

Măiastra: A History of Romanian Sculpture in Twenty-Four Parts

VOLUME ONE PARTS I–XII



Igor Gyalakuthy

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ROMANIAN SCULPTURE
IN TWENTY-FOUR PARTS

VOLUME ONE
PARTS I – XII



Pacific

NEW YORK BUCHAREST LONDON

Publisher's Note

Igor Gyalakuthy's *Măiastra* first appeared in print in *The Miami Rail* between 2015 and 2018. In accordance with the professor's wishes, the texts have been presented here with their original notes and corrections.

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First International Edition, September 2019

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Published by Pacific www.pacificpacific.pub

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Cover Design and Layout Design by Adam Turnbull
Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro
Printed in Poland

Edition of 250

ISBN: 978-1-7332957-0-3

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Modura Fountain, Herastrau Park, Bucharest, 1939

WANDERING ROCKS

One sunny day in the summer of 2010, while combing through the stalls of Bellu Cemetery in Bucharest, two men made a surprising discovery. Sleeping peacefully under an alder tree in a shaded corner of the graveyard was a life-sized statue of a Romanian peasant woman; she was adorned in traditional dress, with a pitcher of water on her shoulder and a long braid of bronze hair trailing down her neck.

This would not have been an uncommon sight in Bellu. Romania's turbulent political history, its rich artistic tradition, its folksy, superstitious piety and often-garish morbidity have resulted in cemeteries littered with all manner of memorial statuary odds and ends. But these two men were not chance passers-by; one of them, a Mr. Ghelase, was charged by his government with the retrieval of public artifacts lost during the cultural dark ages of the Communist regime. The men were treasure hunters, and after some deliberation, decided that they had in fact stumbled upon a jewel of Romanian sculpture long thought lost. But there she stood. It was she, *Modura*.

Maria Mudura is a heroine of Romanian folklore: a peasant woman said to have given water to a thirsty King Carol II after his plane crash-landed in the Transylvanian woods in 1930. Her grateful king brought her to Bucharest, where she was feted by her countrymen, her likeness printed on the banknotes, and her family name, in tragically Romanian fashion, misspelled and then immortalized.

In 1936, sculptor Constantin Baraschi won a commission to build a monument to mark the creation of a new Park in Bucharest. At the entrance of what is now Herăstrău park, he built the *Alley of Caryatids*: twenty stone peasant women with jugs of water on their heads, assembled in the Hellenistic style (two rows of ten), that formed a pathway to the centerpiece of his sculptural ensemble: *The Fountain of Modura*. Baraschi's bronze likeness of the woman is a remarkable work, one whose features capture the pathos of a nation reconciling its muddled Eastern ancestry with aspirations of Northern European beauty.

After World War II, the Communist regime renamed the park after Joseph Stalin, and a large bronze statue of the dictator was commissioned to rechristen the entrance. Baraschi's sculptural ensemble was demolished to make room for the incoming effigy, and the statues of Modura and her caryatids were believed lost or destroyed for nearly sixty years. [Note: *The harrowing journey of the Stalin bronze, sculpted by the infamous Dumitru Demu, is equally fascinating. See Part XI.*]

Sometime during all of the chaos, the old girl must have wandered off. Modura fled south, and interred herself in a graveyard nearly ten kilometers away. Not even the Communists, it seems, would dare wake the dead. [Note: *Lesser recreations of the Modura Fountain and the Alley of Caryatids were made in 2006 by sculptor Ionel Stoicescu in their original positions in Herăstrău. The original Modura remains in Bellu, where she marks the grave of Elly Baraschi, the sculptor's indomitably elegant wife.*]

Baraschi's sculptures have a history of wandering off. In 1959, the artist entered a competition to design a public statue of Communist leader Vladimir Lenin. He lost, and when he lost, as legend goes, he replaced Lenin's head with that of Romanian playwright Ion Luca Caragiale, the country's favorite dramatist. Grinning under his famous mustache, his left hand placed casually in Lenin's pocket, Baraschi's *Caragiale* looks everything like a man out for a walk. And between the years 1959 and 2006, that's exactly who he was. For reasons as much bureaucratic as political, Caragiale got around. From the artist's studio to a residential courtyard in Splai, to the Cartea Românească Publishing House, to Maria Rosetti Street, to the lawn of the National Theater and back finally to Rosetti, Caragiale's journey across Bucharest was over fifty years and nearly seven kilometers long. That's a distance for an old man.

