

# **COTROCENI NATIONAL MUSEUM: A NEW BEGINNING, DIGITIZATION OF EXHIBITIONS, AND ITS ONLINE KNOWLEDGE**

**Carmen Ileana DOBRESCU  
Darius NESTORIUC**

**Abstract:** *The purpose of this paper is to review four centuries of history at the Cotroceni. Cotrocenilor Hill being higher and protected from floods has been inhabited since ancient times, here there is a monastery complex built between 1679-1681 by the ruler Șerban Cantacuzino. Here were buried the ruler, his sons and daughter, whose graves can still be seen today. A new period began during the reign of Alexandru Ioan Cuza and the accession to the throne of King Charles I of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, when the palace became the official residence. Over the years it has suffered several earthquakes and each time an attempt was made to rebuild it according to the old plans. After 1949 it became the Pioneers' Palace. Following the 1977 earthquake, the complex was severely damaged and rebuilt, and a new wing was added, which today houses the headquarters of the Romanian Presidential Administration. By Romanian Government Decision No 478 of 10 July 1991, the Cotroceni National Museum was established as an institution of national representation. Today it is a modern institution, in sync with the new trends in contemporary museology, with diverse programmes and exhibitions. Besides being visited by many foreign and Romanian tourists, it is also known online through its website, Facebook pages, Instagram, YouTube channel and many others (Google Arts and Culture), by organizing digitized exhibitions, both on its own and in collaboration with other cultural institutions.*

**Keywords:** *Cotroceni, palace, royal residence, Queen Mary, King Carol I, salons*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Cotroceni Palace has always been a symbol of the cultural and historical tourism in our country, and its localization can be seen in the map (fig. 1)

People have always been attracted by the historical past, by the culture of a country, expressed through architecture, interior design and painting. The palaces of Bucharest are an example of this. They create the landscape on which cultural tourism can develop (Teodorescu: 2009; Merciu et al:

2022). The architecture of palaces and important institutions in Bucharest are real treasures, keepers of a history passed on to all those interested in discovering the local values of the great city (Teodorescu et al:2016).

The history of Cotroceni began 350 years ago on the site of a village of free peasants, located on the top of Cotroceni Hill, surrounded by Codrii Vlăsiei. The first attestation was of a monks' hermitage, called Cotrocenii de Sus (1616), but there is evidence showing a much older date. The ruler Șerban Cantacuzino built a monastery complex on this site, where he lived and where members of his family were buried.

Besides Șerban Cantacuzino, Constantin Brâncoveanu, Alexandru Ipsilanti and Barbu Dimitrie Știrbei also contributed to the restoration and size of the complex.

In 1821 Tudor Vladimirescu established his camp at Cotroceni, where the Proclamation of the High Gates was read, condemning the Popular Movement and where many of the revolutionaries were imprisoned. The ruler Barbu Dimitrie Știrbei modernised the stately homes, which became the ruler's official summer residence, and cut a new road separating the monastery's domain from the Botanical Garden (1860).

Alexandru Ioan Cuza, after the Union of the Principalities, asked the architect Carol Beneschi to refurbish the manor courts, to furnish them elegantly and to establish here the official European residence of the new state.

