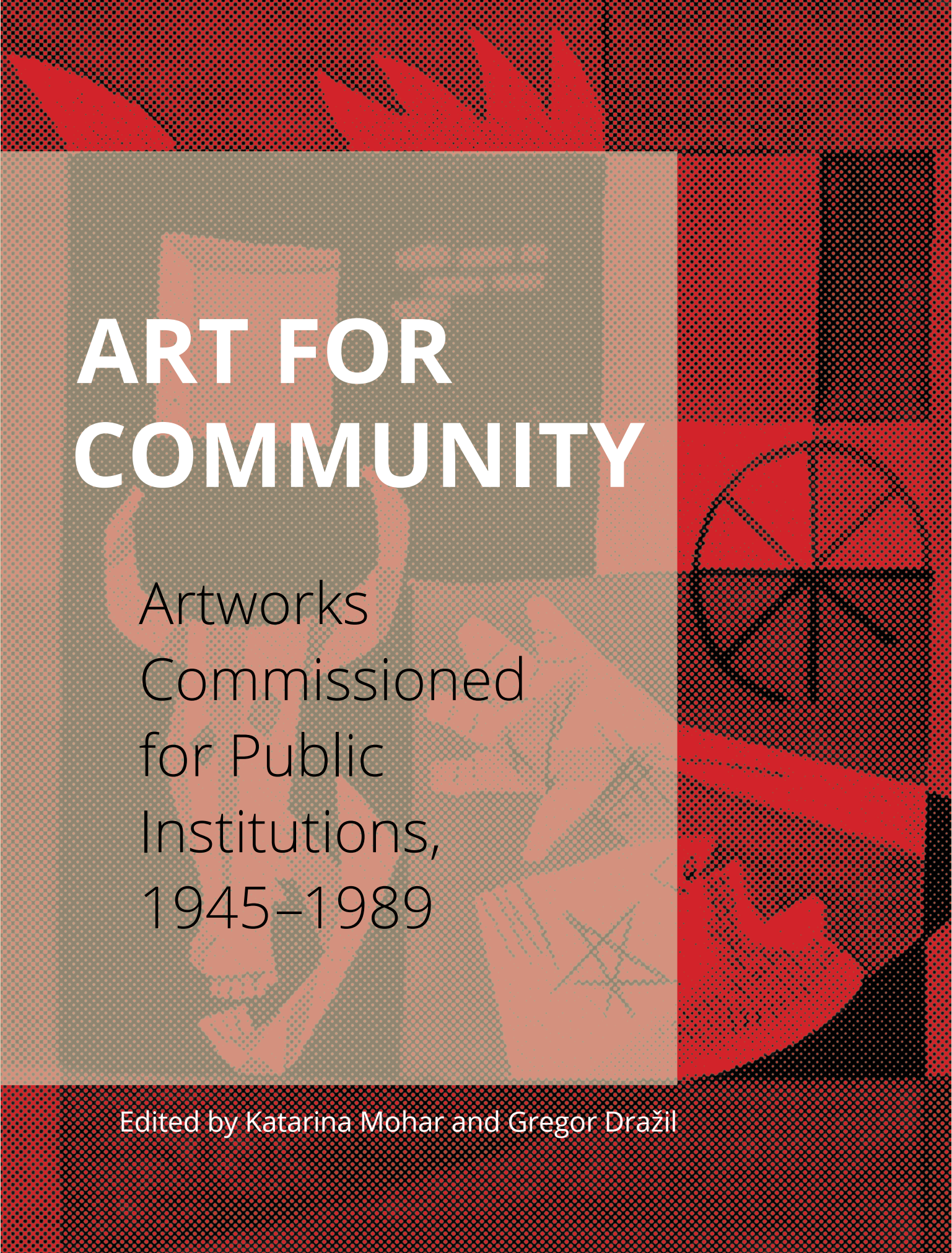




ART FOR COMMUNITY

Artworks
Commissioned
for Public
Institutions,
1945–1989

Edited by Katarina Mohar and Gregor Dražil



Založba ZRC



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Ljubljana, 2026

Opera Instituti Artis Historiae

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English proofreading: Ana Čavić, Donald Francis Reindl

Slovene proofreading: Darja Gabrovšek Homšak

Reviewers: Marjeta Ciglencečki, Jessica Jenkins

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Cover image: Ivo Šubic, unrealised sketch for the mosaic in the building of the People's Assembly of the People's Republic of Slovenia.
Photo: Andreja Rakovec, ZRC SAZU.

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JULES PERAHIM'S MURALS AND THE POLITICS OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT IN ROMANIA IN THE POST-STALINIST PERIOD

Irina Cărbăș

National
University
of Arts in
Bucharest

In December 1962, in a central Bucharest gallery, Jules Perahim presented the mosaic panel *Tinerete* (Youth) [Figure 1], which later became part of one of the most ambitious mosaics created in socialist Romania, installed in the town of Mangalia on the Black Sea. Because of the very process by which monumental mosaics were produced, for a short time this fragment was able to be displayed as a self-contained work of art before being subsumed into a larger ensemble in situ. The transition from fragment to whole – from “easel painting” to mural, which in the cultural climate of the time served first and foremost as a vehicle of self-promotion – is emblematic of a broader set of changes that reshaped Romanian artistic policies, the built environment, and Perahim’s career itself.

Born Iuliș Blumenfeld, Jules Perahim (1914–2008) was a politically engaged artist that significantly contributed to the institutionalisation of socialist realism in Romania, both via his artistic output and his involvement in the postwar reorganisation of the artistic system. His commitment to communist ideals, however, predated this by decades: as early as the 1930s, he established himself as a graphic artist, concurrently publishing in surrealist magazines and antifascist journals in Bucharest.¹ Following the Second World War, Perahim ascended to a prominent status within the emerging cultural hierarchies, principally engaging in graphic art, particularly book illustration, a medium integral to the propaganda tactics of the communist regime. His standing, reflected in official positions and a continuous stream of state commissions, provided him not only a degree of flexibility but also the freedom to expand his practice into new domains, including murals, mosaics, ceramics, and stage design, while experimenting with various materials and formats [Figure 2].

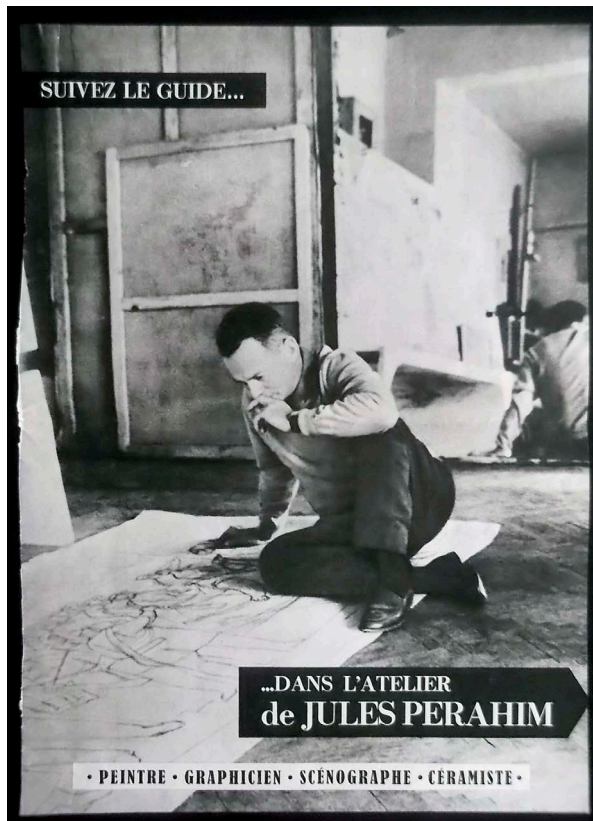
Despite public art being ideally suited for socialist ideals due to its collective visibility and persuasive intent, Romania experienced a proliferation of such initiatives only during the late 1950s. By then, the discourse of socialist realism had begun to be largely absorbed into that of public art, which retained its militant ethos while no longer insisting upon classical formal norms. Public art, or what was then referred to as “monumental

