



4 women 4 pathways



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The exhibition **4 Women / 4 Pathways** completes our research project ***The woman artist in the communist regime in Romania, represented in the Tyler Collection*** for the inaugural Tyler Visiting Fellowship (2024).

Of the twenty-six Romanian artists represented in the Tyler Collection of the University of Tasmania, only four are women: **Geta Brătescu** (1926–2018), **Sultana Maitec** (1928–2016), **Georgeta Năpăruș** (1930–1997), and **Silvia Radu** (b. 1935). They are the creators of more than 130 artworks in the collection. The four women-artists were active in Romania both during the communist regime and in the post-1989 Revolution era, for different periods of time.

Under the communist regime, one avenue of escape from the imposed topics of socialist realism and constant threat of censorship was the recourse to mythological / antique stories - as distant in time as possible, and access to a completely different universe. Mythological tales were published and read widely, and a book was rewritten for young people, *The Legends of Olympus* – retellings by Alexandru Mitru. In the world of gods and heroes, life presented problems similar to those of ordinary mortals: there were love stories, pranks, parties, travels, fights. Compared to the bleak reality of Romania in the 1980s, these stories brought a breath of fresh oxygen, carrying people's imaginations to distant lands and times to which they could not travel in reality. Artistic themes were thus inspired by Ancient Greece and Rome – the immortals and characters of ancient tragedy, or by the (post)Byzantine tradition as reflected in the frescoes on the interior or exterior walls of churches, the icons and mosaics with hieratic figures of saints and other-worldly gold backgrounds. All were utilised and revisited through modern interpretation in order not to arouse suspicion of the authorities. This strategy allowed the artists a certain freedom of expression, so as to avoid professional and moral compromises.

At that time, the woman-artist was subjected to an additional layer of complex stresses. Traditionally she had had to behave according to her secondary status as a woman in a patriarchal society and to obey certain roles, such as taking care of the house, children, and her husband, who was considered the head of the family. Romania was greatly influenced by Oriental traditions perpetuated especially through the Orthodox Church, and the subordinate role of women persisted from generation to generation. With the rise of the communism regime a supposedly "fair" society was established, but in practice it was a world from which every trace of spirituality had to be erased in favor of materialism, and every freedom of expression had to be suppressed. Communist ideology applied in art, as in society, a gender egalitarian policy, placing women on an equal footing with men. However, despite this the conditions of life and creation for the woman painter or sculptor were not easy, and in fact more burdens were placed on women. From 1966, Decree 770 prohibited abortion and contraception in a bid to increase the birth rate and grow a new Romanian population. It led to disastrous results: the death of many women who resorted to abortions "at home" in insufficiently sanitary conditions, increasing physical and emotional suffering of women, and a greater number of orphanages – in fact ultimately extermination centers for those considered a ballast by the communist state. As this newly doubled generation of children aged, economic and education resources became even more severely stretched.

Restricted personal freedom was a difficult reality, as was the communist regime's contempt for any trace of spirituality. In many cases, the woman-artist was also forced to take a job, often inadequate, and chosen not necessarily to fulfill her dreams and desires. Consequently, her time for artistic creation was substantially reduced. The cold and hunger were everyday realities, as Silvia Radu discusses in the exhibition's filmed interview. Despite major social and political upheaval, the woman-artist – as is the case of the four women artists in this exhibition – often found the strength to do so many things: to achieve excellence and to preserve the beautiful Romanian traditions that communism, fortunately, did not manage to destroy completely. Let's also think about the peasant woman from the traditional village, who took care with delicacy and talent in spinning the wool, of weaving carpets, of the beautiful seams on the traditional Romanian blouse, called 'la'. These creative women of all times knew how to make the necessary sacrifices, often with a smile on their faces, being aware of their mission to preserve the values and carry forward, for future generations, the fundamental features of the Romanian soul.