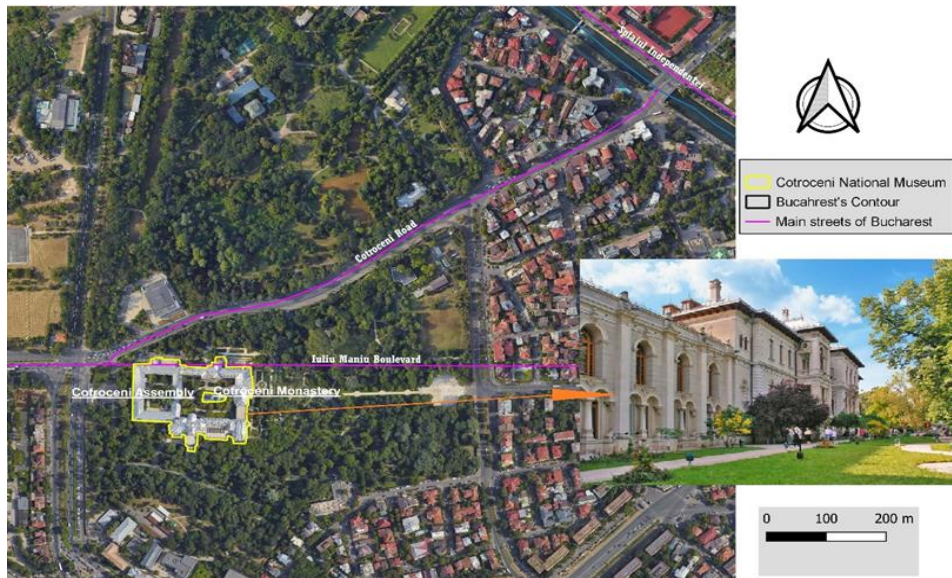


Fig. 1: Location of Cotroceni Palace: Personal archive



Fig. 2: Leaders of the country: [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)

King Charles I of Hohenzollern Sigmaringen will have as his summer residence the Cotroceni Palace, where he will live with his wife Elisabeth and Princess Maria until the palace in Calea Victoriei, where he moved in 1885 (official residence), is refurbished (fig. 2)

The King transformed the Cotroceni Palace into a modern royal palace in the manner of French eclecticism. The government allocated 1000000 lei for the "restoration of the Royal Palace at Cotroceni and the addition of new buildings", a project entrusted to the architect Paul Gottreau. The new palace will be inhabited by Prince Ferdinand and Princess Maria from 1896.

After 1900, Princess Marie redesigned the interiors, where the Romanian architecture of the Great White Salon meets the Art Nouveau and Norwegian-style salons.

Important events took place in these rooms, such as the Crown Council of 1916, which decided on general mobilisation and entry into the First World War, but they were also host to many painters, musicians and writers of the time. After the death of Queen Mary, King Charles II and King Michael did not use the palace as a residence (fig. 2)

The palace was severely damaged by several earthquakes, including those of 1940 and 1977. Between 1949 and 1976 it served as the Palace of the Pioneers (fig. 2)

Between 1977 and 1988 the palace was rebuilt, the church was rebuilt and a new wing of the Presidential Administration Headquarters was built. In 1991, on the basis of a Government Decision, the Cotroceni National Museum was organized in the old palace, which through its activity has become a landmark of national heritage and European treasure.

## METHODOLOGY

The following methods were used to produce this article.

1. Method of analysis and synthesis - This is the method by which bibliographical materials such as information, theories, data series are taken, on the basis of which an analysis of the proposed topic is carried out, then a conclusion, in which we have synthesized the collected information. Using this method I consulted several sources, such as the official website of the Cotroceni National Museum, the Cotroceni Architectural Ensemble album, the personal archive, the book *Sfârșit de Veac la Cotroceni*, the Cotroceni National Museum Publishing House and other sources. I also visited the Cotroceni National Museum, where I took many of the photos that appear in the article.

2. Cartographic method-I used this method in the creation of the map in the Appendices category at the end of the paper entitled "Map of Romanian migration to Western Europe", a map illustrating the flow of Romanian emigrants to Western European countries.

## RESULTS

### *Description of Cotroceni Museum Complex*

The Cotroceni Museum Complex includes the Cotroceni Church, the medieval heritage and the Domnesc Palace.

The church, built in 1679, was dedicated to the 20 great monasteries of Mount Athos. The church was damaged by earthquakes in 1738, 1802, 1940 and 1977, as well as by Turkish, Austrian and Russian looting and fires.

In 1984 it was demolished, but the stonework was restored and parts of the frescoes were removed.

