

Gateways to Romanian Culture and History

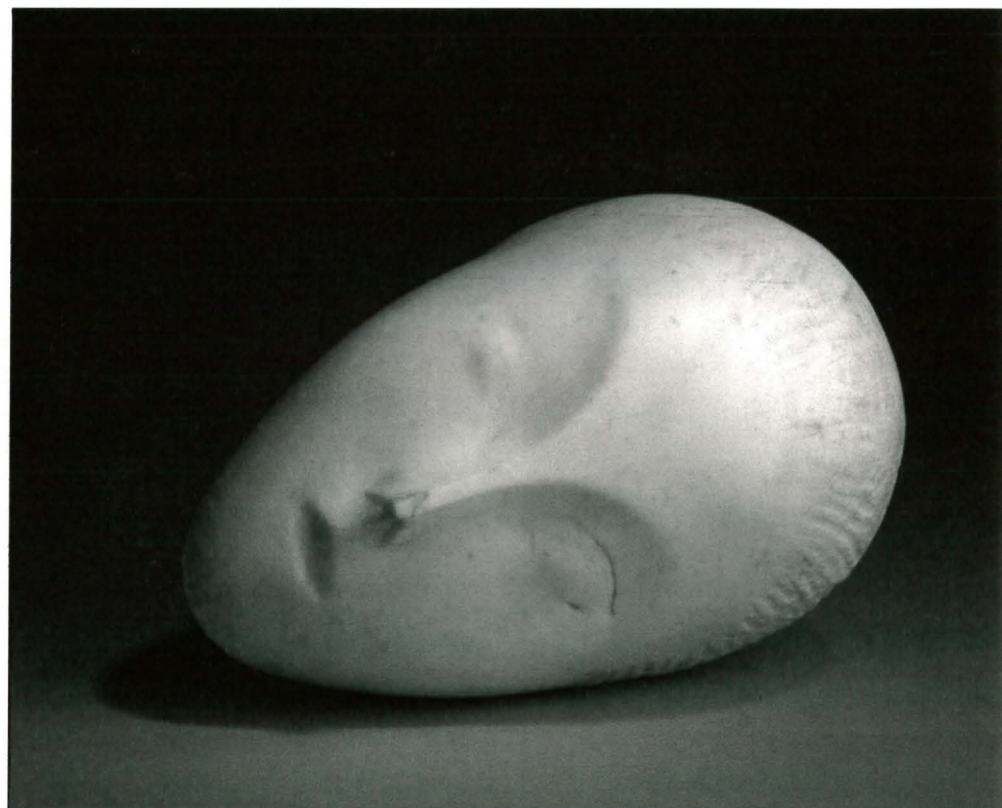
Charles King

"We Romanians are the heirs of the eastern reaches of the Roman Empire, whose memory we have preserved in our language and our name."

—Nicolae Iorga
Romanian historian (1871-1940)

Majestic mountains, rolling plains, the Danube, and the Black Sea — all contribute to the geographical diversity of Romania, the gateway between the Balkans and Central Europe. The country is bordered by Hungary, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and the Black Sea. The central part of the country is dominated by the great arc of the Carpathian Mountains, with their alpine peaks and thick beech, fir, and spruce forests. The Danube forms Romania's southwestern and southern border for much of its course, giving the country the longest Danube frontage in Europe. This great waterway ends its journey across Europe in Romania, emptying into the Black Sea and forming the Danube delta, one of the world's richest treasures of unique fauna and flora. Vast, fertile plains stretch from the Carpathians east toward the Black Sea coast. Fishermen and farmers, highlanders and lowlanders, forest dwellers and settlers of the plains have all contributed to the making of modern Romania.

Romania consists of several distinct geographical regions, all of which have historically been more gateways than barriers to different cultures and peo-



ples. To the west lie the hills and flatlands of Crișana and Banat, regions that open onto the immense Hungarian plain even farther west. To the north are the hills and mountains of Maramureș and Bucovina, regions that have long been considered the cradle of Romanian folklore and traditional art. In the center is Transylvania, with its distinctive multicultural heritage influenced by Romanians, Hungarians, and Germans. Across the Carpathians to the east lies Moldova, where Orthodox monks have long guarded their unique painted monasteries nestled amid lush foothills. To the south of the Carpathians are Oltenia and Muntenia, often grouped together under the

name Wallachia, with their vast agricultural zones washed by the Danube. And situated between the Danube and the Black Sea is Dobrogea, where ancient fishing villages have given way to bustling tourist resorts.

Romanians are often perceived as a small nation inhabiting a small and unknown land. But the image could not be farther from the reality. The Romanians are the largest cultural group in Southeast Europe and one of the largest in Europe as a whole. There are some 25 million Romanian speakers living mainly in Romania but also in several neighboring countries. There are thus more Romanians in Europe than Nor-

**Right: Icon represent-
ing Adam and Eve,
from Gherla, Banat.**

*Photo courtesy Village
Museum, Bucharest*

Left:
Sleeping Muse I,
1909–1911, by
Constantin Brancusi.
*Hirshhorn Museum and
Sculpture Garden, Smith-
sonian Institution, Gift of
Joseph H. Hirshhorn,
1966. Photography by
Ricardo Blanc*



wegians, Swedes, Finns, and Danes combined. The territory of Romania itself is only a little smaller than Italy.