Writing about 19th century realist artists, art historian and feminist writer Linda Nochlin stated: "The artist striving for truth or sincerity had to guard his spontaneous vision against distortion or alteration by aesthetic conventions or preconceptions." (*Realism*, London: Pelican Books, 1971). This quote could equally apply to the four women in this exhibition. The themes and motifs chosen by them – such as the traditional folk blouse, the mediterranean dancers, and the mythological characters – explored abstract and ethnic territories, with spiritual valences, and managed to carry forward a spirit of tradition that would otherwise have been annihilated by the totalitarian regime.

The metaphorical journey of the works presented in this exhibition is filled with a high sense of the travelling of culture, of the transmission of values, of the organic link between people, between millennial traditions. A core of humanity that remains permanently connected and passes on, despite harsh destructive historical events, what is most valuable. The physical journey covered three continents and is almost as far-reaching in place as it is in time: from Romania, in Europe, where they were created, to Washington, DC, in North America, at the residence of the collector Geoffrey Tyler, to finally arrive on the Australian continent, at UTAS in Hobart, where most of the collection was donated.

Within the exhibition, viewers can watch the specially conducted interview with Silvia Radu, the only one of the four women artists who is still alive: *Silvia Radu in conversation with Alina Gherasim and Eduard Andrei in her Pangrati St. studio, Bucharest, January 11, 2024* (filmed and edited by **Mihai Constantineanu**, English subtitles by **Mona Momescu**).

Curators, Tyler Visiting Fellows,
Eduard Andrei and Alina Gherasim

Sultana Maitec

(1928–2016)

Sultana Maitec is represented in the Tyler Collection with the painting *Pomona* (not dated, mixed media on canvas), in which ancient Roman symbolism is presented against a Byzantine gold background, similar in manner to the work of fellow Romanian artists Marin Gherasim and Corneliu Petrescu.

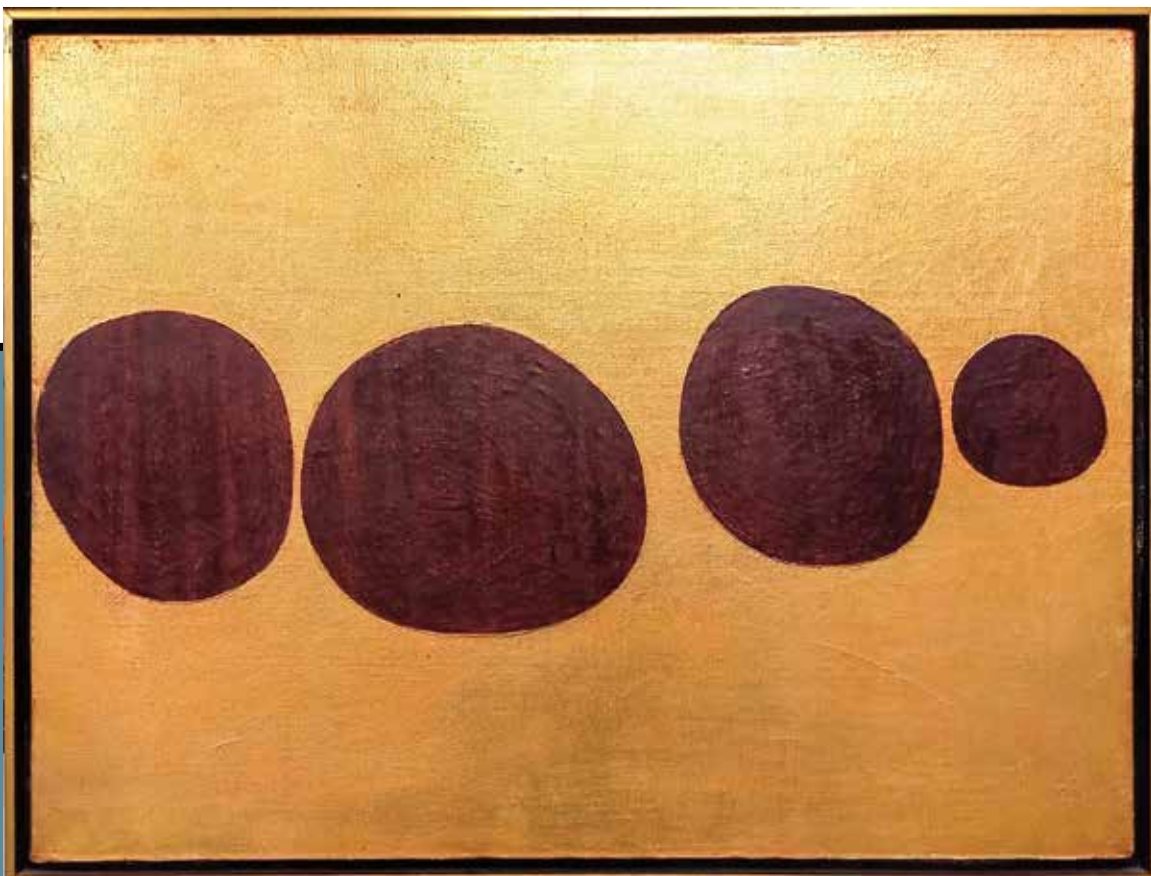
Maitec was a formal painter who became widely known for her non-figurative imagery and extensive use of gold leaf. This can be seen as a quiet resistance against the realist visual doctrine imposed by Romania's communist government. Her artwork is contemporary in its stylization and essentialization, just like the sculpture of Constantin Brâncuși, "the pioneer of modern sculpture".