It has been reconstructed on the old foundation with an open porch with eight octagonal columns, door and windows carved in stone, with a pisanie above the door, and inside there are 12 columns, symbolizing the apostles, the original marble stones from the tombs of the Cantacuzins with the bicephalous eagle-stamp of the Cantacuzins, and the frescoes of the 1806 founders on the walls.



Fig. 3: Cotroceni Monastery: personal archive

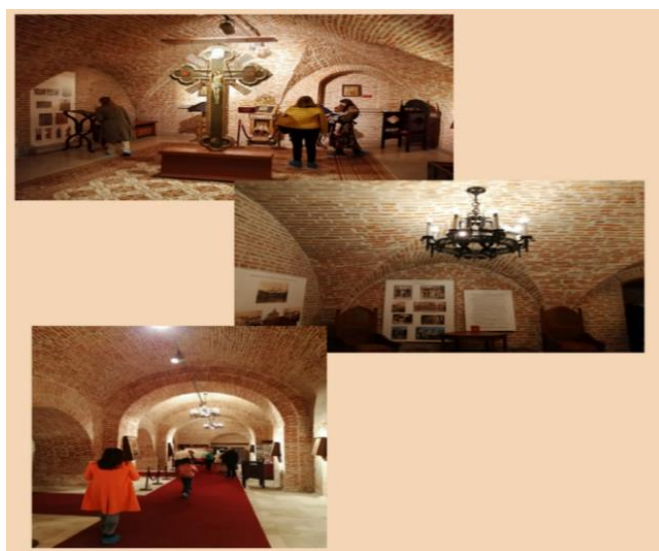


Fig. 4: Cotroceni Monastery artifacts: personal archive



The medieval spaces are parts of the former monastery, built between 1679-1682, are massive brick walls with impressive vaults comprising the Cuhnia (kitchen), the Trapeza (monks' dining room), the monks' living cells (about 40), situated on either side of the bell tower and on the south side of the courtyard. The large cellar has an architecture typical of the 17th-century Romanian Country with brickwork, semi-cylindrical vaults, dublours, equal beams. In the cellar there is a permanent exhibition "Cotroceni Monastery Church, history, spirituality and art" (fig. 3 and 4)

## Royal Palace

The entrance to the palace is through the Hall of Honour, which was built by architect Paul Gottereau on the model of the Garnier Opera House in Paris, where the richly ornamented Italian marble staircase with stained glass windows connects to the first level of the palace.

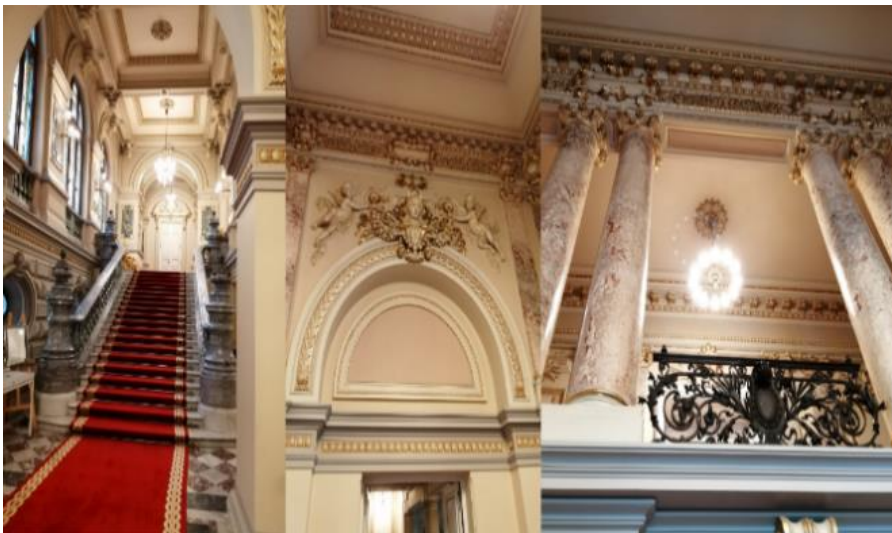


Fig. 5: Details from the entrance hall of Cotroceni Palace: personal archive

On the first floor are the family lounges.