Figure 1.
Jules Perahim and
Ștefan Constantinescu,
*Tinerețe / Revoluția
culturală (Youth / The
Cultural Revolution)*,
mosaic, House of
Culture, Mangalia,
1962, detail.
Source: *Contemporanul*,
21 December 1962.



art”, was meant to operate in concert with architecture, facilitating the visualisation of the social contract and embodying the achievements of socialism in a modern built environment that was clean, legible, and aesthetically dignifying.² What had once been almost synonymous with conventional sculptural monuments was now reconceived as a synthesis of arts, closely aligned with modernist architecture. In this context, murals and especially mosaics emerged as a key medium of public art, rivalling sculpture. They proved capable of mediating the tension between modernist architecture and decoration, while also offering a cost-effective means of achieving the regime’s desired monumentality and synthesis.

This chapter takes Perahim’s career as a muralist as a case study to analyse these shifts, occurring simultaneously across artistic, architectural, and political registers. Drawing on novel archival sources, period press, and artists’ recollections, it delineates the circulation of the two primary notions in public art discourse – synthesis and monumentality – within professional and political contexts. These concepts proved remarkably adaptable, accommodating divergent artistic expressions and shaping artistic practices but also producing frictions among the various stake-



holders engaged in creating public art in socialist Romania. From the perspective of Cold War studies,³ Perahim's trajectory is particularly revealing: despite geopolitical divisions, ideas and practices surrounding synthesis and monumentality circulated between East and West, and Perahim was one of the individuals that actively made these intersections possible.

Figure 2. Jules Perahim in his studio, ca. 1958. Magazine cutout from an unidentified publication. Source: Archive of the "G. Oprescu" Institute of Art History, Bucharest.

The synthesis of the arts: theory and practice in post-Stalinist Romania

In a 1963 interview, Jules Perahim asserts that "a synthesis between architecture and monumental art is essential, necessitating a common mode of thinking. The architect and the visual artist must collaboratively start from a clean slate in conceptualising a future urban ensemble. This objective is achievable solely within a socialist system."⁴ Perahim condensed the project of the ideal socialist city into a radical collective endeavour, conceived from the ground up in terms of space, aesthetics, and social relations. In this context, the concept of synthesis between art and architecture, which has been a recurring theme since the early twentieth century, was reinterpreted as a defining characteristic of socialist modernity, actively endorsed by Eastern Bloc regimes. At that time, the collaboration between art and architecture fulfilled three primary roles: it allowed modernist artistic concepts and practices to gradually replace the classical norms of socialist realism, it was also employed as a pedagogical tool in cultivating socialist citizenship; and it generated aestheticised environments for the rhythm of both labour and leisure.

For Perahim, the rapidly expanding field of mural art was not only a means of maintaining political authority in a shifting cultural landscape

but also a strategy of self-reinvention, apparently leaving behind socialist realism. He was not only actively engaged as a mere producer, completing significant mural commissions in Romania and abroad, but also as a contributor to the discourse that propelled and validated new practices in art and architecture. Under his leadership, the official art journal *Arta plastică* promoted monumental art with particular attention to murals.⁵ In parallel, Perahim held institutional positions, serving simultaneously as an artist, a cultural official on the Committee for Art (within the Ministry of Culture), and member of the Commission for Monumental Art.

By the early 1960s, “synthesis”, a term used not only by Perahim but also very frequently in the cultural discourse in Romania, functioned at two levels: on the one hand, in the discussions and practice of artists and architects responsible for its implementation, and, on the other hand, in political and professional discourse, which set out principles, guidelines, and conditions for both art and architecture. Despite the frequent intersections between the two, each carried the mark of its own field, drawing back to specific traditions and concepts. Particularly between 1959 and 1963, Romania witnessed a proliferation of theoretical discussions on the interplay between art and architecture published in the press that aimed to define or refine the meaning of synthesis. What remains visible today from all these discussions is only the tip of the iceberg of the broader transformations and conflicts of a period throughout which the limits of the “thaw” were actively negotiated in every cultural field. Compared with other Eastern Bloc countries, Romania moved more cautiously in loosening cultural policy after Stalin’s death. Within this thorny context, the discourse of synthesis assumed increased relevance, becoming a site for recalibrations and tensions in Romania’s cultural landscape.

Art historians, critics, and architects held slightly diverging views on synthesis, often depending on how they envisioned the hierarchical (or non-hierarchical) relation between the two fields. Eugen Schilleru, a professor of art history at the Bucharest Institute of Fine Arts, understood synthesis as an integrative instrument compelling art and architecture to form “an entirely new image”.⁶ In contrast, Petru Comarnescu, an art critic trained during the interwar period, regarded art’s role in synthesis as one of complementing and emphasising the function and style of the building.⁷ Closer to Comarnescu’s perspective, the architect Anton Moisescu, the secretary of the Union of Architects, argued that the characteristics of architecture should be embraced by other arts as well, rendering them “economical, rational, constructive”. In the same vein, he encouraged artists to adopt new or prefabricated materials.⁸ Although such arguments

might appear to open a window for abstraction, in practice the situation proved otherwise: collaboration between artists and architects was frequently marked by rivalries and misunderstandings. A series of articles published in *Scînteia* (The Spark), the official mouthpiece of the Romanian Communist Party, in 1962 reveals these disjunctions. Artists complained of being excluded from the early phases of architectural and urban design or of being assigned inappropriate sites for their work;⁹ conversely, architects criticized artists for acting by themselves, disregarding architectural and urban contexts. Moisescu himself reproached artists for their inadequacy and conservatism.¹⁰

Undoubtedly, the collaboration between artists and architects often depended less on abstract principles than on personal relationships, institutional affiliations, or hierarchical positions within the Union of Fine Artists. Viorica Iacob – who, alongside her husband Gheorghe Iacob, engaged in numerous projects in mosaic and tapestry – later recalled how personal ties with architects influenced both the limits of artistic expression and the distribution of commissions.¹¹ Perahim, who held key positions across several institutions, proudly praised the collaboration between artists and architects in the Galați housing district, where he was assigned one of the best walls to be decorated with mosaics.¹² Undeniably privileged within the commission system, Perahim nonetheless contributed to shaping a discourse on socialist monumental art in Romania, one in which the concept of synthesis was central, bringing together multiple professions while also fostering new artistic practices.

The relational character of synthesis proved essential to all of its artistic expressions. “Monumentality”, in contrast, referred broadly to public art while also signifying an essential feature of such art, primarily grounded in the organisation of the image. Discussions on monumentality emerged in connection with the commissioning of large-scale mural paintings and sgraffito in Bucharest, projects that functioned as testing grounds for longer-term public art programmes.