It could have been worse. The winning *Lenin*, a seven-ton bronze by sculptor Boris Caragea, which stood in front of the Casa Scânteii for thirty years, was torn down by an angry mob in 1990, a year after the Revolution. For the next twenty years, Lenin lay on his stomach, his face in the mud, on the grounds behind Mogoșoaia Palace. He has with him for company Petru Groza, the defamed former prime minister of Romania under Soviet rule, whose bronze body, unlike Lenin's, lies mercifully supine. Visitors to the palace snap photos of their children walking up and down the men's torsos, and straddling their bald heads like cattle. [Note: Both

bronzes have once again been moved, and their whereabouts are currently unknown to me. There are murmurs of construction on a Communist sculpture graveyard similar to Memento Park in Budapest.]

Once upon a time there were two giants, twin brothers, who met a beautiful young nymph and fell deeply in love with her. Unable to choose between the brothers, the nymph threw herself into the ocean, believing that the twin who rescued her was destined to be her husband. The brothers argued over who would save her, and while they argued, the young girl drowned. As punishment, the gods turned the giants to stone, and the nymph into a cascading waterfall. *[Note: This story appears in a collection of fairy tales written by Romanian Queen Elisabeta, though it bears a strong resemblance to the story of the River Tamar in southern England, with which the queen would undoubtedly have been familiar.]*

The myth of the giants served as the basis for a sculptural ensemble commissioned for the inauguration of Carol II Park in Bucharest in 1906. The *Giants* are carved from Rousse stone, the works of Frederick Stork and Dimitrie Paciurea respectively, two veritable giants of Romanian sculpture in the early twentieth century. *[Note: See Part VI and Part III respectively.]* The *Sleeping Nymph* is a marble by Filip Marin, a former student of Stork and Paciurea's. *[Note: See Part VIII.]* For more than thirty years, Marin's *Nymph* lay contentedly in her grotto, a handsome stone *Giant* on either side of her.



Baraschi's statue of I.L. Caragiale in transit



Boris Carageas's *Lenin* taking flight

The legend has a familiar ending. The park was renamed, the grotto destroyed, and room cleared for a new monument: a mausoleum succinctly titled *Monument of the Heroes for the Freedom of the People and of the Motherland, for Socialism*. Today the *Giants* remain in Carol Park, but without a lover to win they are now purely ornamental. The *Sleeping Nymph* has stolen away to the safety of Herăstrău, which, like Bellu, has become a repository for wayward statuary. Once an allegorical celebration of the best of Romanian sculpture, robbed of their context these lovers appear as nothing more than awkward replications of antiquity. Meanwhile, the specter of the mausoleum that took their place continues to cast a sinister pallor over the park. [Note: The tomb was repurposed in 1991 to commemorate the veterans of World War I. Still ghastly.]



The Giants and the Sleeping Nymph sculptural ensemble, Carol I Park, Bucharest, 1906

Back when *Caragiale* stood casually on the lawn in front of the National Theater, it was possible to imagine every pair of passing hands as those that penned the words, “History, for us, must be an endless wellspring of healthy poetry.” In truth, Romanian history is a fetid, smoldering trough. Communism’s most potent assault on this country was the obfuscation of the national memory. Like ancient civilizations, so much of the writing and painting with which we might reassemble our history is gone. Like those ancient civilizations, however, the statuary remains: the sculptures, the busts, the monuments, and the tombs. They are the old men and women of Romania, scattered about by tectonic seizures of change to odysseys of bronze and stone. The purpose of these pages is to locate them once more, and to secure them firmly to the ground.