The German Dining Room in the style of the German Neo-Renaissance and reflecting the King's preferences, has a coffered ceiling with carved wood panelling, Cordoba leather table and chairs with the cypher of King Charles I, has an original chandelier and an Albanian marble fireplace, above which is a painting of a hunting scene (fig. 6)

The Hunting Room created by Karel Liman dates back to 1926 and was designed by dismantling the Byzantine Salon and the Louis XIV Salon

in the spirit of the Italian Renaissance, it has a coffered ceiling, carved lime wood panelling, and includes tables and benches made of richly carved walnut and oak with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic decorations. On the walls are panoplies of weapons and trophies.



Fig. 6: German Dining Room: personal archive

The Room of Flowers or Salon d'Or is one of the rooms furnished by Princess Marie, decorated in the French Louis XVI style, it has a coffered ceiling with patinated and gilded decoration. The walls are divided into registers, ornamented with swaying stems of lilies and friezes of lily flowers.

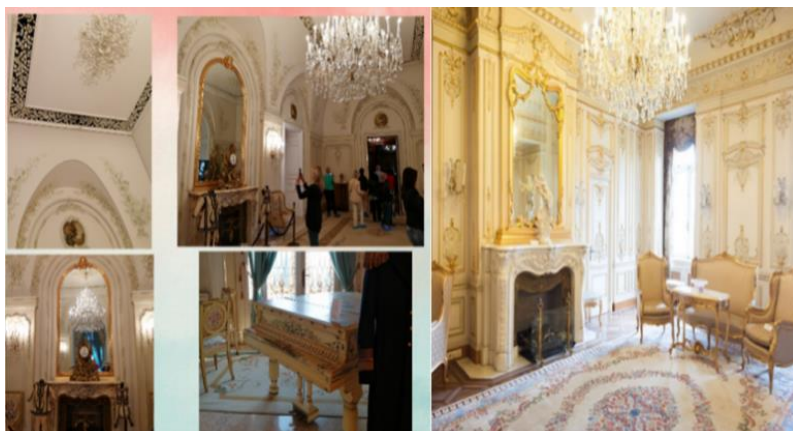


Fig. 7: Salon of Flowers: personal archive and

[https://www.muzeulcotroceni.ro/istoric/1\\_palatul\\_cotroceni/palatul\\_cotroceni.html](https://www.muzeulcotroceni.ro/istoric/1_palatul_cotroceni/palatul_cotroceni.html)



Fig. 8: King Ferdinand's Library: personal archive

The floor is turquoise-green, the furniture is carved and gilded wood upholstered with embroidered natural silk, it has an Alunu marble fireplace and has as its centrepiece the Steinway piano, which was purchased from New York by Queen Elizabeth for artistic appointments (fig. 7)

King Ferdinand's Library is a privileged space, the King's study, the complex is composed of two levels, decorated in the Henry II style. The furniture is carved in elm wood, the ceiling has rectangular boxes with acanthus leaves, and the tiered gallery has a fretwork balustrade, chandelier and green Porto marble fireplace. It houses a book collection of 2,500 books on botanical domain, history, art, etc. (fig. 8)

The Cerchez Salon, the Great White Salon (Salonul Cerchez) resulted from the merger of two rooms at the initiative of Queen Mary, who imposed the Romanian style of the architect Grigore Cerchez, with a perfectly blended architecture of the styles of 17th century Wallachia and Moldavia. The room is divided into two areas, one with a semi-cylindrical vault with penetrations and one with three spherical caps embroidered with twisted brackets. On display are pieces of Iberian furniture and Queen Maria's Roschița marble table, on which Romania's entry into the First World War was signed in 1916 (fig. 9).

The Royal Dining Room is a blend of Byzantine and Celtic influences, for which Queen Mary commissioned a large round Art Nouveau table in golden rosewood with 24 chairs, with the eagle and the tree of life alternating as symbols. Many Romanian and foreign personalities sat around the table with the royal family (fig. 10).



