

NICOLAE GHICA-BUDEȘTI – A PIONEER OF FURNITURE DESIGN IN ROMANIA

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Abstract. This article is part of a series dedicated to highlighting the value of the national movable heritage, with a special focus on furniture created by Romanian architects during the 19th and 20th centuries, a crucial period for the formation and consolidation of the furniture design profession in Romania. The research is based on a rigorous analysis of primary sources, including field research, archival documents, and period publications, providing a comprehensive perspective on the evolution of this field. Although furniture represents a significant element in the history of architecture, it has often been overlooked compared to architectural works, due to both its perishable and movable nature, and the prioritization of other aspects of built heritage. This study aims to address this oversight by offering a systematic evaluation of the contributions made by Romanian architects to the field of furniture design.

One of the key figures in this research is Nicolae Ghica-Budești, an architect recognized for promoting the revival of traditional Romanian architecture and the affirmation of the Romanian style in architecture. He was also a pioneer in furniture design, having a major impact on the development of this profession in Romania. The article provides a detailed index of his initiatives, analyzing various types of furniture and highlighting the essential role of the architect in the creation of design objects.

The paper incorporates both period images and the author's sketches to illustrate Ghica-Budești's contribution, who is considered the first Romanian architect acknowledged as a designer (Pittsburgh, 1943), thereby emphasizing his significance in the development of industrial furniture design in Romania.

Introduction. A central motivation for this research is inspired by Victor Margolin's discussions on the fragility of design history [1], particularly regarding its relatively late emergence as a formal discipline in the 1970s. Building on this premise, this article introduces the concept of “design history isolation” to emphasize how, in this particular case, the significance of design history is frequently overshadowed by the achievements of architectural history. This study is part of a more significant research effort that seeks to shift the perspective towards a more horizontal axis in research by examining all furniture design examples that were achieved by Romanian architects in the period of the crystallization of the designer profession, aiming to both structure a cohesive history of Romanian furniture design and enhance the broader context of architectural history.

Nicolae Ghica-Budești, a key figure in this study, is renowned for his significant contributions to Romanian architecture and monument restoration discipline. While his architectural achievements are well-documented in the available literature, this paper emphasizes a lesser-studied aspect of his

multifaceted work, which is his contributions to furniture design history. The analysis will concentrate on three main functional directions in his body of work: ecclesiastical furniture, household furniture, and institutional furniture, each of which significantly enriches the field of design history. Besides his architectural contributions, Ghica-Budești demonstrated the same passion and care for movable heritage through his work, restoring or recreating new objects while considering the original spirit of the interior spaces he addresses. His efforts transcend projects for building restoration, reflecting a unified design language in which furniture is honoured with the same respect as architectural spaces. This approach, which emphasizes the preservation and redefinition of Romanian-style values, fosters a true sense of connection with tradition and continuity through modern movement in the furniture design industry. Ultimately, his work embodies the harmonious integration of architecture and furniture design within a comprehensive artistic vision. By examining Ghica-Budești's contributions, this research seeks to deepen our understanding and enrich the broader narrative of Romanian design history, offering the audience a deeper appreciation of the depth of his work.

Pioneering the furniture design throughout the Romanian-style period.

N. Ghica-Budești (1869–1943), graduated from the École des Beaux-Arts in 1901. Like Ion Mincu, Ghica-Budești played a significant role in the development of the Romanian-style in architecture, advocating for formal explorations enriched by their symbolic meanings and influenced by his extensive experience as a researcher of historical architecture, as well as his work as a restorer and practicing architect. He described his approach as follows:

“I sought to give a place of honor to the essential forms of noble Byzantine architecture, from which our Romanian forms are derived, both logically resulting from the technique of brick, which was, in the past as in Byzantium, the most widespread and affordable material. It was the only viable option for universal use.”[2]

A contemporary of the most important Romanian architects, N. Ghica-Budești did not achieve the same level of popularity among followers of the Romanian style. Nevertheless, his originality lay in his synthesis of Byzantine and Gothic influences, combined with the impact of french academism, who shaped his technique of historic model synthesis [3]. He also extended his creative pursuits to interior design, a field further elaborated in the following sections.