Youth cultural centres in Bucharest: laboratories for mural art

In 1958 and 1959, five youth cultural houses opened in Bucharest, each featuring large murals with a total of thirty projects. Jointly supported by the city council, the Ministry of Education, and the Union of Fine Artists, these works marked the first stage of a broader initiative. Until then, murals and mosaics had been confined to a small number of individual buildings. The murals were thematically aligned with the socialist realist

repertoire: peace demonstrations, cultural, artistic, and sporting activities, educational depictions of various professions, and revolutionary-historical themes. They represented both the regime's promises to the younger generation and the inclusion of youth as integral participants in socialist society. The collectives designated for these initiatives generally comprised very young artists, working under the supervision of a politically reliable senior figure.¹³ Some of these coordinators brought experience from ecclesiastical mural painting, whereas others were entering the field for the first time. Perahim belonged to the latter category, turning toward public art at precisely the moment it became a vehicle of renewed political engagement for him. Such commissions also provided artists with significant remuneration, far exceeding the pay available through ordinary state acquisitions.¹⁴

Perahim was appointed the coordinator for all projects at the Vasile Roaită Youth House of Culture in the Grivița Roșie district, whose topography was highly symbolic for the history of the Romanian Communist Party. There he designed the largest piece for the auditorium, *Cultură și Sportul* (Culture and Sport), created in collaboration with Ion Minoiu and Vasile Melica (covered at a later unknown date). The composition, organised across two equal horizontal registers, featured processional groups of figures engaged in sports and artistic activities. Its style was fundamentally graphic, resembling an oversized book illustration, betraying Perahim's primary training as a graphic artist. The composition lacked spatial depth; instead, simplified figures were clustered in decorative ensembles against a quite flat background. Surviving only in black-and-white reproductions, the work cannot be reconstructed chromatically today [Figure 3]. Perahim's name also appeared, alongside Mihail Danu, Aurel Stoicescu, and Simona Vasiliu-Chintilă, on the two exterior sgraffito panels of the same house of culture, depicting *Arta și cultura* (Art and Culture) on one side and *Știința și tehnica* (Science and Technology) on the other (improperly restored by covering some figures).¹⁵ Unlike the interior murals, these works drew more directly on the language of propaganda posters, a domain in which Perahim had previous achievements [Figure 4]. The translation from graphics to murals operated by Perahim allegedly gave those works the most distinctly modern character among the youth centre projects.

Yet, even before the murals were completed, they became the subject of critical scrutiny. The critique highlighted discontent with their deviation from the principles of socialist realism – namely, about the generalisation of human figures, their lack of convincing power, and their disproportion

Figure 3.
Jules Perahim,
Ion Minoiu, and Vasile
Melica, *Cultura și
Sportul* (Culture and
Sport), fresco, Vasile
Roaită Youth House
of Culture, Bucharest,
1959.
Source: *Arta plastică* 7,
no. 1 (1960).

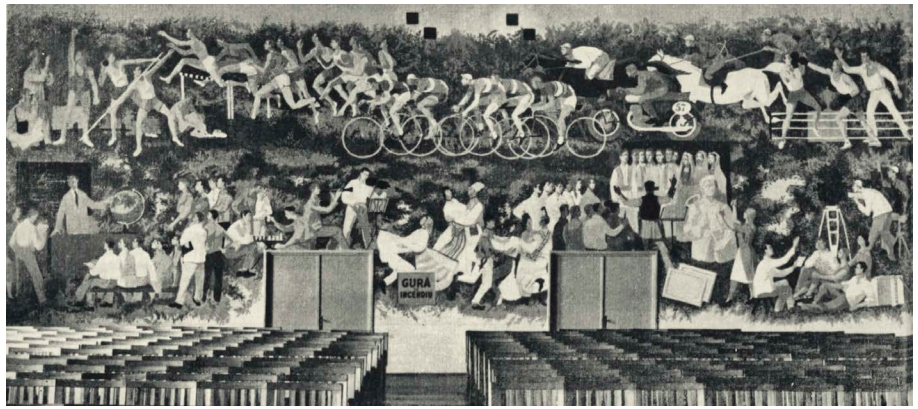


Figure 4.
Jules Perahim, Mihail
Danu, Aurel Stoicescu,
and Simona Vasiliu-
Chintilă, *Știința și
tehnica* (Science and
Technology) (left) and
Arta și Cultura (Art and
Culture) (right), sgraffito
panels, Vasile Roaită
Youth House of Culture,
Bucharest, 1959.
Source: *Arta plastică* 7,
no. 1 (1960).



in relation to architecture.¹⁶ These discussions that emerged in the press during the early 1960s also provided an opportunity to reflect on the specificity of mural painting as a distinct artistic discipline. Monumental painting, it was argued, needed its own principles, apart from being neither reducible to easel painting nor decorative art. Within the concept of monumentality, at least two contradictions became apparent. Initially, through these mural projects, the regime attempted to re-legitimize socialist realism, which had been weakened even more following the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Romania in 1958. In exhibitions of the late 1950s and early 1960s, a more inclusive form of realism was tolerated, but the boundaries of this “thaw” remained unstable. The sculptor Dorio Lazăr, a prominent artist of the 1950s, warned that form must not be severed from content in pursuit of originality, which can be read as an implicit attack on modernism because such separation led to formalism, the enduring opponent of socialist

realism.¹⁷ In fact, this indicated that the traditional standards of socialist realism conflicted with the regime's aspiration for a propagandist art that was simultaneously contemporary and compelling, a dynamic accurately characterized by Jessica Jenkins, in her analysis of East German mural art, as "competing visions".¹⁸

Overlying this conflict was an older one, between the pictorial and the decorative, in which the latter was associated with facility and superficiality that could sometimes destabilize the ontological status of painting. In the 1950s and 1960s, critics regularly addressed the tension between monumental and decorative elements, both of which were deeply entwined in monumental painting. Some inclined toward one pole, some toward the other, and yet others sought to reconcile both. The art critic Ion Frunzetti, for instance, referred to public mural painting as "monumental-decorative", referencing the authority of the Soviet sculptor Vera Mukhina.¹⁹ Nonetheless, an identical language had also been prevalent in the 1930s in Romania during discussions over mural painting as a complement to architecture.²⁰ Monumentality thus intersected with synthesis, together providing conceptual frames that gradually allowed the introduction of modernism into mural practice.

When asked about the distinction between decoration and mural painting, the artist Ștefan Constantinescu (1898–1983), Perahim's collaborator on several major projects and a key link bridging interwar and socialist mural practices, explained that the difference lay in complexity: "Mural painting, without abandoning a decorative conception, stylisation, and integration with architecture, encompasses a wider range of elements, organises figures in a rhythm of broad movement, accentuates the human figure, engages in deeper problematization, and is at once an art of analysis and of synthesis."²¹

Without ever claiming the mantle of a theoretician, Perahim was instrumental in propagating a conceptual vocabulary for mural art, both as an art bureaucrat and as an artist. By the late 1950s, muralism had been promoted to one of the most important categories of official art, tasked with propagating state ideology. Defining the specificity of mural painting, however, became a site of negotiation between the requirements of socialist realism and what would later be referred to as socialist modernism. These negotiations decisively shaped the medium most favoured by official commissions in socialist Romania from the 1960s onward: mosaic, valued for both its durability and its relatively simple integration in a synthesis with architecture.