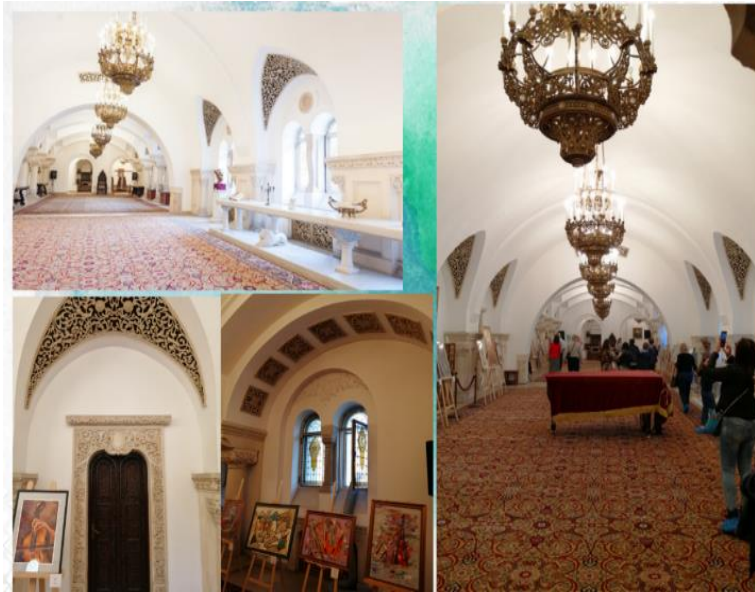


Fig. 9: Cerchez Salon (personal archive)



Fig. 10: Royal Living Room (personal archive)

On the second floor are: Cuza family apartment. The apartment is composed of a hall, living room and bedroom and since 2011 there is a permanent exhibition dedicated to the princely family with crystal services,

porcelain with the coat of arms of the United Principalities and other objects that belonged to the two: husband and wife. In the bedroom there is the marital bed, armchairs, mirror and paintings.

The billiard room has an 1865 billiard table made of walnut by the German architect August Bembe for King Charles I. The private dining room was the place where only family members ate, especially breakfast.

The Oriental Room is double the height of the other rooms and was designed by Queen Mary as a tea room, a study room for girls, a music room or a leisure room.

The tables, armchairs, bed and sideboard were made of carved black ebony, inlaid with coral and silver, with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic motifs.

The Royal Suite of King Charles I and Queen Elizabeth is sober, consisting of a sitting room and bedroom, oak and walnut panelling and furniture, with gold and ochre wallpaper. In the bedroom there is a marble fireplace, table, armchairs and double bed (fig. 11).



Fig. 11: The Royal Suite of King Charles I and Queen Elizabeth: personal archive

The French apartment is located on the north-east side of the palace with an opening onto the gardens. It has three parts: a Louis XVth century salon (communicating with the King's library), a Louis XVIth century bedroom-king's suite and a Rococo bedroom with floral decoration, gilded stuccowork, exquisite furnishings in pink silk with floral motifs and a fireplace in white Rușchița marble (fig. 12 and fig. 13).



Fig. 12 and Fig. 13: French apartment (personal archive)

Queen Mary's bedroom designed by Paul Gottereau was refurbished and in 1901 a Celtic decoration was chosen with a church vaulting with semicircular arches and ceramic tile floor. In 1929 the architect Ion Ernest refurbished it, opting for a more serene Tudor-style decoration with decorative beams of fir and palin wood on a white ceiling and a fireplace of Vratza stone (fig.14).



Highlights include a bed, chairs, side tables and an 18th-century tapestry, as well as a portrait of the queen by the painter Costin Petrescu.

The Norwegian drawing room was designed by the architect Karel Liman at the request of Princess Mary in 1910. It was here that Queen Mary wrote her correspondence, her diary and her children's fairy tales (fig. 15).



