

Labour, precarity and hierarchies in the arts. Case study: the decorative art of Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu (1878-1969)

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Abstract

The article is based on a case study with layered relevance within the local art history meant to analyse contexts that have shaped the gap between applied and fine arts, art hierarchies and gendered classifications as well as the complicated intersectional trajectory of a woman artist in relation with political regimes, ideological background, gender expectations, age and precarity. The research is focused on the forgotten and marginalised Romanian decorative artist Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu, who was Maître suppléant of national embroidery, weaving atelier in Bucharest (1906-1938) and whose art practice spans more than a half century and had a significant role in the art from the beginning of the 20th century Romania by transitioning the craft of embroidery to the individualized visual art discourse.

Keywords: decorative arts, art hierarchies, intersectional feminism, art and politics, 20th century art, Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu, Nădejde family.

„A new sending to isolation and obliteration is not further possible... Obliteration and ignorance are no longer fit.” (Sadoveanu 1936)¹

Having apparently a significant impact on the local art scene measured by the articles and reviews in newspapers and journals from the beginning of the 20th century, a certain visibility and artistic quality validated by being included in important collections (such as Atanase Simu collection) overshadowed in time due to several factors that are to be analysed in this paper, Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu was a textile artist whose work stands as a testimony of an enduring, time-based process crossing various stages in Romanian history, from the ages of monarchy and early socialism to both World Wars and communism. In the Western avant-garde conversation on textile art it becomes obvious that, overall, textiles had been left out of art histories and art politics. The 1960s turned to its favour through Minimalism and Pop Art and artists such as Sonia Delaunay, Sophie Taeuber-Arp introduced textiles in their discourse. Mostly women artists used embroidery, tapestry, fiber

and textile installation casting a certain level of importance to this medium in Romanian art of the 1970s and 1980s taking into account the work of Geta Brătescu and Ana Lupaș (Asavei 2019, 1-13), but also less visible, yet valuable artists such as Ritzi Jacobi (pioneering work from the 1960s), Daniela Grușevschi, Șerbana Drăgoescu, Ariana Nicodim.

Also worth mentioning in the Eastern European context is the textile sculpture and fibre work of Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz, whose ideas clearly influenced following generations, challenging the norms of art based on exclusion rather than inclusion, on a historical and aesthetic hierarchy where painting holds the podium.

In this gap between the development of textile domestic work with a large inventory of crafting objects of use and decoration, especially in the Romanian rural areas, largely known as “folk art” and the reinvestment of textiles in the art of 1960s and 1970s and following decades, actually stands the needle and thread art work by Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu, a chronological fact and an artistic discourse that was in a certain way a pioneering initiative, evading the private sphere

¹ “O nouă trimitere în izolare și uitare nu mai e cu putință... Uitare și ignorare nu mai încap.” [sic] Izabela Sadoveanu, *O artistă unică în felul său*, in the daily newspaper *Adevărul*, on the 9th of April 1936.

of the household to the public art world from the first decades of the 20th century.

The current research is based on the investigation of various sources, local press archives, art journals, dictionaries, biographic and genealogical studies, art and socio-political books, institutional collections, museum and other institutional dialogues and documentation (memorial houses, educational institutions) and identifying and contacting family descendants, following various leads with the purpose of recovering and mostly (re)positioning the art work and personality of Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu.

Victims of a systemic mechanism, of a cultural and social disinterest dominated by gender norms and prejudice, deprived of access to education equally with the opposite sex, of access to visibility and validation, confronting the disastrous effects of a hostile history (world wars, other conflicts, totalitarian regimes) the majority of women artists miss their integrated, consistent and coherent presence in art history, equally in the history of Romanian art, becoming fleeting presences and consequently left behind by cultural hierarchies and socio-political priorities.

The answer to Linda Nochlin's question asked in the West in 1971, yet relevant to the Eastern Europe "Why have there been no great women artists?" (Nochlin, 1971) relies both on institutional exclusion and social inequalities and on the importance of family context. Therefore, most of the women who have access to studies and can engage in artistic activity in the second half of the 19th century, the beginning of the 20th, were financially supported by their families, especially by the male side.

