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Archives, Libraries and Museums from Romania: Knowledge Management of Special Collections of Historical Images of Towns¹

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It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words. This is maybe the reason why images are more often used in historical research since historians discovered, or accepted, that an image from the past contains valuable historical information.

Historians are interested in studying representations of towns because they offer a widespread area of information, completing or substituting other sources. Therefore, the present day historian can see the surrounding of the town at a given moment, the flow of the rivers, today surely modified, former forests, meadows, pastures, agricultural lands, fruit gardens or graperies. They can also find, in such images, information about the local economy (mine pits, mills, commercial ports, trade fairs), architecture (towers and other fortifications, market places, houses and palaces, churches and bridges), everyday life and social conditions, confessional and political urban life.

During the past four centuries, pictures/images of Romanian towns have been made on a wide range of supports as: walls (of houses or chapels), coins and medals, shrines and other religious objects, scenic backgrounds, documents and other guild objects, playing cards and even on tableware. They were marked by the spirit of the time they belonged to, by the artistic styles and by the purposes they served. Many of the town-views can be found on canvas paintings and on other works of art, but the vast majority of them were printed images.

My understanding of “historic images of towns” comprises the following: documentary graphic (or the visual historic sources) that depict partial or overall images of towns, including drawings, mono- or polychrome engravings (no matter of support), water-colors, different genres of painting.

Compared to other European countries, which have strong traditions in studying the representations of towns, – in this context I will mention the conferences of The International Commission for the History of Towns (*Imago Urbis*, Bologna, September 2001; *Image and Perception of Town*, Vienna, October 2003) – Romanians do not pay great attention to this kind of representations. Consequently, they were only superficially investigated.

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One of the reasons why papers about historical images, in general, and about towns, in particular, have not yet been written, is that many persons who come into contact with them are working in museums, libraries and archives with special collections, being foremost devoted to cataloging and labeling of images. They do not enjoy a special interest in the interpretation of these artifacts in terms of historical information.

This paper aims at presenting the way special collections of historical images of towns from present day Romania's territory are exploited.

The first thing to notice about the works discussed here, is the continue take over of both, images and explanations related to them, without checking who wrote the original sources, thus perpetuating the mistakes.

I will give some general examples, which in the same time are relevant for understanding the way historical images of Romanian towns are handled in literature.

One of the most awaited and – after publishing – mediated history work in recent years, the treaty concerning the *History of Romanians*, drafted by the Romanian Academy, uses many historical images, including plenty of those representing towns. But unfortunately they were not used properly: images are inserted without any relation to the text, there occurred repetitions from one chapter to another and different legends were used for the same images, different sources were mentioned.

The editors of the series *Foreign Travelers About Romanian Countries* also failed to balance the text with the appropriate images. The images should have the role of illustrations, but there is no relation between texts and the way the images were used, only the chronological criterion was obeyed. The legends which accompany the images are often laconic and erroneous. The formula the publishers preferred is the “Town X” or, for variation, “View of Contemporary Engraving of Town X” (the reader is supposed to decide to what or to whom contemporary is referring to, because nowhere in the text it is specified).

There are only few special works which strictly deal with representations of towns. Except Sibiu² – which also from this point of view is privileged, the town's historical images are subject of several studies, the last one was published in 2007 – only the towns of Brasov³ (written in 1976), Bucharest⁴ (written in the interwar period, in 1936), Cluj⁵ (1974) and Satu Mare⁶ (1975) enjoy studies about their views. Except the most recent work devoted to Sibiu which is comprehensive, the other studies are sequential, covering only parts of the topic and, without denying them the importance for historiography, it must be said that they contain numerous errors. The paper about Brasov is a repertoire, useful as a tool, but one can not say

² Otto Czekelius, *Alt-Hermannstadt. Zeitgenössische Beschreibungen, Veduten, Pläne*, Neue Literatur, 1, 1981, p. 85-95 și în Idem, *Schriften aus dem Nachlaß*, Herausgegeben von Brigitte Stephani, Kriterion Verlag, Bukarest, 1985, p. 69-84; Hermann Fabini, *Sibiul vechi – evoluția orașului oglindită în reprezentări grafice*, Sibiu, 1983 sau varianta în limba germană: *Baugeschichtliche Entwicklung von Alt-Hermannstadt im Spiegel historischer Stadtbilder*, Hermannstadt, 1983; Otto Czekelius und Hermann Fabini, *Das alte Hermannstadt. Veduten und Stadtpläne aus vier Jahrhunderten*, Monementa Verlag Sibiu-Hermannstadt, 2007.

³ Minerva Nistor, *Brașovul în izvoare cartografice și iconografice*, în *Cumidava*, IX, 1, 1976, p. 37-72, + 75 il.