In her paintings Maitec reimagines a symbol from Roman mythology. In the Roman pantheon, Pomona is worshipped as the goddess of abundance, of fruits, of orchards. Her name comes from the Latin word "pomum" (meaning *fruit*, especially *orchard fruit*). The artist was born in the village of Livezi Mari (translated in Romanian, which means *Large Orchards* in English), in the Pindus mountains of Greece. Her family emigrated to Romania when she was young, and she attended the Institute of Fine Arts as an adult. It's touching to note that the name of the village of her birth provided such inspiration for a great part of her body of art.

The painting *Pomona* from the Tyler Collection is part of a splendid series of works on this theme, the *Pomonas*. Gold is the predominant tone, presenting a land of the sun and making reference to the golden background of Byzantine icons and mosaics, a constant visual influence in the day-to-day life of Romanians where the Orthodox Church is so important.

The Romanian art critic and philosopher Andrei Pleșu wrote about the artist: "Sultana Maitec's painting is a road to the South. The gold, the beach, the sea, the sun, the offensive turgor of the fruit, circumscribe, all together, a southern aspiration (or source), whose emblem is, not coincidentally, Pomona, the goddess of gardens and fruits." (*Spre Sud [Towards South]*, catalog of Sultana Maitec's solo show, Dalles Hall, Bucharest, 1988).

In *Pomona* the fruits are reduced to four ovoids that seem to float, timelessly, in an intense unreal setting, without any other formal or chromatic detail that would detract from the expressive force of the contrast between the dark burgundy of the fruits and the rich gold backdrop, and any trace of the narrative is excluded.



Sultana Maitec, *Pomona* (not dated, mixed media on canvas)

Silvia Radu

(b. 1935)

Silvia Radu has had a prolific career as sculptor, potter and painter, and is represented in the Tyler Collection with no fewer than 123 works. With restrictions on portraiture during the communist era she turned to ceramics, which allowed her greater freedom of expression. As a sideline and to pay for materials for her costly sculptural work, she produced painted porcelain vessels, mainly vases and bowls of various sizes decorated in indigo, ochre, and gold designs. These were sold through Artists Union shops, and were popular with both locals and tourists. Deeply spiritual, much of Radu's works deals with Christian themes – as demonstrated in particular in her *Angels* sculptures. However we also see very clearly the influence of ancient Greek and Etruscan sculpture and pottery in her mark making.