It the case of Victoria Nădejde, married Beldiceanu, second daughter of socialist-feminist, publicist and writer Sofia Nădejde (born Băncilă, 1856-1946) and Ioan Nădejde (1854-1928) professor, translator, founder of the socialist magazine *Contemporanul* in Iași and founder of the Social-Democratic Workers Party from Romania (1893), we can conclude that she was both supported by her mother and father. Sofia Nădejde, the artist's mother, one of the elder sisters of the artist Octav Băncilă, was an

important writer, publicist and activist for women's rights, active both in Iași and in Bucharest, where she moved after her marriage to Ioan Nădejde in 1884. Although extremely vocal in the era, the writings about Sofia Nădejde are still limited. We find the most consistent data on the biography of Nădejde family from Victor Vișinescu who published a monograph on Sofia Nădejde in 1972. A volume dedicated to her publishing activity was printed at *Paralela 45* publishing house in 2019, the anthology being coordinated by Maria Cernat and Adina Mocanu. Sofia was in turn supported by her family to study, by her father Vasile Băncilă Gheorghiu and her uncle, the priest Ioan Băncilă. Together with Ioan Nădejde, living in the house in Sărărie street from Iași she embraces socialist ideas, the house becoming the headquarters of the editorial office of *Contemporanul* journal and *Muncitorul* newspaper in 1881, as well as the headquarters of the Socialist Club of Iași.

Sofia and Ioan Nădejde had 7 children, one of the children, a little girl by the name of Vera succumbed to an illness at the age of two. (Cernat, Mocanu 2019, 36) All the children of Nădejde family had access to studies and careers. The first two of their children, two daughters – Sonia Nădejde² and the second child Victoria Nădejde became visual artists.

"I grew up in a creative intellectual atmosphere, where there were discussions about art, science, literature, politics. I was helping with the expedition of the journal, but I was no stranger to the discussions that took place in the editorial office." (Nădejde Beldiceanu, 1966, 4)³

The artist was born in Iasi on the 5th of May 1878. We also learn from the artist through an interview (Bică, 1969, 10) the fact that personalities such as writer Ion Creangă, politician Dobrogeanu Gherea, but also poet Mihai Eminescu came to the house of Nădejde family from Sărărie. Eminescu is evoked as the first responsible for encouraging the artist's passion for embroidery by bringing the 6-7-year-old girl "the first cotton beads and the first spools

² Born in 1976, completely erased from art history, whose notable work and biography I have managed to recover, is the subject of a separate research.

³ "M-am pomenit de mică într-o atmosferă intelectuală creatoare, unde se purtau discuții despre artă, știință, literatură, politică. Ajutam la

expediția revistei, dar nu eram străină nici de discuțiile ce se purtau în redacție." Bică, Ion. *Prietenul meu Bădia, Mihai Eminescu*, Cutezătorii, 13 februarie 1969, p. 10

of silk in several colours". (Bică, 1969, 10)⁴ The house of Nădejde family in Iași was an important landmark of socialist ideas, women's rights, intense politics, cultural dialogue and also a place where art could find support for development. Victoria grew up in this environment where she could even serve as a model for Octav Băncilă's early paintings. Octav Băncilă was raised by his sisters Ecaterina and Sofia Nădejde, encouraged to study art by Ioan Nădejde and the age difference was only of six years between Octav and his niece Victoria. This small age gap probably determined a confusion in the book dedicated to the artist by Anton Coman (Coman 1954) that was perpetuated in various writings on the artwork of Octav Băncilă, identifying him as a cousin and not an uncle. It is important to clarify that for the painting *Nostalgia* (*Nostalgie*) from 1891, reproduced in the same book, the model was not "his cousin Victoria" (Coman 1954, 28) also mentioned as a model for his painting *Prayer* (*Rugă*) where he states "his cousin Victoria, future wife of writer N. N. Beldiceanu". (Coman 1954, 28) For both paintings the model was clearly his niece, Victoria Nădejde.

