From Bucharest to Hobart:  
A legacy of Romanian art

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Abstract

The Tyler Collection is an extraordinary testament to the vision of a collector who captured the tension of immense cultural and political change in Communist Romania. It represents a fascinating time capsule which has taken a serendipitous journey from Bucharest to Hobart via the collector’s home in Washington DC. Coming from a time and place unambiguously remote from its new home, it now awaits a fresh life within the University of Tasmania Fine Art Collection.

Keywords: Romania, Art History, Tasmania, Ceausescu, Petrescu, Byzantine

In 2010 I received the first of many letters from Mr Geoffrey Tyler about his personal collection of artworks. Tyler was born in Melbourne and spent some of his childhood in Hobart, attending the University of Tasmania to receive a BSc in 1949. He worked as a meteorologist in Melbourne in the 1950s, and in 1958 received a Master’s degree in Economics from the University of Melbourne. He worked for the Australian Treasury Department as an economist in Canberra and London before moving to Washington DC and joining the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1966. Tyler was assistant director of the European Department of the International Monetary Fund during the 1980s. He retired in 1988, but remained living in Washington.

At the start of our correspondence Tyler was seeking to make plans for the preservation of his art collection. Although an alumnus of both the University of Melbourne and the University of Tasmania, he suspected that our much smaller institution would greatly appreciate the gift of artwork and funding to maintain it. As a life-long collector of art, he wanted to ensure his collection would be preserved and valued into the future. Tyler also recalled how much he’d enjoyed his years in Hobart, and so offered to donate his art collection to the University of Tasmania.

"It’s full of memories and what you want to do in the end is to keep it maintained as a unity; and I looked around and said 'Where can I send it?' and I thought of Tasmania because that's where I went through high school and university," he told ABC radio in 2011. In particular,
the University policy of having its Fine Art Collection as much as possible on display for the enjoyment of staff and students was an important factor for Tyler in choosing the University of Tasmania as a suitable home for his own collection.

Easily perceived as obscure and of unclear relevance to dominant historical themes of Tasmanian public art collections, the collection of over 700 works of print, painting, drawing and sculpture, together with an archive of correspondence and library of Romanian language publications, nevertheless found a new home in Hobart when the Vice Chancellor, himself a devotee of Eastern European ecclesiastical architecture, enthusiastically welcomed it as part of the University’s Fine Art Collection.

Tyler was an avid collector not just of art, but of books, antique silver, music, stamps, and rugs. While in London in 1960, he began to collect art seriously and among his earliest acquisitions was a proof set of William Blake’s engravings illustrating the ‘Book of Job’. Living overseas, he had little chance to collect Australian art but was able to purchase Leonard French’s ‘Three Towers No 1’ and paintings by Daws and Blackman. A subsequent acquisition was of an early painting by Arthur Boyd, ‘The Sisters’ (c1949). Other artwork – paintings, prints, drawings, sculptures, and ceramics were collected - artists from Britain, Europe, and US; but the substantial body of the Tyler Collection is of Romanian artwork, collected when Tyler made frequent visits to that country between 1973-1987 during assignments with the IMF.

“By pure chance” Tyler looked in the window of the state-run gallery Fondul Plastic in Bucharest. He purchased a painting and met the artist, Corneliu Petrescu. Petrescu and his wife Mariana went on to become close life-long friends with Tyler, guiding him in the formation of his collection of Romanian art, and introducing him to their circle of friends, many of whom were significant Romanian artists. Tyler said that “the Petrescus and other close artist friends helped me choose quality, representative works, and gave me many as gifts. Petrescu in particular was an artistic mentor as well as a friend.” More broadly, Tyler was able to stimulate and support the professional development of this group of Romanian artists, and provide a rare conduit for their works to reach the West.

When Tyler moved back to Washington he maintained a weekly correspondence with Petrescu. Tyler would source gold leaf and other art supplies for Petrescu, as these were hard to obtain in the economic environment of Communist Romania. In return, Petrescu’s letters
would usually contain gifts of small artworks and painted cards for birthdays and Christmas, which Tyler catalogued and kept. Spanning the 1980s up until Petrescu’s death in 2009, this archive of letters provides a valuable insight into the daily life of Romanian society under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu and the changing political landscape. Copies of Tyler’s correspondence will soon be transcribed from a range of sources, including later email files, offering an intimate gift of dialogue between two friends, a valuable archive of social, political and cross-cultural relations.

In addition, the Collection contains forty painted wood icons from Russia, Macedonia, Serbia, and Romania, and twenty Romanian icons painted on glass. When Tyler and I first started our correspondence, he listed various paintings, books, and sculptures, and said – “there’s also a group of icons which you may or may not be interested in taking, but to me they are the heart of the collection.” My reply was that accepting the collection without them was unthinkable. Their importance to Tyler and also the profound cultural context they provide makes them indeed the very soul of the Tyler Collection.