Ancient Greek ceramics are recognizable by their different types of vases – amphora, hydria, lekythos – with elegant drawings of precise and fine lines in both red-figure and black-figure pottery. The influence of these drawings on the characters decorating Radu's ceramic vases and bowls – dancers, musicians, wrestlers, warriors on horseback, all with stylised robes and hairdos – is immediately obvious. Likewise, we see the same classical figures in Radu's sketches/preparatory drawings for her ceramic works.

The Kora and Kouros sculptures from the archaic period of Ancient Greece inspired Radu's work with their hieratic attitudes and seemingly smiling faces. To this was added the influence of Byzantine art, reflected in the characters' big eyes, fixed and ecstatic gaze, channeling the religious 'gate of the soul' for communication with the Divinity: ***Head of Woman*** (1981).

The gilded bronze plaque, ***Dacian Warriors*** (not dated) is particularly notable for its heraldic insignia and reference to Romanian heritage. Here we recognize the coats of arms of Wallachia and Moldavia, the two great Romanian historical regions, placed symmetrically to the centre of the composition. This work showcases the artist's concern for history, from the origins of the Romanian people, the wars between the Dacians and the Romans, up to medieval times, combining both antiquity and the medieval era in one artwork. These heraldic insignia and other historical motifs are also found in a series of war-themed ceramic panels, with which the bronze work must be iconographically related.

Two paintings in the Tyler Collection, titled ***Shore*** (1978 and 1983; both gouache on paper), demonstrate that Radu, known primarily as a powerful sculptor, is also a refined expressionist painter. The two works were painted in Vama Veche, a small village on the southern coast of the Black Sea, where Radu and her husband Vasile Gorduz used to spend their summer holiday. It is a place with an almost Mediterranean climate and a special light of the South that has attracted many painters over time, while the Black Sea was a main route of communication between the current territory of Romania and the ancient Greek world.

Thus we can see how much the imagery of the world of antiquity has been a constant influence on Radu's artwork; starting from ancient sources and developing into stylised, contemporary expressions of affection, beauty and devotion.



Silvia Radu, large bowl (not dated, glazed porcelain)

Georgeta Năpăruș

(1930–1997)

Georgeta Năpăruș is represented by seven paintings in the Tyler Collection. Geoffrey Tyler wrote of her: “Năpăruș, throughout her career incorporated Romanian peasant costumes, sometimes as subjects but most of the time as decorative detailing in more general subjects. Often these detailed costumes were on somewhat fantastic persons.” (<https://tylercollection.omeka.net/items/show/2080>). The collector had noticed the connection of the artist’s work with folk art, decorativism and a propensity towards the fantastic. Here, folk art functioned for her as a timeless archaic wellspring.

Another source for Năpăruș was the art and symbolism of Ancient Egypt. In her paintings one sees “hieroglyphs” – small elements as if detached from papyri or frescoes from the tombs of the pharaohs. Old writings, the indecipherable loaded with meanings, fascinated the artist. In works such as *Fațada / Facade* (1987), the overlapping of motifs and calligraphies not only creates the impression of successive layers of peeling paint on the wall of a dilapidated building, but also suggests the idea of a palimpsest, of superimposed cultural histories.

The influence of Romanian folk art, with its geometric motifs and splendid stitches from traditional costume, can also be found in Năpăruș’ paintings. Growing up in the countryside, in an area where home production of textiles was a life necessity and the craft of weaving had a long tradition among women, passed down from generation to generation, Năpăruș kept in her mind the exceptionally hand-embroidered blouses and the rich ornamental patterns of the peasant women’s skirts. Another subtle source is the medieval illuminated manuscripts with their pure, bright colors, fine graphics, rich decoration, and narrative tone, blending influences from both Orient and Occident.

These motifs can be detected in the work *Costume* (1980), which, according to the *pars pro toto* principle (a part is representative of the whole), offers only a fragment of a dress, allowing the viewer’s imagination to complete the female body wearing the clothing. The work relates directly to a real dress created by the artist which was displayed in the retrospective exhibition of Georgeta Năpăruș, opened at the Romană Gallery in Bucharest, 2024. At the opening, the artist’s son, Ilie Grigorescu, spoke about his mother creating a limited series of about ten such dresses, which she never sold but instead offered to her lady friends. As in the painting, the actual dress mixes the spirit of medieval courtly elegance with folk art motifs.