Today, Romania's population is just under 23 million. Major ethnic minorities include Hungarians (7 percent) and Roma or Gypsies (2 percent), as well as Germans, Ukrainians, Jews, Turks, Serbs, and other peoples. While Romanians form the majority populations in both Romania and the Republic of Moldova, there are also significant Romanian minorities in Ukraine, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. Diaspora communities are scattered throughout the world, especially in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe.

In their name and their language, Romanians preserve the legacy of the Roman Empire. Their language is of Latin origin, and speakers of Spanish or Italian will find something familiar in its sonorous rhythms. Indigenous peoples in the region of modern Romania were strongly influenced by Latin culture after the arrival of the Romans. Indeed, it is the conquest of the lands north of the Danube by the Emperor Trajan in the second century A.D. that is portrayed

on the famous Trajan's Column in Rome, the most complete ancient depiction of the clothing, appearance, and weaponry of the inhabitants of the region before the Roman conquest. The Roman legions transformed the region into a distinct province, Dacia, and managed to hold on to the frontier province until the coming of the barbarians in the third century A.D. In the following centuries, the local Latinized culture was influenced by Slavs, Hungarians, Turks, and other peoples, with each leaving a mark on the language, art, and history of modern Romanians.

This ancient culture, however, did not find expression in a modern state until relatively late. Two large principalities — Moldova and Wallachia — emerged out of a congeries of local domains in the 14th century, but these eventually fell under the control of the Ottoman Turks by the early years of the 16th century. However, the Romanian lands were never fully incorporated into the empire, unlike areas south of the Danube, and for much of the Ottoman period the Romanians were ruled by their own princes in exchange for annual tribute

paid to the sultan in Constantinople.

The foundations of modern Romania were laid in 1859. In that year, noble assemblies in Wallachia and Moldova elected the same man as leader of the principalities, effectively uniting them under a single head. Within two decades, in 1878, the full independence of the new state — now called Romania — was recognized by the great powers. At the end of World War I, the country doubled its size and population, especially through the addition of Transylvania, Bessarabia, and Bucovina, areas that had previously been part of Russia and Austria-Hungary. The turmoil of World War II reduced Romania's size, with much of the eastern part of the country incorporated into the Soviet Union. The march of the Soviet army to Bucharest in the closing days of the war ushered in the period of communism. Under the tyrannical leadership of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the communist experiment led to the environmental, economic, and cultural degradation of the Romanian land and people. However, an anti-communist revolution in 1989 swept away the Ceaușescu dictatorship and paved the way for the growth of democracy. Since then, Romanians have worked to retake their place in Europe and to introduce their newly free land to investors and visitors from the West.

Although the spiritual homeland of ethnic Romanians, Romania is also a land of great religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Orthodox monks, Catholic priests, Jewish rabbis, Protestant ministers, and Muslim imams may all be found there. Romania is the only country with a Latin cultural heritage without a dominant Roman Catholic tradition. Most Romanians, about 87 percent, adhere to the Romanian Orthodox faith. The peoples of the region accepted Christianity gradually in the third and fourth centuries A.D. After the split between the Western and Eastern churches in the 11th century, the territory of

modern Romania remained a part of the Byzantine tradition. The Romanian church received autonomous status in the mid-19th century, and a Romanian Orthodox patriarchate was established in Bucharest. Like his counterparts in the Russian, Greek, and other Orthodox churches, the Romanian patriarch today serves as the spiritual leader of Orthodox Romanians.

A small minority of Romanians, mainly in Transylvania, are members of the Eastern Rite Catholic church. Also known as Greek Catholics, they recognize the authority of the pope but follow the liturgy of the Orthodox church. In 1948, the communists forced the Greek Catholics to unite with the Orthodox, but after 1989 they were restored to their former independent status.

Many of Romania's Hungarians and Germans are either Roman Catholics or members of Lutheran and Calvinist (Reformed) churches. Adventists, Baptists, and other Protestant traditions are also represented. Romania was historically an important center of Jewish culture, but the tragedy of the Holocaust and decades of emigration have reduced the Jewish population to a tiny minority. Other small religious groups, including Russian Orthodox sects and Muslim communities, practice their faith in the cultural patchwork of the Dobrogea region along the Black Sea.

Modern Romanian culture is the product of centuries of interaction between local populations and successive waves of immigration to the region. Until the mid-19th century, Romanian was written in versions of the Cyrillic alphabet also used by Serbs, Bulgarians, and Russians. The vocabulary contains words of Turkic and Slavic origin. Music, dance, folk art, and religious traditions also share many commonalities with those of Hungarians, Slavs, Turks, and other Balkan peoples. Pre-Christian festivals associated with the changing of the seasons were combined with saints'

days and other religious feasts after the coming of Christianity. Many of these traditions are preserved among the country's large rural population.