Married since 1905 to the writer and publicist Nicolae N. Beldiceanu (according to the data on a photograph from the National Museum of Romanian History collection), Victoria and Nicolae had three children: Verona Beldiceanu, Ion Beldiceanu who died at a young age and Nicoară Beldiceanu (born in 1920, later specialist in Ottoman studies). The genealogy of Beldiceanus was studied by Ștefan S. Gorovei. Through this genealogy we have access to a description of the artist's personality that reveals significant gender prejudices, but also an appreciation of her artistic qualities: "A very voluntary, very intelligent woman, with a very strong head (...). In need, meaning unscrupulous, selfish like a male, not like a woman or a mother. Very talented, unique in her works as they are unique. A very strong, exceptional personality, maybe even brilliant". (Gorovei 2020, 134)⁵

Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu's grandson, Nicolas Beldiceanu (the son of Nicoară Beldiceanu) lives in France in Nantes where he is a computer science professor at the Technological University IMT Atlantique, married to Marie-Hélène Lucet with whom I had an extremely valuable exchange of information.

Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu exhibited for the first time in 1905 in the window case of the Romanian newspaper *L'indépendance*, embroideries noted and briefly commented on in *Semănătorul* as "true works of art". (Scurtu 1905, 240) She exhibited in 1906 at Casa Artelor in the applied art category and in the same year at the Artistic Youth in the decorative art category, in 1908 at the Artistic Youth in the watercolors, pastels, drawings category, in 1910 at the Official Salon in the decorative art category. (Repertoriul 2019) She opened her first personal exhibition in 1916 at Franklin Street no. 6, followed in 1919 by a personal exhibition at Sala Minerva, then in 1936 at the Athenaeum. The last personal exhibition takes place in December 1965 at the Art Galleries of the Plastic Fund. *The Silk Painting* exhibition, made at the age of 87, benefits from a small catalog with a text by Eugen Schileru that describes the works as admirable silk paintings, insistently placing the artist's embroideries in the sphere of painting: "using the materials and techniques of embroidery, Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu exceeds embroidery. Her works are situated through a specific vision, through an understanding of the construction of colored forms with determination, undoubtedly, in the field of painting". (Schileru 1965)⁶ The artist had been a teacher from 1906 at the Embroidery Ateliers within the National School of Fine Arts, studios that are the basis of today's Faculty of Decorative Arts and Design, National University of Arts, Bucharest. In the Yearbook of the Ministry of Education from 1908 we find that the artist was a substitute master of national embroidery, weaving atelier, Bucharest from 1906. In 1912, we learn from the article published in *Evenimentul* and in *Gazeta Transilvaniei* in the same year that

⁴ "...primele jurușițe de arnici și primele bobine de mătase în mai multe culori". Bică, Ion. *Prietenul meu Bădia, Miha Eminescu, Cutezătorii*, 13 februarie 1969, p. 10

⁵ "O femeie foarte voluntară, foarte inteligentă, cu un cap foarte puternic (...). La nevoie, la adică lipstă de scrupule, de un egoism de mascul, nu de femeie sau mamă. Foarte talentată, unică în operele ei și ele unice. O personalitate foarte puternică, excepțională, poate chiar genială". "Beldiceni: întregiri genealogice", revista *Prutul*, serie nouă anul X, nr 2/2020, p. 134.

⁶ "...folosind materialele și tehnicile broderiei, Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu depășește însă broderia. Lucrările sale se situează prin viziune specifică, prin înțelegere a construirii formelor colorate cu hotărâre, neîndoelnic, în domeniul picturii". Eugen Schileru, *Expoziția de pictură cu mătase Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu*, dec. 1965, Uniunea Artiștilor Plastici and Fondul Plastic din RPR, Combinatul Fondului Plastic, Bucharest. From the G. Oprescu Institute of Art History in Bucharest library archive.

the artist made a study about the seams of the Bran circle in Transylvania, research from which she would have created 80 colored drawings. So far I did not detect the existence of these plans and the study in question.

Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu's works were mainly purchased by Atanase Simu. In the catalog from 1910 in the Simu Museum collection (the collection was spread between institutions after its demolition în 1964) there were two works mentioned: *Ducks swimming* and *Interior of household* from which I have identified the work *Ducks* in the possession of the Museum of Collections in Bucharest. However, it is dated 1905 and not 1906 as in the Simu catalog where the artist's year of birth 1881 also appears incorrectly instead of 1878. Some of her works were also purchased by Queen Elizabeth II, as we learn from the *Dimineața* newspaper of Thursday December 10th 1915, which mentions the fact that her first exhibition was also "the first exhibition of silk painting in our country". Nicolae Tonitza signed a favorable chronicle in *Rampa* from March 1919: "To externalize with the tip of a needle a source of color sensations from nature, to balance and harmonize them giving birth to a complete and methodical thing, is an almost reckless attempt in which only a temperament endowed with an extraordinary power of vision and a great gift of color analysis could succeed".⁷ She was appreciated for her efforts of having an "artistic objective" (Jianu 1936) not merely decorative.

Although initially celebrated as an artist, Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu remained isolated, ignored and marginalized. Working initially with preparatory sketches she went on reaching maturity to work *at first hand* in precarious conditions: a modest room, a small table on which she was forced to roll the canvas as it moved without having the whole ensemble under her eyes, embroiding everything with the support of an extraordinary compositional and chromatic memory. In the early years, she made various embroidered copies after paintings by Ion Stoica Dumitrescu as reflected by the works from Simu collection, but she stood out for her personal works in which landscapes and still lives dominate. She worked on variable dimensions also mastering generous surfaces that betray a

monumental vision, using multiple, interlaced and intersected stitches, coloured threads of silk and cotton on canvas. The artwork of Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu is an example of a practice that reflects a work of endurance to which the artist remains faithful despite all the ideological and aesthetic transformations throughout the 20th century until her death in 1969. In terms of technique we can certainly recognize the innovative approach of embroidery, using multiple threads and intersecting stitches on canvas with a landscaping vision, stitching with lines of variable thickness and in variable length, often overlapping, changing directions in a dynamic stitch, and, evidently, her pioneering efforts of introducing textiles in the sphere of visual arts. Yet the artist's work carried out over the years with obstinacy, loyalty and in isolation placed her in an area of vulnerability, on the one hand due to her choice for the marginalized technique in relation to the so-called major arts, associated with an activity rather intrinsic to women's life and the domestic sphere, and on the other hand the precariousness (with retirement in 1938 she loses her studio, situation followed by the difficult years of the World War II) and the self-isolation in her own forms of thought placed outside state ideology and modernist currents. Self-isolation is done at the price of ignorance of the guild, demonstrating the contextual importance in the relationship between artistic practices and social environment. Endurance, work with one's own body, economic, socio-political conditions, aesthetic and cultural social norms situate Victoria Nădejde's artistic practice in the sphere of an intersectional analysis, in which gender, art technique and medium, precariousness and furthermore age function as mechanisms of marginalization. She is the example of a needleworker woman artist confronting the dominant narrative of the domestication of embroidery. The context of textile work as folk art in the communist era in Romania was linked to a systematized tool of propaganda around UCECOM (The Central Union of Handicraft Cooperatives), a large network meant to contribute to the national values and the particular peasant image. "Yet, the non-commissioned craftwork during communism was

⁷ "Să exteriorizezi cu un vârf de ac o sursă de senzații coloristice din natură, să le echilibrezi și să le armonizezi dând naștere unui ce complet și metodic, este o încercare aproape temerară în care nu a putut izbuti decât un temperament înzestrat cu o extraordinară putere de viziune și

un mare dar de analiză coloristică". Nicolae Tonitza, *Rampa*, 21 martie 1919.

considered to be products of low value by the artisans" (Asavei 2019, p.5) and also it did not develop into a real market due to the lack of mass tourism. The experimentation with textiles as long as it did not directly serve the regime was considered Western and untraditional. It is not negligible that Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu did not comply to the ideological canon and she was not an artisan either. She was a textile artist and textile art is by the definition of Ann French "work in which the approach, intent and content is seen by the artists or makers to be as important as the process. In most cases the choice of the medium of textile is integral to the work and its conceptual base. The result is a work of art to be exhibited as such, and not as a piece of applied art that may have had or was intended to have a functional use". (French 2010, 283)

Izabela Sadoveanu writes an incisive article in *Adevărul* where she discusses the isolation of the artist and the lack of visibility, and states: "maybe they will try to do what happened in the past: after a polite admiration for...her art of weaving (!) will try to make it forgotten, sending it into the isolation and loneliness from which it came....A new sending into isolation and oblivion is no longer possible....Forgetting and ignorance no longer fit." (Sadoveanu 1936)