Năpăruș’ artworks thus demonstrate the combination of a variety of elements from different cultures and eras, offering the viewer a canvas of rich, expressive imagery.



Georgeta Năpăruș, *Costume* (1980, oil on canvas)

Geta Brătescu

(1926–2018)

Geta Brătescu is featured in the Tyler Collection with her series *Portraits of Medea* (1979, cycle of 10 five-colour lithographs), inspired by ancient Greek and Roman mythology writings. The literary inspiration is not at all accidental, since the artist was also a graduate in letters from the University of Bucharest, a refined intellectual, and artistic director of the literature and art magazine *Secolul 20 / 20th Century* (later *Secolul 21 / 21st Century*). Her work was vanguardist for Romania during the Ceaușescu era, the artist expressing herself in multiple media: graphic arts, textile collage, photography, book illustration, and also installation, video, performance. The National Art Museum of Romania dedicated a major retrospective to her in 1999. Her exhibition *Apparitions* represented Romania at the Biennale di Venezia in 2017.

Let's consider the great themes of the Mediterranean world, such as jealousy, ambition, revenge. These, along with the art of Ancient Greece have always been a rich source of inspiration for artists. Those who followed an artistic education in Romania attended Art History classes and were aware of many ancient works of art from books and slide projections. Ancient Greek theater, with its tragedies and comedies, provided a wealth of epic ideas, including the striking theater masks worn by the actors. It is the tragedy *Medea* by the ancient Greek playwright Euripides – first performed in 431 BC and later rewritten around 50 AD by the Roman philosopher Seneca – which inspired Brătescu's series *Portraits of Medea*.

In Greek mythology, Medea, a princess of Colchis, helps Jason leading the Argonauts in search of the legendary Golden Fleece – the source of power and kingship – and later marries him. After many years Jason leaves Medea, who then kills their children and his new wife in an act of horrific revenge.

In the center of each of Brătescu's ten compositions is the portrait of Medea, which forms an island as seen from above. Each portrait/island is surrounded by the sea and by complicated arabesques, as if woven from the threads of the Golden Fleece. This lyrical evocation cleverly bridges the gap between mythology and a contemporary expressionist formula. In some of the portraits one sees an X-ray view of the mother's womb in the labyrinth of drawing lines, in which the silhouette of Medea's murdered children might be divined. In Brătescu's words, Medea embodies woman as a "territory of birth and death... the maternal 'I' is reflected terrifyingly, hysterically". (*Apparitions. Geta Brătescu*, 2017, p. 17).

Furthermore, the ancient themes of the scorned woman and witchcraft have 'proto-feminist' undertones, as Medea unleashes her full force – passion, anger, and revenge – all because of her great love for Jason. From this point of view, the series of works by Brătescu also offers a contemporary perspective on femininity, in terms of strength, power, and self-determination. However, the artist refused to be associated with feminism and once humorously stated: "If I am a feminist, it is through obstinacy. This means I wink at whatever happens." (<https://tylercollection.omeka.net/items/show/795>).



Geta Brătescu, *Portraits of Medea* (1979, no. 2 and no. 10 from a cycle of 10 five-colour lithographs, printed on "Letea special" paper, format in folio / 56 x 40cm each sheet, copy 10/10)



Georgeta Năpăruș *Women* (1982, oil on canvas)

Front cover:

- S. Radu *Head of Woman* (detail), 1981
- G. Năpăruș *Fatada* (detail), 1987
- S. Maitec *Pomona* (detail), not dated
- G. Brătescu *Portraits of Medea No 10* (detail), 1975

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the **TYLER** collection

<https://www.utas.edu.au/about/arts-and-culture/our-collections>