The icon is one of the most important genres in Byzantine art. Likenesses of Christ, the Madonna, saints and angels were used as objects of veneration in Orthodox churches and homes alike for centuries. In Romania, this importance extends beyond the ecclesiastical to celebrate key elements of Romanian history and culture. Palade (2006) points to the establishment of the first Romanian feudal states, which enjoyed unusual freedom in the Orthodox Balkan world of 14th and 15th centuries. Established under the early reigns of the Fanar princes, these were ‘Houses of Peace’, where “Romanian Christian art constantly manifested an aesthetic experience in its own right". In addition to establishing territories that retained their own military, administrative and political structures as a defence against Ottoman rule, “all great church founders, be they princes or noblemen, concerned themselves with forming and preserving the artistic tradition which definitively linked Romanian art with the Byzantine Commonwealth.”

In this way, the Byzantine aesthetic tradition underpinned the entire medieval history of Romanian Christian art, “as one of its basic co-ordinates, like the revered remembrance of an exemplary past”. Continuing in Wallachia and Moldavia throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, this aesthetic tradition was celebrated and developed as rulers of the two principalities competed through the architecture, painting and sculpture that characterised
the great monasteries they each established. This creative renewal of tradition remained unchallenged until the arrival firstly, of the Occidental influenced painters from the Moscow School in the early 19th century, followed by enforcement of the Soviet art of socialist realism in the 20th century.

Tyler observed that on his visits “most Romanian artists had (icons) on the walls of their studios and homes, treasuring them as works of art rather than religious objects”. Their influence is apparent in the imagery and decorative style of many of the artists represented in the Collection, Petrescu in particular. Petrescu made art counter to the push from the Communist government to abandon Byzantine styles and marginalise the influence of the once-powerful monasteries of Romania. This is clear in his religious imagery and extensive use of gold leaf, and even in the titles of his paintings, such as ‘Byzantine Composition’.

Thus, the Tyler Collection comprises approximately 800 items - paintings, prints, sculpture, ceramics, and religious icons. It is mostly of Romanian art, and predominantly by one artist, Corneliu Petrescu. The collection contains a unique selection of Romanian artworks from 18th century icons through to 20th century modernist works. The breadth of styles represented in the Collection illustrates important social, cultural and political phases in Romania’s recent history, especially the repression of monastic traditions associated with the rise of Communism; an important range of artworks that would otherwise have been confined in Romania under the authoritarian rule of Nicolae Ceaușescu (1965-1989). It is through Tyler’s position with the IMF that artwork could be taken out ‘from behind closed doors’ to come together in a collection that is unique in Australia.

For me the singular most important aspect of this collection is what it meant to Tyler. He didn’t gather art for show, prestige, or profit, but because he was moved by the imagery and by the artists who made it. He stressed to me that, as a frequent visitor to Romania working long hours to return to yet another hotel room, the warm friendship extended by Petrescu and his peers was invaluable to him. They welcomed him into a rich cultural world full of music and beauty, and life-long relationships.

The majority of the Tyler Collection arrived at the University’s Hobart campus in 2013, a few months after Tyler’s death in Washington. The artworks have been photographed, catalogued and entered onto a dedicated database. Tyler’s widow, Frances, is an annual visitor to the
University and an integral part of discussions around the future of the Collection at the University.

An important responsibility of the University of Tasmania in accepting the Tyler Gift is to consider the potential of the collection as a research and teaching resource for the University. This unique and highly personal collection allows us a glimpse into an unparalleled period of change in Romanian aesthetic traditions that occurred during Romanian communism. It is an extraordinary assemblage to have travelled out of that time and place, and adds a profound cultural dimension to the University Fine Art Collection. The task now is to research and contextualise this collection in a place so far physically and spiritually from its home. The terms of reference for the Tyler Gift acknowledge the potential of the Collection in this regard; to assist Romanian students, Romanian artists or arts scholars who are invited to visit the University.

It is also envisaged that the Collection will grow with the acquisition of both Romanian and Australian artwork. A detailed understanding of the recent history of the creative arts in Romania is therefore critical, along with a thorough understanding of the character of Tyler’s personal assemblage of works, which must continue to critically influence its growth.

Over the years that Tyler and I discussed the eventual donation of the Collection, I undertook trips to Washington, New York and London to liaise initially with the Tylers and then seek to identify organisations and individuals who might support the University’s development of the Tyler Collection. I also sought contact with Romanian interest groups in Tasmania and on the mainland, although these are modest. In Washington DC I was able to meet with managers from other university collections including the Katzen Gallery and Grey Gallery, and the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York. This provided many exciting ideas and models for the development of the Tyler Collection within the University. The idea of creating links with art institutions in Romania - in particular Bucharest National University of Arts and Cluj--Napoca University of Arts and Design – was suggested, as well as artist exchanges, hosting travelling exhibitions, and identifying links between students/staff from faculties within the University of Tasmania (e.g. literature, philosophy).