Meanwhile in the West: Perahim in Geneva

At the very moment when discussions on mural art gained momentum in post-Stalinist Romania, the concept of synthesis was already far from novel. It not only possessed a conceptual history extending back before the Second World War but also functioned as a vital connective thread to different modernities. In the context of postwar reconstruction in the West, Le Corbusier became a prominent advocate of synthesis in his seminal article “Vers l'unité” (Towards Unity), whose rhetoric combined reconciliatory aspirations with distinctly collectivist inflections.²² Numerous organisations placed the cooperation between art and architecture at the core of their mission, including the CIAM (*Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*), the Association for the Synthesis of Plastic Arts (*Association pour une Synthèse des Arts Plastiques*) led by Henri Matisse, Le Corbusier himself, and André Bloc, and the AIAP (*Association Internationale des Arts Plastiques*). The AIAP, founded in 1954 under the aegis of UNESCO, had a worldwide influence that encompassed socialist countries.²³ The archives of the Artists' Union in Bucharest preserved documentation regarding the establishment of a Romanian section of the AIAP, as well as transcripts of international meetings at which artists of various origin expressed their intent to contribute to postwar reconstruction by invoking the principle of artistic synthesis.²⁴ At the 1963 AIAP Congress in New York, also attended by the Romanian representatives, a charter inspired by the Athens Charter was formulated to guide future collaborations between architects and artists.²⁵ The activities conducted by the AIAP could be a useful indicator for the extent to which artistic concepts circulated across the postwar world, demonstrating the permeability of the Iron Curtain despite ideological conflict.

These exchanges opened new directions for mural art. Their primary focus was to redefine monumentality by disentangling it from its fascist genealogies and rearticulating it as genuine and democratic.²⁶ The synthesis of the arts and the reinvented monumental vision were adopted not only in the Eastern Bloc but also within the cultural initiatives of Western governments, which aimed to create public art that was able to embody the new postwar aspirations while simultaneously negotiating the antagonisms of the Cold War.

Perahim held an exceptional position among artists living under socialism in the 1950s: despite the limitations on circulation, he benefited from direct exposure to monumental practices on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Shortly after completing his first large-scale mural commission in Bucharest, he received a special commission in 1960 for a mosaic intended for the new headquarters of the United International Bureaux

for the Protection of Intellectual Property (*Bureaux Internationaux Réunis pour la Protection de la Propriété Intellectuelle*, BIRPI, predecessor to the WIPO) in Geneva, an organisation affiliated with the United Nations. The building, designed by Pierre Brillard, who played a pivotal role in shaping postwar Geneva, was decorated with diplomatic gifts of member states. Although the architect's impact on the selection and the spatial distribution of these artworks remains unclear, the outcome was undoubtedly a synthesis of arts, although it occasionally deviated towards eclecticism when assessed against the criteria of international postwar modernism.²⁷

Romania's gift was among the most substantial ones. It marked the country's admission to the United Nations in 1956 after prolonged delays and political conflict.²⁸ Installed in August 1960, the 24 m² faience mosaic, designed in the colours of the Romanian flag, was created by Perahim in collaboration with Ștefan Constantinescu, who was twenty years his senior, and an experienced muralist as well as a professor at the Department of Mural Art at the Institute of Arts in Bucharest. Perahim himself acknowledged Constantinescu as the main author of the work, a reasonable claim considering the complexity of its compositional interdependencies and differentiated treatment of surface, neatly differentiating it from Perahim's earlier murals in Romania [**Figure 5**].

The mosaic's concept aligned impeccably with the institution's function of overseeing intellectual and industrial property. The iconography combined figurative and symbolic elements referencing industrial labour and infrastructure (steelworkers, a dam, and industrial products) as well as intellectual and artistic activities (a reader, a sculptor, and a lyre). The robust constitution of the figures and their worker's attire imparted a distinctly socialist aspect to the composition, emphasising that workers were the agents of both the conception and the performance of their labour [**Figure 6**]. This convergence of intellectual, artistic, and industrial labour echoed one of the central tropes of socialist realism, frequently used in Romanian monumental art. Thus, Romania succeeded in exporting socialist realism to the West, integrating it within a framework of artistic-architectural synthesis that was both connected to and yet distinct from its Eastern Bloc counterparts.

However, the project's reception felt less glorious. As a report written by Perahim after his return reveals, the Romanian authorities exhibited no enduring interest in advancing the commission, neither in Switzerland nor domestically, neglecting to leverage its potential propagandistic significance.²⁹ What might have been a diplomatic triumph turned into a missed



Figure 5. Entrance hall of the United International Bureaux for the Protection of Intellectual Property (BIRPI), Geneva, 1963. Source: World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Archives, WIPO Historical Photograph Collection, item b000036.

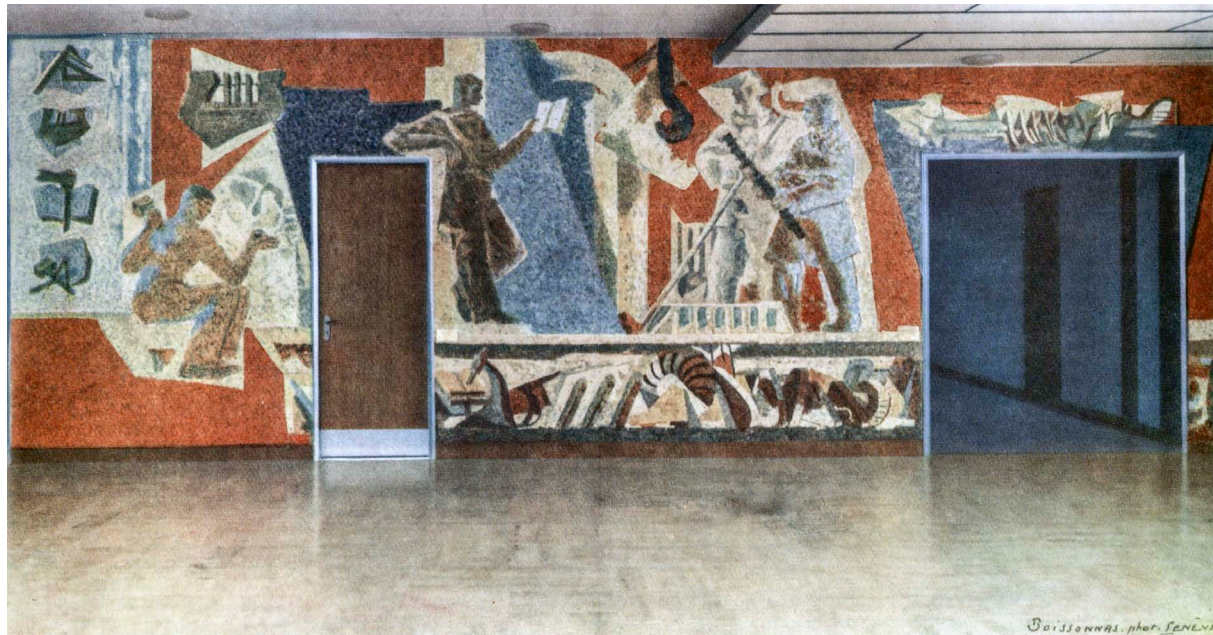


Figure 6. Jules Perahim and Ștefan Constantinescu, Munca industrială și munca intelectuală (Industrial and Intellectual Work), mosaic, United International Bureaux for the Protection of Intellectual Property (BIRPI), Geneva, 1959. Source: Arta plastică 10, no. 7 (1963).

opportunity. Only through Perahim's own efforts at self-promotion have a few reproductions of the mosaic, now absent in Geneva, survived in Romanian cultural publications, allowing the project to retain a place, however muted, in the visual record of socialist monumental art.