In an article published in the “Arhitectura” magazine in 1909, architect N. Ghica-Budești presents a critical perspective on the art of the autohton furniture design, highlighting its growing tendency to imitate classical styles, a trend increasingly prevalent toward the end of the 19th century. He advocates for reintegrating Romanian furniture into the forefront of modern architects' and artists' concerns, emphasizing the need to define a distinct style, which he calls “Modern-Styl.”[4] This style is conceptualized as a rational, practical, and original expression, profoundly shaped by the national identity of each person. Ghica-Budești argues that architecture and decorative arts should simultaneously reflect modernity and tradition, thereby creating a form of expression that meets the needs of contemporary Romanian society:

“...the study of the principles upon which our art is based, and the investigation of how these principles are applied to various materials—wood, metals, fabrics, etc.—followed by the creation of new elements and motifs that, while preserving the spirit of tradition and respecting the character of past works, should never be servile copies and, at the same time, should be well-suited to the demands of our modern life.”[5]

In his effort to define the principles of this national style, the architect designed a set of furniture pieces intended for a living room. His proposal aimed to generate a movement among architects, encouraging the national industry to overcome economic challenges by supporting authentic design, free from foreign imports, costly or in poor taste [6]. The furniture, crafted from polished alder wood—a complex essence with a yellow-reddish hue—is characterized by simple volumes and decorated with floral cutouts that evoke traditional motifs from the porches of peasant houses. Beyond their aesthetic value, these cutouts visually lighten the furniture, allowing glimpses of the wall, covered with a light green wallpaper chosen to harmonize with the texture of the wood. The decorative motif of the flower with sinuous branches, inspired by peasant distaffs, is integrated not only into the furniture but also into panelling, picture frames, draperies, and the border of a white-centered carpet in the room. Although furniture pieces designed by Ghika-Budești are found rarely, they reflect his concern for integrating architecture with decorative arts. This example plays a vital role in overcoming “design history isolation” by showcasing the value of publishing furniture drawings (Fig. 1) and inspiring other architects to do the same. As a result, more individuals have started contributing their work, enriching the resources that can highlight the significance of Romanian design history.

Among the restoration projects undertaken by architect N. Ghika-Budești, a notable achievement is the restoration of the “St. George” – White Church in Baia, Suceava County. At the beginning of the 20th century, this edifice was in a precarious state of preservation, with only the brick walls and the tower remaining intact. Between 1907 and 1914, under the auspices of the Historical Monuments Commission, the architect oversaw the restoration work, relying on architectural clues and remnants preserved in situ, and utilizing the original masonry as the basis for the intervention. A particularly remarkable aspect of this project is the design of the furniture for the restored place of worship. Drawing inspiration from the only remaining original ornament—a relief on the frame of the entrance between the nave and the narthex—Ghika-Budești, assisted by master sculptor Anibal Spoldi from the Higher School of Arts and Crafts in Bucharest, designed several pieces: the iconostasis, the sidechairs, the pews, the tetrapod, and the screen. The ornamentation was derived from the relief motif of the stone portal, consisting of two intersecting perpendicular bands at the center of a circle of equal thickness. This decorative element was creatively reinterpreted, with the architect reshaping and enriching the motif through successive iterations.

Symbols such as the Moldavian coat of arms and the princely crown, featured on the princely throne, were faithfully reproduced based on historical documents. The simplicity of the church’s architecture, characterized by whitewashed interiors devoid of paintings or decorations, prompted the architect to adapt the furniture’s aesthetic to the space. As such, the

furniture was crafted from stained oak, finished with a transparent coating to emphasize its dark natural tones, foregoing the gilding technique often employed in similar projects. The execution of the works was carried out entirely at the Higher School of Arts and Crafts in Bucharest. The carpentry was performed under the supervision of master carpenter Emil Gerrechs in his workshop. The sculptural details were crafted in the workshop of master Spoldi, while the altar icons were painted through a collaboration between Ghika-Budești and painter Arthur Verona.

Another noteworthy example of furniture design is The Romanian Classroom furniture at the Cathedral of Learning, University of Pittsburgh, inaugurated in 1943, which stands as an expression of the cultural heritage and serves as a medium to promote the national character of Romania among American citizens. This initiative was part of a broader project comprising a series of “national rooms” dedicated to various communities that contributed to the growth and development of Pittsburgh. In 1929, the president of the organizing committee for the Cathedral of Learning, traveled to Romania to discuss the selection of architects and design concepts with the president of the Society of Friends of the United States in Bucharest.[7]

Although the architect G. M. Cantacuzino, a cousin of N. Ghika-Budești, was initially favored for the commission, the project is ultimately awarded to Nicolae Ghika-Budești, owing to his experience in restoring Romanian churches and the trust he enjoyed from historian Nicolae Iorga[8]. However, the inscription in the Romanian Classroom indicates that the two cousins collaborated on the project, with architect Balș serving as an advisor. What is evident is that all three architects are acknowledged on a wall inscription as “designers,” marking one of the earliest instances of the term being used in reference to Romanian professionals.