Baraschi's lost *Caryatid* in Bellu Cemetary



Diogene Maillart, *Posthumous Portrait of Iulia Hasdeu*, Oil on canvas, 1889

THE CHIMERA

“More goat than donkey.” This is how my father described Hasdeu, with an epithet he reserved for men whose intellects he admired and whose views he loathed. Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu was a writer and linguist, and a prominent figure in the Romanian intellectual community of the late nineteenth century. Among other, more legitimate endeavors, Hasdeu was the father of Protochronism, the delusional school of revisionist history that exaggerates the feats of the ancient Dacians, a Thracian tribe thought to be the ancestors of modern Romanians. [*Note: Protochronism was later used by Communists to stir up nationalist pride, and is yet another Romanian cultural hemorrhoid, one we will be examining in Part IV.*] Hasdeu’s stubborn brilliance had the power to inspire and confound, and the impact of his work can be felt across Europe to this day. To Romanians, however, his legacy will forever be bound to that of his only child, Iulia.

Iulia Hasdeu was born in Bucharest in 1869. Her father’s daughter, young Iulia possessed a particularly acrobatic virtuosity. By age two, Iulia could read. By age eight, she spoke French, English, and German, as well as her native Romanian. Influenced by the work of her father, she spent her childhood days writing dry, academic histories of Wallachian princes. She had a mind for complex mathematics and an ear for musical composition, studying piano and canto at the prestigious Music and Declamation Conservatory, now the National University of Music Bucharest. More than anything, she loved writing poetry.

*If they love the shady paths
and the peace of wispy nights
and nature, august mother
as if in reverie they cheer
and have no fear of the Chimera.*

–“The Chimera,” Iulia Hasdeu, 1887

[Note: This is the second stanza of a three-stanza poem. In the spirit of this entry, my suspect English translation is cobbled together from both the Romanian and French versions of Iulia’s verse.]

When she was twelve, Iulia moved to Paris with her mother, where she soon passed her baccalaureate. Four years later, in 1886, she became the first Romanian woman ever to study at the Sorbonne. For her doctoral thesis, she wrote a treatise on Romanian folklore that caught the attention of leading scholars in her home country. Her father couldn’t have been more proud, and when she began to show promise, he dropped much of his own work in order to publish collections of her poetry. *[Note: In a chimeric twist, there were murmurs that Iulia was born with both male and female genitalia. These hints are the basis for a thinly veiled short story written by B. P. in which a king, angered with the rumors his daughter’s doctors have spread, replaces the heads of the libelous men with those of farm animals, and vice versa. With this in mind, I walk delicately around the issue.]*

Two years later, at the age of eighteen, Iulia contracted tuberculosis and fell deeply ill. To the very end, she worked tirelessly to exercise the full range of her prodigious talents. “I’m still alive and I will never give up this work, as long as blood is still flowing through my veins and life is still breathing in my chest,” Iulia wrote to her father from Paris in 1888. A few months later, she passed away in her home in Bucharest. Her father crumbled under the weight of his grief. He retreated to Cămpina, a sleepy mountain town in Prahova County, where he soon began construction on a monument to his late daughter.

The Castelul Iulia Hasdeu is a folly house built in 1896 and designed to resemble a medieval castle. Like much of the architecture in Romania, the castle has been dancing on the brink of annihilation for over one hundred years, victim to two world wars, the cultural upheaval of Communism, and a devastating earthquake in 1977. Today, the castle houses the Bogdan P. Hasdeu Memorial Museum, a collection of sitting rooms decorated with family artifacts. This museum holds many art treasures: a marble bust of Iulia’s mother carved by Karl Storck [*Note: The father of Romanian sculpture. See Part XI.*], a portrait of Hasdeu by Nicolae Grigorescu, and various other paintings and sculptures, many of which depict Hasdeu mourning his lost daughter. The front room is dedicated to young Iulia’s personal effects, including her childhood diary, her favorite baby doll, and two collections of her poetry—poems written before her untimely death ... and after it.