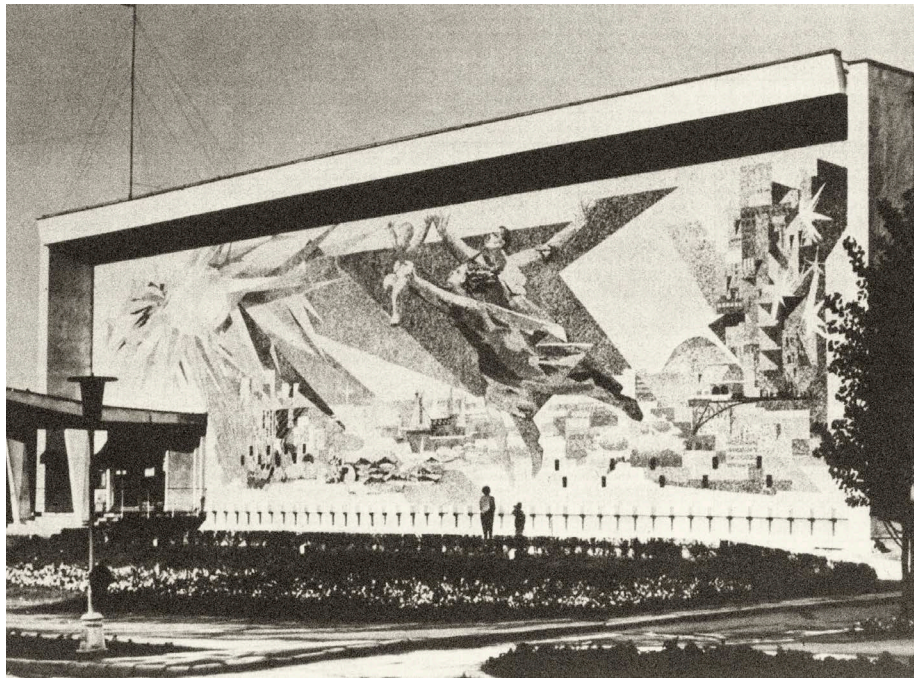
**The socialist
contract
of beauty:
Perahim's
mosaics in
model urban
spaces**

The late 1950s were a period of tentative exploration and adjustment for mural painting, whereas the 1960s in Romania saw extensive building campaigns that provided numerous opportunities to implement, test, and consolidate methods and techniques for combining the visual arts with architecture. Large-scale urban extensions were planned for both major cities and newly developed industrial towns, allowing the creation of housing ensembles with the goal of accommodating an increasing number of people while reflecting complex architectural ideas based on modernist principles. Simultaneously, these programmes served as guarantors of the regime's planned new social contract, which now relied not solely on coercion but on gaining benevolence on the part of its citizens and on the cultivation of desire as a social binding force. The pure forms of modernist architecture corresponded perfectly with the regime's desire to create a modern state identity capable of providing its subjects with both comfort and an aesthetically pleasing setting. As in other communist countries, the promotion of modernist architectural concepts arose from the junction of political decision-making and the professional agendas of architects and construction specialists. This growth was accelerated by the exchange of architectural ideas and practices between the West,³⁰ the Soviet Union, and other Eastern Bloc countries.

By adopting the period's conceptual vocabulary and stressing "monumentality" as the connective thread between architecture, decoration, and the viewer, Jules Perahim projected a magnificent aura on the purpose of artists working in large-scale urban and architectural projects: "The monumental vision demands embodiment in forms of powerful expressivity, in a vivid rhythm, and in expressive chromatic harmonies; all these must be fused into an image perceptible from afar, one that complements architecture and imposes itself through grandeur and sobriety."³¹ This discourse coincided with the development of media, methods, and materials capable of embodying monumentality and everyday beauty: mosaic (both handmade and industrially made), sgraffito, monumental ceramics for interiors and exteriors, tapestry, urban design, and sculpture. Next to sculpture, large-scale mosaics, envisioned as an extension of painting, ranked first among state commissions, not only for their durability but also for their prestige, which drew many artists eager to participate in such public art projects.

Figure 7.
Jules Perahim and
Ștefan Constantinescu,
*Tinerete / Revoluția
culturală* (Youth / The
Cultural Revolution),
mosaic, House of
Culture, Mangalia,
1962.

Source: *Arta plastică* 10,
no. 7 (1963).



Always strategically positioned, Perahim secured mosaic commissions in two of Romania's most prominent architectural projects of the 1960s and beyond. In both cases, he was granted the largest surfaces, and the most conspicuous places within the building complex.

The first to be completed was the commission for the house of culture in Mangalia, which went by several names, such as *Tinerete* (Youth), *Revoluția culturală* (The Cultural Revolution) [Figure 7], and more recently *Geneze* (Genesis; the sole mural by Perahim in good condition today). Located on the Black Sea coast, the town was part of the ambitious architectural and political programme for remodelling and expanding seaside tourism infrastructure, which began in 1955 and culminated in the 1960s. This programme had far-reaching implications, influencing forms of construction and planning throughout Romania's socialist era and transforming the coastline into a genuine modernist laboratory.³² It also served as an experimental ground for mosaic, sgraffito, and mixed mural methods, all of which benefited from a sort of suspension of socialist realist orthodoxy, much like architecture. Depending on the artist and the function of the building, modernist idioms of various origins developed, putting pressure on the canons of both representation and architectural planning.

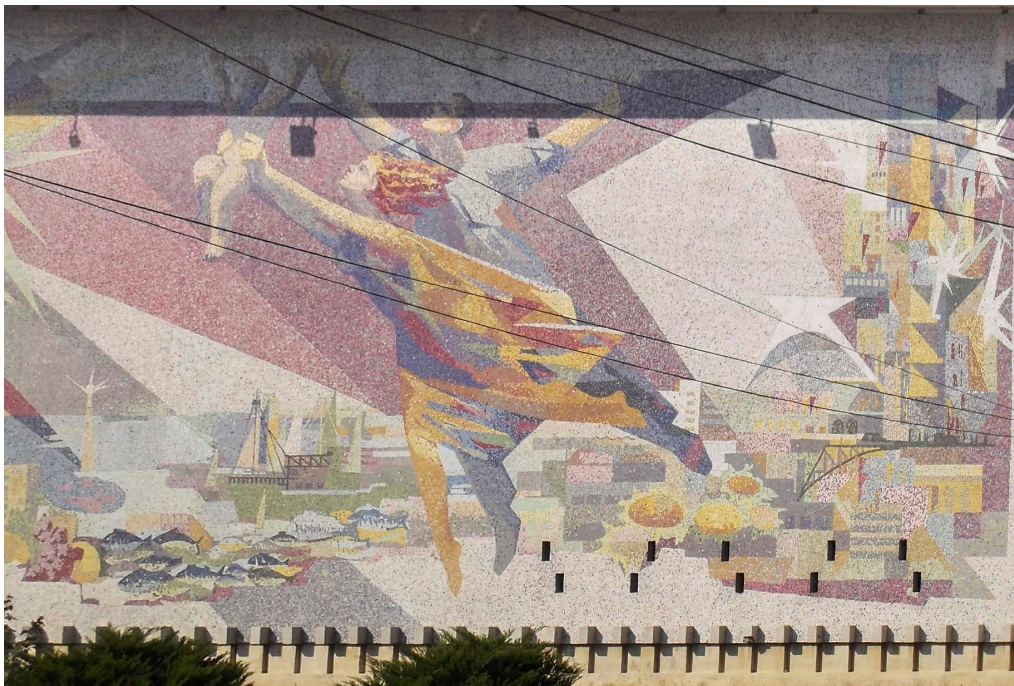
According to Carmen Popescu, the new coastal architecture served as a "modernist visual machine".³³ Following the same line, Juliana Maxim