Persons linked to Romania have made a major impact in many cultural spheres. Artists such as sculptor Constantin Brâncuși reinterpreted traditional Romanian folk themes through the lens

ditions, the Romanians inhabit a land of diverse landscapes, where local customs, rituals, and ways of life have adapted to distinct physical environments: the woodlands of Transylvania and Maramureș, the plains of the west, the lowlands along the Danube river, and the urban cityscapes of Bucharest, Iași, and Cluj, ancient settlements that are today



Plowing in Maramureș.
Photo courtesy Dan Dinescu

of modernism. Composers and writers such as George Enescu and Eugène Ionesco likewise explored the boundaries between custom and innovation. The philosopher of religions Mircea Eliade, the poet Paul Célan, the novelist Panait Istrati — as well as sports legends such as Johnny Weismuller and Nadia Comăneci — have also hailed from Romania. Just as the country has been a gateway between East and West, so it has been a portal through which unique contributions to culture have reached the world.

A people with a rich Latin heritage influenced by myriad other cultural tra-

becoming nodal points in Romania's expanding array of private businesses, tourist outlets, and expatriate communities. The folk culture of the peasant has long been seen as the embodiment of Romanian identity, but at the close of the millennium, Romanian culture is more than ever a dynamic combination of both tradition and modernity.

Gateways to Romanian Culture and History

Suggested Readings and Films on Romanian and Moldovan Themes

Academic Works

Deletant, Dennis. 1995. *Ceaușescu and the Securitate: Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965–1989*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe. Britain's foremost



authority on Romania offers an examination of the communist-era secret police based on his research in the still-classified archives.

Federal Research Division. 1995. *Belarus and Moldova: Country Studies*. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress. The second half of this volume, by William Crowther of UNC-Greensboro, presents a very good overview of Moldovan history and politics.

Hitchins, Keith. 1996. *The Romanians, 1774–1866*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. A masterful synthesis by the dean of Romanian historians in the United States.

_____. 1994. *Rumania, 1866–1947*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Kligman, Gail. 1988. *The Wedding of the Dead*. Berkeley: University of California Press. A fascinating excursion into the folk rituals of northern Transylvania.

Livezeanu, Irina. 1996. *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. A brilliant and readable analysis of the problems of state- and nation-building in Romania in the 1920s and 1930s.

Memoirs, Journalism, and Literature

Anton, Ted. 1996. *Eros, Magic and the Death of Professor Culianu*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. A fascinating investigation into the 1991 murder of a Romanian professor at the University of Chicago and possible links with the Romanian far right.

Funderburk, David B. 1997. *Pinstripes and Reds*. Washington, D.C.: Selous Foundation. A former U.S. ambassador's account of his battles with Ceaușescu, and with Washington.

Malaparte, Kurzio. 1995. *Kaputt*.

Evanston: Northwestern University Press. First-hand views of Romania during World War II, by the war correspondent for *Corriere della Sera*.

Manea, Norman. 1993. *Compulsory Happiness*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. Four short stories on the terrors of totalitarianism.

Anything by Mihai Eminescu (the Romanian national poet), Ion Luca Caragiale (Romania's finest satirist), Paul Călan (Jewish-German poet born in Bucovina), Mircea Eliade (noted essayist, short-story writer, and professor of religion), or Emil Cioran (the dark and brooding voice of the "lost generation" of the 1920s). All have major works now available in English.

Films

Fortunes of War (BBC, 1992), starring Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson. An English professor and his wife travel through Romania and the Balkans in the 1930s, with the Nazis hot on their heels. The Bucharest Athénée Palace Hotel, where much of the action takes place, is now restored to its former grandeur.

An Unforgettable Summer (Lucian Pintilie, 1991), starring Kristin Scott-Thomas. A film by one of Romania's most important contemporary directors, which chronicles the fate of an army family sent to the Romanian-Bulgarian frontier in the 1920s. A searching portrayal of life on the turbulent border, as well as the moral and political complexity of Romania's interwar years.

The Oak (Lucian Pintilie, 1992), starring Maia Morgenstern. A darkly funny story set in the waning years of the Ceaușescu regime, with gritty scenes shot in the environmental wasteland of Copșa Mică.

Web Resources

The key source for Romanian and Moldovan links is the Web page of the Society for Romanian Studies, located at <<http://www.huntington.edu/srs/>>. The page has excellent links to pages on history, art, culture, politics, economics, and many other fields.

Charles King holds the Ion Rațiu Chair of Romanian Studies at Georgetown University, where he teaches courses on contemporary Southeast Europe, nationalism, and comparative politics. His books include *Nations Abroad: Diaspora Politics and International Relations in the Former Soviet Union* (1998) and *The Moldovans: Negotiable Nationalism on a European Frontier* (in press). He is a frequent traveler to Romania and Moldova and speaks fluent Romanian.