For the eleven years from the time of the castle’s completion to the time of his death, Hasdeu communicated regularly with



Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu Memorial Museum, Câmpina, Romania

Iulia from beyond the grave. The castle—firmly rooted in its mountain hamlet though it appears—functioned as a sort of Charon’s ferry uniting father and daughter. Throughout the rooms are traces of their paranormal correspondences and the remnants of Iulia’s posthumous endeavors, including a black marble tablet of sheet music titled “Sursum,” a hymn composed by Iulia from the afterlife. She is even said to have designed the castle herself, transmitting blueprints for the structure through her father’s hand.

On the building’s exterior facade, above a large stone door, is the symbol of the Eye of Providence, underneath which is written Galileo’s famous observation, “E pur si muove [sic].” Below this inscription, on either side of the doorway, are two stone thrones, each topped with a small stone Sphinx. *[Note: The Sphinx is Iulia’s totem, and two similar Sphinxes top her tomb in Bellu cemetery in Bucharest. Unlike the more familiar Egyptian version, the Greek Sphinx was typically female.]* Inside the dome of the center tower stands a large wooden statue of Jesus Christ, carved by Raphael Casciani, a sculptor of the Parisian school. This effigy is the centerpiece of the castle’s temple room, where Hasdeu conducted his profane séances. The juxtaposition of all these sculptures and reliefs is fundamental to Hasdeu’s particular brand of Spiritism: the pseudoscientific connections between Egyptian, Christian, and pagan mythologies, linguistics, astronomy, and mathematics. Christianity, here, is the lion head of this architectural chimera, an assemblage designed in the depths of Hasdeu’s Renaissance mind and united in a single purpose: the assuaging of his enormous grief. *[Note: The chimera was*

also a famous preoccupation of Dimitrie Paciurea's, who sculpted the mythological creatures for years until they finally drove him mad. See Part III.]

Isn't it astonishing what rubbish will rush to fill in the widening and deepening holes of the human heart? But who can blame us? Who of us would not, when death comes knocking for a loved one, barricade the door with every table and chair in the house? And that is what this castle is: the proverbial kitchen sink, a spiritual catchall, one that echoes Romania's own history, itself a sedimentary buildup of the remnants of the Roman, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires.

Iulia's uncanny omnipresence, the lengths undergone by her unraveling father, the awe at their shared brilliance and the intensity of their misfortune: it is, all of it, admittedly a bit unnerving. Since its reopening, Hasdeu Castle has become a destination for a kind of occultist tourism, one that threatens to minimize the castle's historical import, a fact that has not escaped its staff. Written on the museum's website is a scolding: "Some people's ignorance, other people's prejudices, their impossibility to raise to the level of Hasdeu's mind, sometimes labeled the monument as a strange place." The caretakers of the museum are understandably offended by the insensitive, uninformed gawking that often occurs at sites like this. But to their objection to the word "strange," or *straniu*—a word that creeps through the mountain air of this region like a fog—I must respectfully object.

The Iulia Hasdeu Castle is nothing if not strange. "Strange" is a cipher for unearthing the emotional and

intellectual strata hidden beneath this monument, and beneath Romanian history in general, and it is exactly where we must begin in ours. “Strange” is an adjective free from the prescription of any singular, definitive feeling. Instead, the word is an amalgam of sentiments; a chimeric mixture equal parts intriguing and repellent. *Straniu* allows us to understand and even celebrate our past without ignoring its darkest truths. It is the pocket of trapped air that keeps relics like this one bobbing to the surface generation after generation. If we love the shady paths, we must not fear the chimera.



Hasdeu family portrait, 1886