Drawing inspiration from the ecclesiastical architecture of the late medieval Romanian tradition, Ghika-Budești completed the initial designs for the Romanian Classroom in 1930. On March 22, 1931, the Romanian Committee convened in Youngstown to approve the architect’s proposed design. In 1936, during the president of the organizing committee visit to Bucharest, she spent hours with Ghika-Budești and his son Jean, meticulously refining the details of the revised drawings, including the design for the writing chair with an asymmetrical arm[8]. The chair, the models for paneling, and the entry doorframe are also commissioned from the Higher School of Arts and Crafts in Bucharest.

The rapidly deteriorating political situation in Europe following the 1938 Munich Agreement rendered transportation from Romania impossible, abruptly ending the collaboration with Bucharest. The Romanian consul in New York and commissioner of Romania’s pavilion at the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair proposed completing the Romanian Classroom using artifacts from the Romanian Pavilion after its planned dismantling. Meanwhile, dramatic political shifts unfolded in Romania during the war. King Carol II is forced to abdicate, and power is transferred to General Ion Antonescu, whose government includes members of the Iron Guard. This created a delicate issue regarding national representation, as Romania became an ally of Nazi Germany, the United States’ principal adversary. Nonetheless, these events had little apparent impact on the project, and on November 20, 1940, Antonescu issued a decree transferring icons, wrought-

iron gates, and carved chair frames to the University of Pittsburgh.[10] Architect Albert A. Klimcheck was commissioned by the University of Pittsburgh to incorporate these materials into the reconstruction of Ghika-Budești's design. Comparing the original sketches with photographs of the completed room reveals a significant divergence in the student seating furniture. Klimcheck's solution combines Ghika-Budești's sketches with elements from the "Casa Românească" pavilion furniture designed by architect Octav Doicescu. The chair retains the general structure defined by Ghika-Budești—a solid wood seat with a concave form and an asymmetrical arm—but its backrest was reconstructed using dismantled components from the restaurant chairs of the Romanian Pavilion. Klimcheck retained only the uprights and crosspieces from Doicescu's design, incorporating them into the elements produced in Bucharest. With the functionality resolved and the structure reinforced by doubling the lower crosspieces, Klimcheck's solution lacked only the original decorative authenticity, which he transferred directly from one object to another. The result illustrates the resilience and adaptability of the design, embodying a very sustainable principle.

The furniture is not the only element diverging from the original project for the Romanian Classroom. The folding wrought-iron gates, with their lace-like transparency, reveal blue silk curtains embroidered in the Romanian manner with silver and gold threads. These curtains previously adorned the banquet hall of the Romanian Pavilion in New York, while additional wrought-iron panels, formerly used to separate the main dining room from the foyer, were repurposed to create the radiator cover in the classroom.

Conclusions. In summary, Nicolae Ghika-Budești's work reflects an artistic coherence that blends architecture and furniture design into a harmonious whole. His wide-ranging projects, from ecclesiastical restoration to the design of household and institutional furniture, illustrate his dedication to safeguarding Romanian cultural heritage while reinterpreting traditional forms to meet the demands of a modernizing society.

Ghika-Budești's interdisciplinary perspective defied the conventional boundaries between design and architecture history, as they were referred to by Victor Margolin. By combining historical inspiration with contemporary functionality, he developed a distinctive creative framework rooted in the Romanian style, showcasing a profound expression of national identity through integrating these disciplines. The Romanian Classroom at the Cathedral of Learning stands as a true testament to this approach. In the face of complex geopolitical challenges, his designs were adapted and brought to implementation, demonstrating the lasting impact and flexibility of his vision in representing Romanian heritage on a global platform.

Through these contributions, Ghika-Budești emerges as a true pioneer in the history of furniture design, standing among the first architects to recognize the importance of engaging with object design. At a time when the concept of the architect-designer had not yet fully taken shape, Ghika-Budești's work advanced the clarity of this dual role. His efforts were firmly rooted in the principles of the Romanian style while being enriched by a society eager to explore and articulate its unique cultural identity.

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Figures.

FIGURE 1. The author's illustration, created using resources from the Nicolae Ghika-Budești archives (drawings), is part of a broader research project by the author, focusing on the visual documentation of Romanian furniture history.

