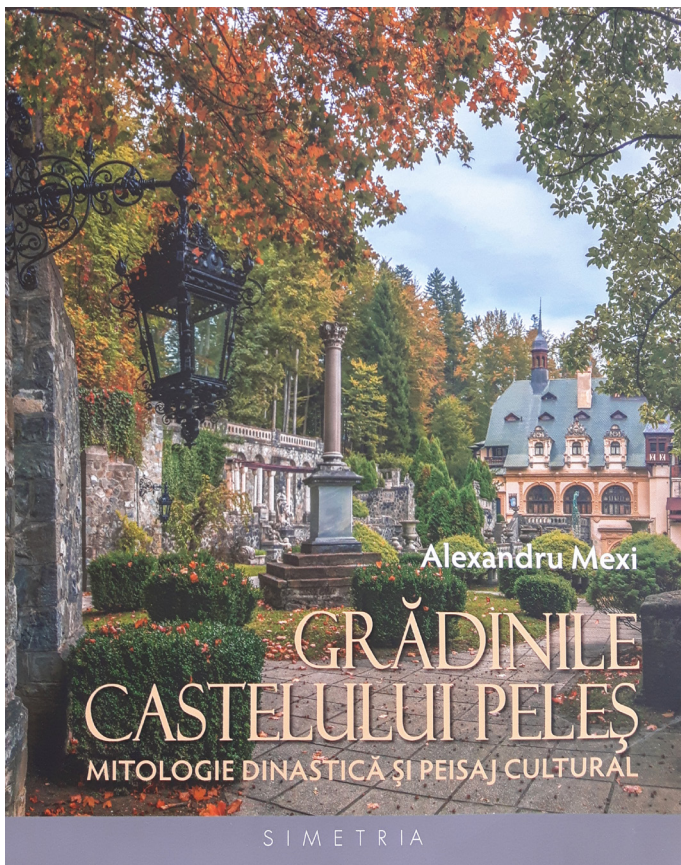


Alexandru Mexi, *Grădinile Castelului Peleș. Mitologie Dinastică și Peisaj Cultural*, Bucharest: Simetria, 2017.

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Alexandru Mexi looks into the history of Sinaia's cultural landscape, a city and its environs in a mountainous region in Romania, to show how King Carol used Western artistic and cultural trends to propagandize his power. This volume analyses the historical, political and military events underlying the transformation of Sinaia into a cultural landscape, focusing on the history of landscape arrangement of the Peleș Palace, in the Carpathian mountains.

This monography attempts to emphasize the role of the cultural landscape of the Peleș Palace in the repre-

sentation of this young monarchy of German origin and the construction of a dynastic myth. The first Romanian ruler of the Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen dynasty, Carol I, was elected Ruling Prince of the Romanian United Principalities on 20 April 1866, after a *coup d'état*. In 1881 he was declared king of the Kingdom of Romania. His family and the Bonaparte family were next of kin and Napoleon himself suggested this Prussian-officer should become king of Romania. The need to legitimize his power was evident.

The scenic landscape embraces different Western influences, such as the French classical statuary and symmetrical grandeur; the uphill sensation of the Italian composition of terraces, staircases, balustrades and pots; and the boldness of German parks. Although the palace is built in Romantic style, the spaces surrounding the palace and establishing a connection with nature follow a baroque style, whereas the statues are presented in classical French. In the wider realm of sociocultural history, the study of the transmission of sculptural models can promote the idea of a larger Western influence more than that was acknowledged. This book contributes to enlarge our knowledge on this topic.

The garden was used to launch Carol's programme, crossing classical subjects of garden iconography with statues of ancestor kings, queens, and warriors related either to the Royal Family or to German classical myths and legends. The *decorum* established during the Renaissance, which privileged the proper adequacy of subjects to contexts, conveyed Floras, Pomonas, Venuses, Cereses, Apollos, River Gods, and the Seasons as typical of gardens, rather than royalty subjects. These provided artistic material for a rich iconological interpretation as they were unique and had been devised according to the patron's particular intentions. However, and on the contrary to the interest this may present at a national level, what makes this book more valuable to European history are precisely the sculptures that convey typical subjects of garden art. They are responsible for putting Peleș Palace in any book on European circulation of ideas and forms, not only for the gardens, their design

and their sculptures, but also for the language (I assure you that any Portuguese person with some knowledge of Italian and Latin can read Romanian).

The images in this book cannot but surprise us. From Romania, a vis-à-vis distant country, since Portugal is in the extreme occidental part of Europe, this beautifully illustrated book on Romanian nineteenth century gardens offers pictures that depict statues, pots on balustrades, iconography, and architectural layouts that are quite similar to the ones found in eighteenth century Portuguese villas. This raises some important questions on the circulation of models from French and Italian centres of garden art into peripheral areas in Europe, whether they are in the West or the East. For example, at Peleş garden there is a set of statues which are copies of the extant ones in Versailles; such is the case of the reclined statues of a Moribund Gaul, the Sleeping Ariadne, and the standing statues of Abundance, Amazon, Deception, and the Water.

One might think there are no direct relations between Portugal and Romania in this context. However, Carol's brother, Leopold, was married to Infanta Antónia of Portugal, the daughter of Queen Maria II of Portugal, who had married with Prince Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. All the European royal families were related to each other and the diffusion of Italian and French models might have followed unexpected secondary routes.

Moreover, Mexi addresses this question as the 'copies phenomenon'. I argue for a change of perspective as, although the central models on the art of gardens are in Italy and France, the appropriation made in each European country, from Portugal to Romania, has been different, as each culture has reinvented the model. Therefore, this phenomenon is better understood under the conceptual framework of circulation and appropriation. The history of the cultural transmission of gardens embeds the choices of pre-existing genres and elements that only take effect through the conscious activity of patrons and artists. Active choices, rather than obedience to the spirit of an age or the passive accep-

tance of a hegemonic culture imposed from above, are the factors that help produce cultural transmission. This case-study shows that the circulation of classical artistic values based on French and Italian models occurred beyond the history of high culture in the West. But, more importantly, Mexi's study compels us to revise the idea that one currently has of Romania, as less distant from us, both geographically and culturally, as the art of the grandies, "arta grădinilor", or of the "Grandes de Portugal" abides its great European family.