Later, in the 1980s Petre Oprea wrote a larger article about Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu carefully illustrated with some of her embroideries, underlining her innovative contribution to the technique, yet also returning to the same reference to painting. (Oprea 1985, 70)

In Hannah Arendt's philosophy, *vita activa* implies significant differences between work, labour and action. Labour for survival has been over the centuries a part projected onto and integrated into the lives of women who played their domestic role. Work, on the other hand, is an assumed activity that leaves something concrete behind, part of the individual but also collective reality, which confers some freedom. (Arendt, 1958) The boundaries between work and labour are subtle, but in the world of objects placed between art and craft, between work and labour, Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu remains suspended. She is nevertheless free in relation to her tools and options, but socio-cultural prejudices question her identity. A woman who sews, who weaves, an artist who paints with a needle, painter or decorative artist, somewhere between techniques, somewhere between borders. Her

identity becomes confusing due to its unique nature and the critical reception of her work is the result of the hierarchic structures imposed in art history, in the norms classifying mediums of expression and the inability and unpreparedness of embracing and understanding transmediality. Her embroidery creates the space for a "subversive stitch" (Parker 1984/2019) in the sense that it opens up the possibility of transitioning textiles from domestic work to art practice, of preserving freedom through an unfazed position towards an ideological compromise, and of redefining the medium of embroidery and decorative arts by creating meaningful landscapes and still lives through the use of needle and thread instead of paintbrush with the audacity of entering into the aesthetics only occupied by painting. In an attempt to visibility, the journalists and specialists who write about her work push it closer to the field of painting, in order to build a new identity that, on the one hand, reflects the reality of a special, very well controlled technique and an aesthetic whose visual effect is easily associated with the pictorial, but on the other hand it only discredits decorative arts. This borderline vision, of uncomfortable cohabitation between techniques, of not voicing a clear identity reveals the trap into which its own supporters fell, seduced by the power and dominance of painting. Donated to the Museum of Art Collections in Bucharest for the purpose of a permanent display, around 50 works by Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu have been neither exhibited nor digitized / documented in optimal conditions to this date, probably being considered non-priority, and the works from the Simu collection, as it has been brought to my knowledge during my research, had been registered as documentation and not as artistic heritage. The merciless effects of marginalization have played their part to the present day in spite of the "needle painter".

Knowledge is a social process. We understand that the social position affects and determines the types of knowledge and perspectives, and scientific research, especially in the humanities, can use the advantages of an approach that can no longer propose to be only objective, but assumed to be subjective, relying on the importance of analysing social constructs and cultural policies. The life and practice of Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu is an example of a personal experience tied to the very principle of belonging to her own values and agenda, an

example of what author Brené Brown meant by making the distinction between "belonging" and "fitting in": "fitting in is assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn't require us to change who we are; it requires us to be who we are." (Brown 2010, 145)

Most probably unfamiliar with her contribution to decorative arts, younger generations working with textiles, fibre and cloth in contemporary art benefit from the historical and cultural shift of decorative arts and Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu's pioneering work, her being the first to sign up to this process.

Conclusion

Although valued at the beginning of her activity as it is reflected in the journals of the time, including institutional appreciation (Atanase Simu Museum collection) artist Victoria

Nădejde Beldiceanu has been forgotten and her legacy erased. Luckily the artist made a testamentary donation of 50 works to the Museum of Collections in Bucharest, Romania that, although considered non-priority and awaiting proper documentation, stand as a testimony to her unique, labouring art practice. This study is focused on the art practice of Victoria Nădejde Beldiceanu in close connexion to the historical and conceptual source of the decorative artistic turn in Romania and the historical and ideological contexts in which she has lived and worked from a contemporary perspective, grasping the importance of her practice as a unique and uncomfortable position, a counter-act in the modernist era, an act of endurance and determination in the communist era, an example of authentic artistic labouring that has significant role in our current understanding of decorative arts in art hierarchies.

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- Note:** all Romanian quotes are translated by the author of this paper.
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