of settlements up until the fading of the vedutist phenomenon in the 19th century. Thus, Dr. Ciangă's study spans a period of two centuries (17th-19th centuries) and this allowed for the possibility of understanding phenomena in their dynamic dimension.

CONTENTS

City evolution

The systematic nature of the study makes it easy to follow. The first step towards understanding urban landscape in representations is to analyse the evolution of cities, to see what factors influenced their development and how the consequences of this development translated into the landscape.

Transylvanian cities have different genesis, their book of layers is thinner or thicker depending on their starting point: some, like Cluj or Alba Iulia, date back to the Antiquity, some have their origin in the process of colonisation of Transylvania starting with the 13th century, while others are the fruit of the policy of industrialization of the past century. However, all settlements evolved to an urban status in time and this aspect is revealed by Dr. Ciangă through an inventory of attestation dates of cities and changes in their toponymy. Past names hint to important settlement functions over time, to defining city personality traits, and to communities that left their imprints in the built environment.

Population growth influenced city expansion and the appearance of new functional areas which had an impact on the city's image, identity and imageability (concept introduced by American urban planner Kevin Lynch, in his work "Image of the city", 1960, which refers to a city's distinct, remarkable character and its ability to evoke strong images). Different urban communities, from religious orders to guilds, played their part in creating a distinct character for their living environment. Also, the ethnic composition of the population in Transylvania determined the emergence of facilities such as churches and stately mansions, whose imposing nature made them become landmarks of the settlements. Many of those well-preserved buildings are nowadays monuments, public institutions, and still have a significant role in the image of their city. Hungarian and German communities played an important part in the construction of such buildings and in laying the framework for urban and rural settlements, particularly in the case of fortress-cities.

Dr. Ciangă takes these aspects into account and further presents an evolution of the fortifications systems of cities in Transylvania, from rectangular stone enclosures in the 14th century, to bastion-fortresses, process which can be better understood in the study cases of the major cities of Transylvania (Braşov, Cluj, Sibiu, etc.). In their presentation, the author looks at aspects such as the evolution of the medieval core of cities and the main architectural and institutional landmarks (these were often distinctive elements in vedutas).

Vedutism - the beginnings

Therefore, a next step in the study is to show how images about cities were, how they changed throughout time, and what shaped them. The author gives a brief history of how vedutas started to grow in popularity, who their main promoters were, of the artistic movements that had an influential role, and of the social changes which had an impact on city representation. From the

city as a symbolic centre of the world, to the city as background of religious scenes, and further on to the city as the main subject of prolific works, the urban image in representations became more and more refined.

One of the first to have a say in this area were navigators who, at the time of new adventurous travels, tried to capture as much information as possible about settlements to serve as guidelines in their travels. This placed cartographers only a step away from urban atlases which became a reality in the 15th century and, in Albrecht Dürer's engravings, the city became a subject by itself for the first time. One of the concerns about city representations thereafter was their veracity, aspect enhanced by the invention of perspective. The Dutch painters of the 17th century had an important role in the evolution of landscape painting (including of the urban one), through their attention to detail and faithful reproduction of the seen world. Nonetheless, one of the most important trends to stand at the basis of vedutism is the Grand Tour, the phenomenon through which travel became acknowledged for its cultural and educational value. This encouraged the apparition of travel journals, accompanied by the graphical reproduction of the visited locations. Italy was the main destination due to its strong testimony of European antique culture, which was highly valued during that period. Hence, Rome and Venice became two main subjects for study, voyage and representation, and the Venetian School of Vedutism, with Antonio Canal (Canaletto) as its main figure, was one of the most popular and acclaimed of its kind.

In a time when travel was a privilege, vedutas satisfied the longing of individuals, particularly those belonging to the bourgeoisie and the aristocratic strata, for knowledge and perhaps also for novel, exotic and mysterious experiences. The 19th century, with all its inventions, enabled travel and new technologies – such as photography – which led to the fading of the vedutist phenomenon. Artists became more interested in representations of subjective experiences and impressions, distancing themselves from their predecessors' realistic, detailed and often objective portrayal of the city.