highlighted its importance in seducing the socialist citizen on vacation.³⁴ Urban and architectural ensembles became, thus, visions of tomorrow, designed to be perceived as complete environments. If extended beyond architecture to encompass the broader ensembles of urban design, sculpture, and murals, the arguments of the two authors acquire even richer significance. As a whole, they created a seductive visual machine from which the viewer could hardly escape.

Perahim's mosaic design for the house of culture in Mangalia, finished in 1962, again in collaboration with Ștefan Constantinescu, exemplifies the requirements for murals, including monumentality, expressive force, and rhythm, which were previously stated in his discourses. The building's main façade was purposefully designed as a flat surface with no openings to allow for large-scale decoration, a decision that the architect Nicolae Vlădescu also framed in terms of monumentality: "Employing simple elements, the chosen composition sought to achieve a sober, major architectural expression, whose monumentality was to be fulfilled by the mural decoration on the entire surface of the main façade."³⁵

At the time of completion, the Mangalia mosaic was the largest in Romania. Its iconography focused on political rather than cultural themes, reflecting the important role that houses of culture throughout the country played in the regime's propaganda apparatus [Figures 8, 9]. The massive couple, lifting their child in the air in a dance-like movement, as though propelling it directly into the future, recalls the iconography of Soviet posters from the 1930s. Youth and family, depicted in idealised human bodies, were central to the political repertoire, reflecting the ideal socialist subject because traits associated with youth, such as strength and enthusiasm, were resonating with the spirit of political engagement. The environment in which the perfect family floats fluidly combines agricultural plenty, modernist housing, industrial buildings, and maritime activity, rendering both a complex landscape and the promise of prosperity in state socialism. By the early 1960s, Perahim and Constantinescu were among the first in Romania to go beyond the literal depictions of socialist realism while still maintaining an explicit political message. Perahim himself advocated art that would be instructive without being didactic or simplistic.³⁶

As the urban planning and architectural design of Black Sea leisure resorts eventually extended into metropolitan contexts,³⁷ monumental and decorative arts followed. The Țiglina district of Galați was created in 1960 alongside the building of Romania's largest steelworks and finished in stages until 1966. Mosaics of varying sizes decorated the walls



Figures 8, 9. Jules Perahim and Ștefan Constantinescu, *Tinerețe / Revoluția culturală* (Youth / The Cultural Revolution), mosaic, House of Culture, Mangalia, 1962. General view and detail. Photo: Irina Cărbăș, 2015.

Figure 10. Cinema building, Țiglina district, Galați, 1962. Source: Digital Archive of the Union of Architects of Romania, © Uniunea Arhitecților din România.



Figure 11. Jules Perahim, *Arta cinematografică* (The Art of Cinema), mosaic, cinema building, Țiglina district, Galați, 1963. Photo: Irina Cărbăș, 2015.



of apartment blocks and cultural and commercial buildings, and green spaces were enriched with fountains, sculptures, and ceramic installations. The district cinema was designed by the architect Maria Bucur as a massive “street screen”, for which Perahim conceived a mosaic in accordance not only with the blind façade but also, at least formally, with the sculpture by Peter Balogh placed in front [Figure 10].

Perahim’s work was a kind of soft spot of the “visual machine” because of its reflexive character, focusing on vision itself. The mosaic (still on site but abandoned), installed in 1963, depicted an allegory of cinema: a glamorous monochrome female figure projected against a background of abstract concentric forms radiating from the film camera she holds into

the urban space. Although certain motifs suggested aquatic landscapes (a nod to Galați's location as a Danube port), the gradient from white to black of the abstract forms was designed to represent the play of light and shadow found in cinematic images [Figure 11]. As in all of Perahim's solo mural projects, the graphic dimension was explicit but here without any caution. However, more than any other of his monumental works, this mosaic boldly experimented with modernist, abstract, and surrealist elements, ultimately demonstrating that the expansion of the cultural "thaw" was not solely the responsibility of new generations or "alternative" artists but was also advanced by officially commissioned practitioners.

Conclusion

The mosaic in Galați was the last large-scale work that Perahim's name was directly associated with in socialist Romania. A longtime legend in the Romanian art world attributes to him the monumental mosaic on the façade of the Museum of the Romanian Communist Party in Bucharest installed in 1966, which is officially ascribed to Ștefan Constantinescu. This mythology may indeed maintain the recollection of another collaboration between the two artists, still unconfirmed. Furthermore, by the late 1960s, socialist realism had been entirely relegated to the margins of the cultural field, and artists, like Perahim, that held significant power in the previous decade were tacitly relocated into secondary positions. Perahim's emigration to France in 1969 further contributed to the erasure of his name.

Murals, especially mosaics, were conceived as long-lasting witnesses to the definitive character of socialism and to the idea that, under socialism, society had reached the final stage of evolution, necessitating only refinement. Nevertheless, the murals Perahim produced in the 1950s and 1960s have either been covered/destroyed or obscured by historical misleads and myths. These multiple erasures can be read as a consequence of changing cultural policies during socialism and post-socialism, as well as a result of the artist's personal strategies of self-redefinition.

The first level of erasure was connected with the controlled oblivion of socialist realism during the cultural "thaw", when the regime itself encouraged amnesia to establish new legitimacy. A subsequent erasure entailed the systematic exclusion of Perahim's name from the historical narrative of monumental art in socialist Romania after his departure for France.³⁸ At the same time, in his endeavour to secure a place within the French art scene, Perahim deliberately obliterated the memory of works

that identified him as an artist once aligned with the socialist regime. His re-invention as a surrealist painter for the French art market (painting being only occasionally practiced prior to his departure from Romania) enjoyed some degree of success precisely because it was paired with the image of the artist as a free wanderer of imagination, creating an art that was self-contained and for which political strings would have been fatal. The post-socialist period in Romania later exacerbated and institutionalised these layers of amnesia, incorporating them into the broader project of extracting the communist experience from what was perceived as the “true” trajectory of local history, aligned with Western paradigms.³⁹ Perahim re-entered Romanian art history as an avant-garde artist when the local historical avant-garde was being reconsidered during the 1990s, with scholars cautiously avoiding any references to his prolific and multifarious career throughout the first two decades of the communist regime. Thus, reconstructing Perahim’s involvement in public art in socialist Romania still needs much investigation because it has to grapple with multiple lacunae and erasures both of his works and of his biography. But it also sheds new light on the ways in which the discourse on monumental art was constructed in postwar Romania, on the major architectural projects initiated by the regime, and on the complexity and contradictions of the artist’s social engagement during the socialist era. Furthermore, his public works represent, however faintly today, an aspirational image of collectivity without which a significant part of the local built environment under socialism would lose some of its initial meanings.