In London, through the Department of Art History and the Ruskin School of Art, I was able to meet Dr Deborah Schultz from Richmond University. She provided a list of helpful contacts within Romania, including the Directors of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, and
the Institute of Art History (both in Bucharest). She also suggested that Professor Dennis Deletant (Professor of Romanian Studies) visiting at Georgetown University in Washington DC would be interested to hear about the Collection and could provide further information. Frances Tyler has since met with him in Washington. At the Romanian Cultural Centre in London, Carmen Campeanu and Ioana Stan were also interested in possible involvement with future projects connected with the Collection.

In 2013, I was introduced to Dr Alexandru Popescu, Senior Research Associate at Balliol College, Oxford. Dr Popescu, a Romanian scholar of Psychiatry and Psychology of Religion, recently published a study of the philosopher Petre Tutea, one of the outstanding Christian dissident intellectuals of the Communist era in Eastern Europe. His multidisciplinary work on the psychology of religion in Romania suggested that Popescu might be of assistance in investigating the scholarly significance of the Tyler Collection. On showing him a selection of works, it became immediately apparent that his knowledge of Byzantine art traditions and Romanian monasticism, coupled with personal experience of the period during which the collection was assembled, offered a significant opportunity. Dr Popescu was moved to see that three of the significant artists, including Petrescu, were from his native county of Ploiesti, Prahova. Since our initial meeting, it has been agreed that the Tyler Gift will fund a visiting research fellowship for Dr Popescu in 2016, with Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tasmania Jeff Malpas, taking the role of Academic Leader.

Dr Popescu’s knowledge in theology and Byzantine iconography will be invaluable to the University in understanding the more than sixty icons on glass and wood, as will his knowledge of the artists in the Collection, who include Stefan Caltia, Silvia Radu, Georgeta Naparus, Vasile Gorduz, and Ion Pacea. A process of rigorous scholarship in the interpreting and contextualising of the artworks, correspondence, and archive of books should lead to several outcomes. These include articles in scholarly journals, public lectures and conference papers, and ultimately a book published to coincide with eventual establishment and public launch of permanent exhibition space dedicated to the Tyler Collection. This will serve as a comprehensive catalogue for the Collection, and a landmark reference that realises the cultural and academic value of the Tyler Collection and pays a fitting tribute to the vision of Tyler. The collection of Tyler’s letters is another rich archive that, with both sides of the correspondence now available, also offers potential for a rich and fascinating publication.
Dr Popescu will also be able to contribute invaluable support in developing an appropriate network of research collaborators, building on the initial engagement that I have been able to establish. The opportunity to establish a working relationship with the University of Oxford and Balliol College is a valuable one as the University of Tasmania seeks to grow its global engagement.

Recently the Ambassador of Romania in Australia and New Zealand, Nineta Barbulescu, visited the University and was surprised and excited to discover a unique gem of Romanian culture quietly residing in an unexpected corner of the Antipodes. Opportunities have now been suggested to show elements of the Collection, including an exhibition in Canberra, and perhaps even a return visit to Romania.

Against the rich backdrop and pivotal importance of Byzantine art throughout centuries of Romanian national identity, the Tyler Collection might be seen only as a small, isolated curio of a distant tradition – incongruous, even anachronistic amongst the vibrant, experimental contemporary culture of Tasmanian arts. However, I feel certain that Tyler’s aesthetic passion for collection, born of an unlikely connectedness between an Australian economist and a dedicated group of 20th century artists bearing the legacy of the Medieval Fanar princes, will soon be recognised as an intimate act of quiet, visionary brilliance. The Tyler Collection has captured a small but precious slice of European art history, plucked from the precipitous edge of a receding Byzantine world and deposited in a place that could not be more remote from its origins. During the coming months of research and exploration, the Collection will slowly prove that a veil of apparent obscurity can be drawn back to reveal something unexpected, fascinating and profound.

Notes

2. G. Tyler, Personal Correspondence, 2009-2011, Fine Art Collection, University of Tasmania.
4. G. Tyler, Personal Correspondence, 2010-2011, Fine Art Collection, University of Tasmania.
5. M. Palade, “The Importance of the Byzantine Legacy for the Romanian Sacred Art”.
6. Ibid.
7. M. A. Musicescu, “Byzantium and the Art of Romanian Principalities”.
8. Palade, op. cit. 27.
9. G. Tyler, Personal Correspondence, 2009-2011, Fine Art Collection, University of
   Tasmania.

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   Burlington.