But, going back to the peak period of the Grand Tour and vedutas, it was a time when Transylvanian cities became intermediary points of travel itineraries towards the Middle East and, implicitly, subjects of representations. The city as an autonomous subject appears in the 18th century, until then serving only as background for other works, such as portraits. Lithography studios flourish through promoters such as Michael Bielz, who opened the first ones in Romania, or Franz Neuhauser, whose representations having a documentary function served as pioneer works for the Transylvanian land imagery. Artist Carol Popp de Szathmari is also worth mentioning for his extensive project, "Erdely Kepekben", in which he captured the 19th century Transylvania in images.

The author's classification of vedutas and the inventory of those concerning the Transylvanian land in the 17th-19th century period shows the popularity of important cities such as Sibiu, Cluj, Alba Iulia, and Braşov, as subjects of representation and also a preference for partial representations of cities and general views, rather than mixed or portrait vedutas, where the city serves as background. Using multiple criteria, vedutas are analysed based, for example, on their frequency, accuracy of representation or function of the represented buildings (e.g. religious, administrative, cultural, and industrial buildings). Most of the representations of the Transylvanian land date back to the 19th century.

Case studies

In presenting the case studies for the main cities of Transylvania, the author uses two approaches: on the one hand, she analyses the changes of the observation points in vedutas over time, on the other, she presents the situation of cities today, by confronting vedutas with the representations she made from the same observation point. The approach is valuable in understanding the evolution of the urban landscape for cities such as Cluj, Sibiu, Braşov, Alba Iulia, and Sighişoara. When confronted, the 'now' and 'then' make you aware of the extension of the urban development up until today, but also of the testimonial nature of the urban fabric. Viewed from the same frame, the elements that are still there, still recognizable, seem bridges to the past, creating the golden thread of the story of a city. This is an important role of vedutas and it is why they can be a great educational tool, the author states. She points to the fact that vedutas can have an influential role in safeguarding the built cultural heritage of cities and they can help people know more and be more aware about the history of cities. Thus, in the end, Dr. Ciangă expresses the wish for a virtual archive of representations of Transylvanian cities, a public database which could serve a wide range of users.

PERSONAL REMARKS. CONCLUSIONS

Dr. Ciangă's study is impressive due to its thoroughness: the multitude of aspects taken into consideration, the number of works comprised in the study. It is clear that the author questions the processes studied, looks for causalities, and is interested in explaining and understanding phenomena in their complexity. This is why the book, well-structured, comprises several sub-themes, which we mentioned above (e.g. evolution of settlements and urban landscape, analysis of artistic movements), which gradually lead the reader into understanding the vedutist current in general and the representations of the Transylvanian land, in particular.

However, given the amount of information analysed, a clear stating of the connection between ideas, information and the main subject studied is needed, and some parts of the book, namely the ones concerning evolution and ethnic structure of population and functional characteristics of cities, need reinforcement of this aspect in order for the reader to be able to fit the information into the 'bigger picture'. Of course, most of the times, it is deductible from the content as a whole.

Also, the author's background as a graphical artist could have been much more exploited by accompanying the data and processes well captured and explained in words, with personal, graphical interpretations besides the statistical ones (tables, Excel charts). In the second part of the book, the joining of text and images of artists' works would have facilitated and embellished the reader's lecture, familiarising him or her visually with the artistic foundation of vedutism.

Nonetheless, "The Urban Landscape in Transylvanian Vedutism" is a book that increases appetite for the study of the urban past, for the understanding of how cities have been regarded throughout history. The representations from diverse epochs are fascinating and make us more aware of the value of urban landmarks and the importance of their preservation. As Iulia Ciangă states, vedutas can serve as educational tools and can help build a culture of heritage valorisation.

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