Endnotes

- 1 Irina Cărăbaș, *Realismul socialist cu fața spre trecut. Instituții și artiști în România: 1944–1953* (Cluj-Napoca: Idea Design & Print, 2017), 190–195.
- 2 Krisztina Fehérváry, *Politics in Color and Concrete: Socialist Materialities and Middle-Class Citizenship in Hungary, 1950–2000* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 113–117; Vladimir Kulić and Maroje Mrduljaš, *Modernism In-Between: The Mediatory Architectures of Socialist Yugoslavia* (Berlin: Jovis, 2012), 166–167; Virág Molnár, *Building the State: Architecture, Politics, and State Formation in Postwar Central Europe* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013), 69–70; Juliana Maxim, *The Socialist Life of Modern Architecture: Bucharest, 1949–1964* (London: Routledge, 2019), 55–59; J. R. Jenkins, *Picturing Socialism: Public Art and Design in East Germany* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021), 6–7.
- 3 Patryk Babiracki and Kenyon Zimmer, eds., *Cold War Crossings: International Travel and Exchange across the Soviet Bloc, 1940s–1960s* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2014); Simo Mikkonen and Pia Koivunen, eds., *Beyond the Divide: Entangled Histories in Cold War Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).
- 4 Gina Copaci, “Întâlnire cu Perahim,” *Tribuna*, 4 July 1963, 10.
- 5 *Arta plastică* 7, no. 1 (1960); *Arta plastică* 10, no. 7 (1963).
- 6 Eugen Schilleru, [Debates], *Arta plastică* 10, no. 7 (1963): 377.
- 7 Petru Comarnescu, “Premise pentru o largă dezvoltare a picturii murale,” *Arta plastică* 6, no. 2 (1959): 37–39.
- 8 Anton Moisescu, [Debates], *Arta plastică* 10, no. 7 (1963): 379.
- 9 Lelia Zuaf, “Discutând despre arta monumentală,” *Scînteia*, 5693, 26 October 1962, 4; see also Jules Perahim, Boris Caragea, and Ion Bițan, “Discuții despre arta monumentală,” *Scînteia*, 13 December 1962, 3.
- 10 Anton Moisescu, “Discuții despre arta monumentală. Modalități și procedee insuficient folosite,” *Scînteia*, 8 November 1962, 4; see also Marcel Locar, “Discuții despre arta monumentală,” *Scînteia*, 13 December 1962, 3. See also Magda Predescu, *Utopie și heterotopie în arta românească din România anilor 1950–1970. Variațiile canonului artistic* (Cluj-Napoca: Idea Design & Print, 2018), 281–282.
- 11 Viorica Iacob, interview by author, Bucharest, 8 August 2025.
- 12 Jules Perahim, “Text prescurtat al referatului prezentat de Jules Perahim, vicepreședinte al Consiliului artelor plastice din C.S.C.A., în cadrul plenarei lărgite, din 10 iulie 1963, a Consiliului artelor plastice,” *Arta plastică* 10, no. 7 (1963): 375.
- 13 N. Delaport, “Viitoarele decorații monumentale la casele de cultură ale tineretului,” *Arta plastică* 6, no. 2 (1959): 40–41; Costin Ioanid, “Decorarea caselor de cultură raionale ale tineretului,” *Gazeta literară*, 18 June 1959, 7.
- 14 Florin Mezopol, interview by author, Buzău, 6 August 2025; Mihai Mănescu, *Țarul cu flori* (Bucharest: Semne, 2004), 174.
- 15 It is not very clear what Perahim’s contribution to these panels was. Some sources name Aurel Stoicescu as the author of the project; for example, Paul Constantin, “Specificul picturii monumentale (decorația caselor de cultură ale tineretului din București ‘Vasile Roaită’ și ‘Tudor Vladimirescu’),” *Arta plastică* 7, no. 1 (1960): 16, whereas the captions of their reproductions in the same publication acknowledged him as the first author.
- 16 Jack Brutaru, “Realizări în domeniul picturii monumentale,” *Arta plastică* 6, no. 2 (1959): 35–36; Vasile Drăguț, “Semnificația majoră a picturii monumentale,” *Arta plastică* 6, no. 2 (1959): 36; Petru Comarnescu, “Premise pentru o largă dezvoltare a picturii murale,” *Arta plastică* 6, no. 2 (1959): 37–38.
- 17 Dorio Lazăr, “Discuții despre arta monumentală. O problemă de principii,” *Scînteia*, 29 November 1962, 2; Drăguț, “Semnificația majoră,” 36.
- 18 Jenkins, *Picturing Socialism*, 4.

- 19 Ion Frunzetti, "Monumental și monumentalitate," *Contemporanul*, 18 April 1958, 5.
- 20 Olga Greceanu, *Compoziția murală. Legile și tehnica ei* (Bucharest, 1935), 9–13. For a similar discussion in East Germany, see Jenkins, *Picturing Socialism*, 34.
- 21 Ileana Bratu, "Decorația în arhitectura litoralului," *Contemporanul*, 27 October 1961, 6.
- 22 Christopher Pearson, "Le Corbusier's 'Synthesis of the Major Arts' in the Context of the French Reconstruction," in *The Built Surface*, vol. 2, ed. Karen Koehler and Christy Anderson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 211–217.
- 23 Predescu, *Utopie și Heterotopie*, 263.
- 24 National Archives of Romania (*Arhivele Naționale ale României*), folder Uniunea Artiștilor Plastici, 27/1956, 43.
- 25 Mircea Popescu, "La cel de-al IV-lea congres al Asociației Internaționale a Artelor Plastice," *Arta plastică* 10, nos. 10–11 (1963): 591–592.
- 26 Romy Golan, "From Monument to Muralnomad: The Mural in Modern European Architecture," in *The Built Surface*, vol. 2, ed. Karen Koehler and Christy Anderson (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002), 200.
- 27 Archives of *Fondation Braillard Architectes*, 02.545.10. I thank Paul Marti for providing this document.
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- 29 Diplomatic Archives of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Arhiva diplomatică a Ministerului Afacerilor Externe al României*), Switzerland/postwar, file 217, 1960, 41–44.
- 30 Carmen Popescu, "Looking West: Emulation and Limitation in Romanian Architectural Discourse," *The Journal of Architecture* 14, no. 1 (2009): 110–114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602360802705072>.
- 31 Perahim, "Text prescurtat al referatului," 372–374.
- 32 Alina Șerban, Kalliopi Dimou, and Sorin Istudor, eds., *Vederi încântătoare. Urbanism și arhitectură în turismul românesc de la Marea Neagră în anii '60-'70 / Enchanting Views: Romanian Black Sea Tourism Planning and Architecture of the 1960s and 70s* (Bucharest: Institutul Prezentului, 2024).
- 33 Carmen Popescu, "An Effective Mechanics: The Romanian Seaside in the Socialist Period," in *Vederi încântătoare. Urbanism și arhitectură în turismul românesc de la Marea Neagră în anii '60-'70 / Enchanting Views: Romanian Black Sea Tourism Planning and Architecture of the 1960s and 70s*, ed. Alina Șerban, Kalliopi Dimou, and Sorin Istudor (Bucharest: Institutul Prezentului, 2024), 22.
- 34 Juliana Maxim, "Enchanting Views: The Politics of Seduction in Early Romanian Socialist Resorts," in *Vederi încântătoare. Urbanism și arhitectură în turismul românesc de la Marea Neagră în anii '60-'70 / Enchanting Views: Romanian Black Sea Tourism Planning and Architecture of the 1960s and 70s*, ed. Alina Șerban, Kalliopi Dimou, and Sorin Istudor (Bucharest: Institutul Prezentului, 2024), 100.
- 35 Nicolae Vlădescu, "Casa de cultură Mangalia," *Arhitectura* 9, no. 4–5 (1961): 66–69.
- 36 Perahim, Caragea, and Bițan, "Discuții despre arta monumentală," 3.
- 37 Maxim, "Enchanting Views," 89; Dana Vais, "Mamaia ca model: cartierul 'radios' de locuințe în anii 1960," *Arhitectura*, no. 1–2 (2024).
- 38 None of these books mention Perahim, although they refer to mural works that he co-authored with Ștefan Constantinescu: Mircea Grozdea, *Arta monumentală în România socialistă* (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1974); Mircea Grozdea, *Arta monumentală în România socialistă* (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1987); Mircea Grozdea, *Ștefan Constantinescu* (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1978).
- 39 Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, "Decolonizing Eastern Europe: Beyond Internal Critique," in *Performing History. Catalogue and Supplement to the Romanian Pavilion of the Venice Biennial*, ed. Bogdan Ghiu (Cluj: Idea Design & Print, 2011).