Fig. 14: Queen Mary's bedroom (personal archive)



Fig. 15: Norwegian Salon (personal archive)



The interior decorations in the drawing room are made of Norwegian fir wood and the furniture is period, reminding her of her childhood days spent in the Osborne Islands or Malta with her cousin. The wainscoting and beams feature the floral thistle motif, the fireplace resembles traditional stained glass in Romanian homes. Two thrones and a table can be found in this room.

## DISCUSSIONS

- a) The museum as seen through social media networks. Categories of visitors to the Cotroceni National Museum. The museum is housed in a monument of Romanian architecture, which combines the characteristics of a memorial space with that of a museum of decorative art. The museum has established itself in the Romanian cultural and social environment as a modern institution, organizing cultural events, but synchronizing with the new trends in contemporary museology. They have carried out scientific programs on medieval and contemporary history and art, exhibitions with various themes, but the main aim is to recover the collective memory and reinterpret the work of politicians, artists or marked events in Romanian history and culture. The museum has highlighted both its own heritage and the movable heritage from the collections of other museums and collaborating institutions, expanding the range of cultural offers addressed to the public. Along with these exhibitions, colloquia, conferences, seminars were organized on themes of cultural interest or for the protection of heritage and monuments, as well as book launches on art, history, philosophy, ecology and predictions on the conservation and restoration of cultural goods (e.g. Predictions of the Earth. On ecological thinking and practice, of very good quality. In addition to the permanent exhibitions in the museum, the museum promotes its values by creating a website, the museum also has a Facebook account, Instagram, and Youtube account where it often posts videos or short documentaries on historical cultural themes, inviting important personalities with this specialization. There are people who own documents and data, they post them on thematic accounts.

The museum is visited by tourists of all ages from children to octogenarians, both Romanian and foreign. The number of tourists is constantly increasing, so in 2022 the museum was visited by 25094 tourists, and between 1 January and 30 September 2023 by 30225 tourists.

- b) Reviving museum exhibitions through digitisation: examples of online exhibitions.

In order to further expand the number of tourist groups who would like to get to know the Cotroceni Museum Complex, in addition to the permanent exhibitions in the museum, a series of online and digitised exhibitions have been created. The exhibition "Cotroceni Monastery Heritage" presents objects that belonged to the old monastery, including: a rich collection of unique icons as well as iconostasis and holy icons that have been saved, such as "Mother of God with Child", which is engraved in silver, "Nativity of the Mother of God", "Annunciation", portraits of important saints, "Jesus Christ Pantocrator with Apostles". Beautiful liturgical furnishings with gilded decorations, vegetal and floral elements have also been preserved. The liturgical embroideries are worked on precious cloths with gold and silver thread, the most spectacular being the Epitaph "The Lord's Weeping" from 1770. In order to further expand the number of tourist groups who would like to get to know the Cotroceni Museum Complex, in addition to the permanent exhibitions in the museum, a series of online and digitised exhibitions have been created. The gold smithery and liturgical vestments were the monastery's easily hoarded treasure. An important piece is the wreaths donated in the 19th century by the Constantinescu family. The book collection includes Cyrillic and later Romanian prints, including the Gospel, printed in 1856, with lithographs by George Vernich, silver-engraved.

The exhibition "The Royal House of Romania, keeper and promoter of Romanian tradition" started in June 2020 and highlights the role of the Royal House of Romania in preserving Romanian traditions and customs and promotes Romanian folk costume. Queen Elizabeth and Queen Mary proudly wore Romanian folk costumes, the ladies of high society followed their example, and they too promoted folk customs and crafts and made them known around the world (fig. 16 and 17).

Other exhibitions on the work of Queen Mary are:

- "Queen Mary and her love of folk costume", which highlights the Queen's admiration for folk costumes, which she wore on her travels through the country, wearing costumes specific to the area she came to, except that her costumes were more richly ornamented and embroidered with gold and silver thread (Fig. 16). The other exhibition is dedicated to the "Paris Peace Conference" 18 January 1919-21 January 1920, at which Queen Mary supported the cause of Romania, participated in social events and through her connections with royal houses, the help of friends and

influential people (First Lady of the USA) she managed to achieve the purpose for which she had come.