⁴ Adrian C. Corbu; Horia Opreșcu, *Bucureștii vechi. Documente iconografice. Vederi – Scene Pitorești – Tipuri și Costume – Scene Istorice (secolele XVII, XVIII, XIX)*, Atelierele Cartea Românească, București, f.a.

⁵ Magdalena Bunta, *Clujul medieval în gravuri*, în *Acta Musei Napocensis*, XI, 1974, p. 185-197.

⁶ Livia Bacâru, *Stampe medievale reprezentând cetatea Satu Mare, aflate în colecția Bibliotecii Academiei, în Satu Mare. Studii și comunicări Satu Mare*, 3, 1975, p. 77-85.

the same thing about historical or artistic considerations, which one cannot rely on. The study about Bucharest analyses only one collection and so does the paper about the town of Satu Mare. In the article dedicated to representations of Cluj not even this is done.

One of the problems concerning the prints kept in Romanian libraries, museums or archives is the identification of their origin: i. e. the question about who made them, when and where they were published. An example why this happens: I noticed at the special collections of prints from the Cluj Central University Library, that many of them seem to be plates which were cut from books. Initially I thought that the situation is due to overzeal of some librarians from the interwar period, but when I read the correspondence of George Sion – the founder of the Library – with the antiquarian Egon Gröner from Bucharest I understood. The latter was often complaining about the lack of plates in books sent to him for sale. So, I concluded that Sion himself used to cut them from books and albums on Romanian topics, in order to increase his collection of prints.

In the prints' card-index, where all the plates which have been cut are registered, one frequently can not find references about the book or the album which once they belonged to, despite the fact that many of those publications are still preserved in the Sion fund.

Most of the historical images are not digitized and those which are, unfortunately are not available for the public. We have to praise the archives in Timisoara, the sole exception, which have posted on their website historical images of Timisoara they preserve in their collection.

A part of the prints' collection of the Romanian Academy Library is digitized too, but by amateurs. More specifically, a project that contains reproductions of historical images resulted in the emergence of an interactive CD-ROM: *The Romanian World in Images. XV–XIX Centuries*, made by a private publisher in 2004. Out of 749 images, 273 are urban representations. But these reproductions, in addition of being realized in poor quality, contain many errors of historical chronology, identification of localities, authors or titles, and also dating mistakes. The accompanying text is also catastrophically, despite the fact that it is signed by a professional. Even so, one can not find these images on the online site of the institution mentioned.

We are lucky having University libraries which started digitizing and posting online old and rare books. Many of them contain historical images of towns kept in their original context, so researcher can use them with confidence.

Another problematic aspect is the terminology used by researchers of historical images. From the literature of the domain I learned that the same term is used with different meanings by different authors, whether they are historians, architects or art historians. Finally each author is free to use the term he/she wants or to understand what he/she can with a specific word. But for all potential readers of a text –professionals or not – to understand the same thing as its author, implies that the latter defines the terms and concepts he/she uses. To hope in a uniform terminology, to reach a common acceptance of the same meanings for the same term, is perhaps asking too much.

Categorized differently from one institution to another, ordered either by author name or after the place they represent, but mostly arranged only chronologically, historical

images of Romanian towns, most of them prints, rarely leave the drawers in which they are kept. They are not processed and published neither by their curators nor by other researchers. Linked to what I said before, I will refer to another problem occurred in researching historical images of towns, namely to the access to “special” collections. Historical images should be seen not only by researchers, but by the public too, because the information is supposed to be free, as it is stipulated in various laws. Unfortunately, however, I think there is no Romanian researcher who had not experienced, at least once, blocked access because of the fact that the fund was “under study”, situation which sometimes may last many years.

If you are counting yourself among the lucky ones who found the fund available, than it may happen that you are told that copying is either banned (common situation, although it is quite strange in a time when digital reproduction is available to anyone who wants it), or there is required a prohibited price/tax for reproductions (especially for young researchers pocket). If you finally get the reproduction, you have to find out that its quality does not meet your requirements.

A last observation I would like do is that the only way of documentation for the researcher of historical images is the classic one, to look in archives or special collections. Often confectioned of paper or cloth, historical images will disappear soon, due to the effect that time has on this fragile support. By digitizing, the original can remain safely in air conditioned rooms, while the electronic version can be studied, analyzed, compared and, especially, multiplied. This problem was solved recently by our colleagues from all over the world, and I think it might be the case to “comply” the new requirements because the safest and cheapest way to conserve an image is to scan it.

The digital form of these images attract another advantage for researchers, greatly improving its situation: an image can be multiplied indefinitely, and this would solve the problem of rapid access to information without charge: e-mail or internet. Currently, an internet search will not have as result many images of our towns from Romanian collections. Instead, works by the same artists who have immortalized our land can be found in many foreign collections, whether private or institutional.

It is likely that some of the issues raised here are not only of historical images research, but generalized across historical research. Therefore, I hope they will be solved in a near future, along with the modernization of other areas related to cultural life.