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Stenske poslikave Julesa Perahima in politika grajenega okolja v Romuniji v poststalinističnem obdobju

Povzetek

V poglavju je skozi prizmo kariere umetnika Julesa Perahima (1914–2008) obravnavano oblikovanje javne stenske umetnosti v socialistični Romuniji, pri čemer je poudarek zlasti na Perahimovih projektih iz poznih petdesetih in šestdesetih let 20. stoletja. Na podlagi arhivskih dokumentov, sočasne periodike in pričevanj umetnikov je analizirano, kako sta koncepta »sinteze umetnosti« in »monumentalnosti« v poststalinističnem obdobju preoblikovala umetniško produkcijo, arhitekturno prakso in kulturno politiko. Osrednja teza študije je, da je umetnost v javnem prostoru postala pomembno prizorišče postopnega prehoda od socialističnega realizma k socialističnemu modernizmu, pri čemer je ohranila ideološko in pedagoško funkcijo. Ta proces je umeščen v širši povojni diskurz o sintezi umetnosti, ki je spodbujal sodelovanje arhitekture in likovnih umetnosti pri oblikovanju modernih socialističnih okolij. V Romuniji se je ta diskurz še posebej okrepil med letoma 1959 in 1963, ko so umetniki, arhitekti, kritiki in kulturni funkcionarji v razpravah skušali opredeliti vlogo stenske umetnosti v socialističnem mestu.

Perahim je bil pri uveljavljanju monumentalne umetnosti pomemben tako na institucionalni kot na umetniški ravni. Kot urednik in kulturni funkcionar se je zavzemal za povezovanje umetnosti in arhitekture, kot umetnik pa je sodeloval v nekaterih prvih večjih programih stenskega slikarstva v socialistični Romuniji. Mladinski kulturni domovi, zgrajeni v Bukarešti v letih 1958 in 1959, so delovali kot eksperimentalni laboratoriji na področju stenskega slikarstva. Perahim je vodil zasnovo likovne opreme Mladinskega kulturnega doma Vasila Roaite in ustvaril dela, v katerih je bil vizualni jezik grafike in propagandnega plakata prenesen v velike stenske kompozicije.

V poglavju je romunski kontekst postavljen tudi v mednarodni okvir. Kljub delitvam zaradi hladne vojne so se po drugi svetovni vojni – tudi prek organizacij, kot sta CIAM in AIAP – intenzivno širile teorije o sintezi umetnosti. V te mednarodne tokove je bil vpet tudi Perahim. Leta 1960 je s Štefanom Constantinescujem sodeloval pri monumentalnem mozaiku za sedež BIRPI v Ženevi, predhodnice Svetovne organizacije za intelektualno lastnino. Delo, ki povezuje socialistično ikonografijo z modernistično monumentalno estetiko, kaže, kako je romunska socialistična umetnost

lahko vstopala v mednarodno povojno vizualno kulturo in hkrati na Zahod posredovala socialističnorealistične teme.

Najobsežnejši del poglavja je posvečen Perahimovim mozaikom v velikih urbanističnih projektih šestdesetih let, predvsem v črnemorskem mestu Mangalia in industrijski četrti Țiglina v Galați. Ta okolja so utelešala novo »družbeno pogodbo« režima, ki legitimnosti ni gradil le na ideologiji, temveč tudi na obljubah udobja in na oblikovanju potrošniških želja. Monumentalni mozaiki so v teh modernističnih urbanih ansamblih postali ključni elementi posredovanja med arhitekturo, dekoracijo in vsakdanjim življenjem. Mozaik za Dom kulture v Mangalii, ki sta ga skupaj zasnovala Perahim in Constantinescu, prikazuje idealizirano socialistično mladino, družino, delo in blaginjo v monumentalnem, a vse bolj moderniziranem vizualnem jeziku. Pri kasnejšem mozaiku za kino v Galați je Perahim še izraziteje eksperimentiral z abstrakcijo in nadrealističnimi prvini, kar kaže, da so širjenje kulturne »odjuge« sooblikovali tudi umetniki, ki so delovali v okviru uradnih naročil.

V sklepnem delu besedila je obravnavan kasnejši izbris Perahimovega monumentalnega opusa iz javnega prostora in lokalne umetnostne zgodovine. Veliko njegovih stenskih poslikav je bilo uničenih, prekritih ali potisnjenih v pozabo, k zamolčanju njegovega ustvarjanja iz socialističnega obdobja pa je prispevala tudi umetnikova emigracija v Francijo leta 1969. Z rekonstrukcijo Perahimovega prispevka k socialistični umetnosti v javnem prostoru v poglavju ni razkrita zgolj kompleksnost umetniškega delovanja v državnem socializmu, temveč tudi osrednja vloga monumentalne umetnosti pri oblikovanju vizualne in ideološke krajine povojne Romunije.

A substantial body of postwar art created for institutional environments remains hidden in plain sight: in schools, hospitals, municipal offices, factories, hotels, shops, and other spaces of everyday life. Some works remain intact, others survive in altered interiors or as partial material remains, and still others are known only through scattered archival records, photographs, and uncertain

memories. Many have been covered, relocated, destroyed or forgotten, even though they formed an important part of postwar public space and visual culture.

This volume contributes to the transnational study of art

commissioned for public institutions, a field that remains unevenly researched across national contexts. The chapters show how institutions used art to shape their environments and how later changes in use or ownership affected the works' meanings and prospects for preservation.