Fig. 16 and Fig. 17: Photos of members of the royal family dressed in folk costume:  
[https://www.muzeulcotroceni.ro/istoric/1\\_palatul\\_cotroceni/palatul\\_cotroceni.html](https://www.muzeulcotroceni.ro/istoric/1_palatul_cotroceni/palatul_cotroceni.html) and  
personal archive

The Cotroceni National Museum is currently organising the exhibition, which has been digitised with the help of several national museums and the National Archives of Romania, at the Maryhill Museum of Art from 18 October 2023 to 11 February 2024. The multimedia exhibition "Reflections of Queen Mary in the Cotroceni Palace" presents to

the public in a unique way the Golden Room and the Silver Bedroom, which today no longer exist in their original form, currently being the Flower Room and the Queen's Bedroom. These rooms have been reconstructed using new technologies, by researching historical sources, showing them as they were designed by Queen Mary, reflecting her creative personality. It's a real journey back in time, made possible by 3D reconstruction and digital graphics, where we discover how they were arranged by Queen Mary during her evolution from princess to queen. The museum has created a multitude of videos of the 3D creation of the rooms, including additional information about the project (fig. 18, fig. 19)

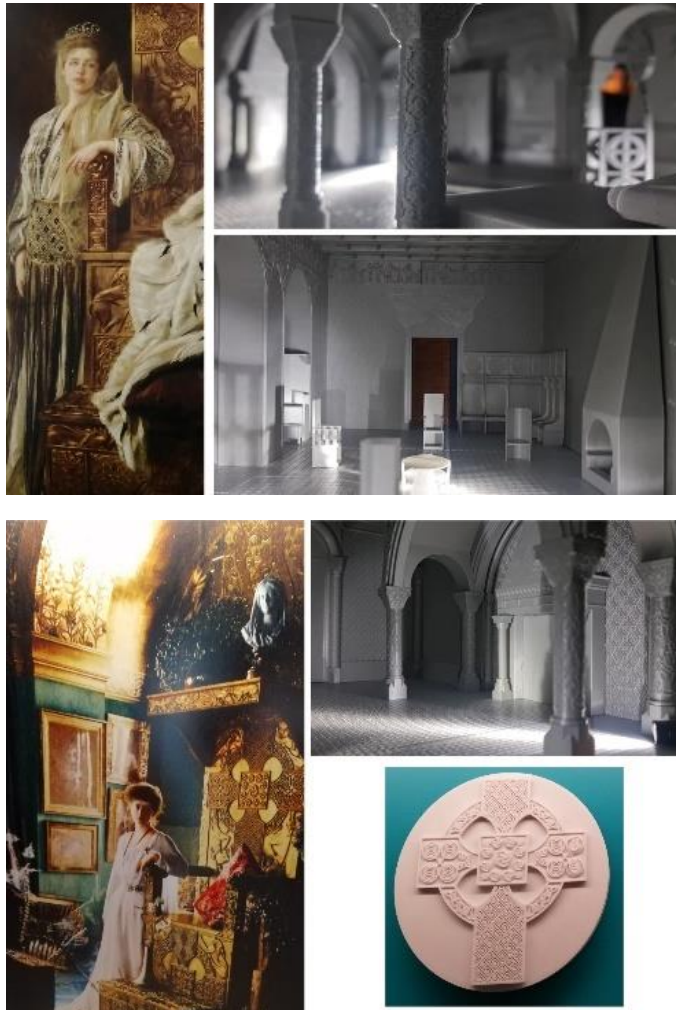


Fig. 18: "Reflections of Queen Mary in the Cotroceni Palace": personal archive





Fig. 19 Reflections of Queen Mary in the Cotroceni Palace", personal archive

Exhibitions were also organised:

- National Decoration System
- Woman in Romanian Art: in which a tribute was paid to women through portraits of women signed by famous painters
- Exhibition "Royal Musical Scores"
- Photo-documentary exhibition "A prince of the Romanian crown, Nicolae"
- Photo-documentary exhibition "Always to America!"
- International Day of Monuments and Sites at the Cotroceni National Museum - 18 April 2021 - Online launch of the exhibition "Ferdinand and Maria, a common destiny: Romania the Great"
- Images of diversity
- Portrait of an Artist

In the framework of these exhibitions there was collaboration with other cultural and art institutions.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Cotroceni Museum Complex is an important monument of history and architecture, the keeper of 350 years of Romanian history, where important personalities of the families of rulers and kings ruled and lived. It is an important institution of culture and art that contributes through its museum activities but also through exhibitions, conferences, some of which are supported by the online, social-media environment, which contributes greatly

to the knowledge of Romanian history and culture by Romanian and foreign tourists. The study and presentation of the Cotroceni Palace represents a beginning in the highlighting of heritage buildings in Bucharest. It is a symbol and a point of tourist attraction, together with other monumental buildings that can form very attractive tourist circuits (Băbăţ et al: 2023). It is very important to know the history, the political personalities of each important moment that Romania has gone through, the values to which they related and creating the possibility for us, today, to relate to our turn. Respecting the values of the past is an important step towards a dignified future.

## References

- AgerPress, 2023, Reflecții ale Reginei Maria în Palatul Cotroceni, <https://www.agerpres.ro/cultura/2023>
- Băbăţ A.F., Mazilu M., Niță A., Drăguleasa I.A., Grigore M., 2023, Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Index: From Theoretical Definition to Practical Analysis in Romania, Sustainability, Vol. 15, Issue 13
- Bengescu G., 2019, Elisabeta, prima regină a României, Editura Paul Editions București, București
- Boerescu D.S., 2018, Marile Cotoversii în jurul figurilor emblematice ale regalității din Colecția Regală, Editura Integral, vol.23, București
- Boerescu D.S., Regina Maria, personaj unic al istoriei naționale, 2023, Editura Neverland, p. 34-37
- Boerescu S.D., 2018, Viața cotidiană și sărbătorile familiei regale de la Carol I la Mihai I, Editura Integral, Vol.24, București
- Ipate M., 2015, Sfârșit de secol la Cotroceni, Editura Muzeului Național Cotroceni, București
- Jicman L.S., 2019, Muzeul Național Cotroceni, Ansamblul arhitectural Cotroceni: Istorie și destin, Administrația Prezidențială Muzeul Național Cotroceni Muzeul Național Cotroceni, 2023, <https://www.muzeulcotroceni.ro/istoric>
- Merciu F.C., C Teodorescu, C Păunescu, GL Merciu, 2022, The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Valorization of Cultural Heritage. Case Study: Bucharest Municipality (Romania), International conference KNOWLEDGE-BASED ORGANIZATION, Vol. 28, Issue 2, p. 203-208
- Teodorescu C., Radu Vânturache, Octavian Teodorescu, Daniel Constantin Diaconu, 2016, Proposal For Functional Conversions-Faur Area, Bucharest, URBANISM. ARHITECTURA. CONSTRUCTII, Vol. 7, nr. 2, p. 137-146
- Teodorescu Camelia, Turism cultural, Editura Transversal, Targoviste, 2009

## Notes on the author

**Master student Carmen Ileana DOBRESCU**, University of Bucharest, Faculty of Geography, Master program Geodemography and socio-territorial vulnerabilities, passionate about tourism, culture, history and languages, e-mail: [carmen.dobrescu@s.unibuc.ro](mailto:carmen.dobrescu@s.unibuc.ro)

**Master student Darius NESTORIUC**, Faculty of Geography, University of Bucharest, Romania, author of culture studies e-mail: [darius.nestoriuc@s.unibuc.ro](mailto:darius.nestoriuc@s.unibuc.ro)