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PhD Thesis

*Marian icons from the collection of the Dr. Nicolae  
Minovici Museum of Folk Art (18th-20th centuries)*

*History, Art, Theology*

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The work “Marian Icons from the Collection of the Dr. Nicolae Minovici Museum of Folk Art (18th–20th Centuries): History, Art, Theology” began with an older idea, that of bringing to the attention of researchers, historians and the general public the multifaceted personality of the scholar Nicolae Minovici. From the very beginning, we set out to create a symbiosis between a biographical study and a historical and theological investigation of his monumental work on the “Șosea” — the Minovici Villa, which became the first private Museum of National Art in early twentieth-century Bucharest.

This contribution was analyzed from a triple perspective: the biography of the scientist, the museum villa, and the iconographic heritage. In the first part of our study, we set out to rigorously investigate the complex figure of Dr. Nicolae Minovici, extending our research to the Aromanian roots of the Minovici family and thus gathering previously unpublished data regarding members of the extended family.

A forensic physician, university professor, mayor, and founder of renowned institutions—such as the first Emergency Rescue Service in Bucharest, the first Emergency Hospital in Romania, and the first private museum dedicated to Romanian national art, with which he closely identified—Minovici was also a philanthropist devoted to the public good. His commitment to his fellow citizens, to improving the living conditions of the disadvantaged, to educating the young and guiding them toward the welfare of society, was matched by a persistent concern for preserving and promoting national values, a promotion that he elevated to the level of an art.

A passionate collector, Nicolae Minovici gathered throughout his life an impressive art collection. It includes a remarkable array of paintings, furniture, ceramics, wood sculpture, as well as pieces of traditional costume, jewelry, musical instruments, decorated eggs, and a spectacular collection of religious objects. Within this subcategory, a collection of over 200 icons on wood, glass, canvas, and metal stands out, reflecting the diversity and refinement of our predecessors’ crafts.

This small national treasure was displayed as early as the first years of the last century in the famous “Villa with Bells,” which became the Prof. Dr. Nicolae Minovici Museum of National Art—an expression of his artistic inclinations, but also of his desire to safeguard the national heritage. For this reason, today the forensic physician can be considered a pioneer of Romanian museography.

The first chapter represents a tribute to the man, the philanthropist, the collector, the founder, and the professor Nicolae Minovici, bringing him back into our memory in a way that clarifies his entire work and activity, in an era in which technological progress has given a new connotation to national values.

In order to trace his development, we analyzed the history of this complex personality and the evolution of the family from its origins to the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the moment when his personality began to take shape not only from a cultural perspective, but especially from a social one—the field on which he concentrated his entire activity.

His intellectual profile and his remarkably broad cultural horizon became defining character traits which, during the first three decades of the twentieth century, earned him the title of founder of institutions not only in the medical field, but also in the social and cultural spheres.

Throughout this chapter, we have presented several original insights derived from various archival sources, ranging from biographical data to an overview of the family environment in which the young Nicolae was formed and developed, highlighting a comprehensive interpretation of the ideas and factors that shaped his development not only intellectually, but also culturally, philanthropically, and spiritually.

His origin, family background, educational formation, artistic vocation—later followed by his career as a physician—his travels, generosity, and his affiliation over time with various scientific, humanitarian, and medical societies are discussed in a gradual and chronological manner

In order to complete his biographical portrait, we have examined aspects related to the urban administrative activity in the Capital, his social and philanthropic work, as well as a detailed investigation of the first ambulance service—Societatea Salvarea—and of the first Emergency Hospital. Previously unknown details regarding his pedagogical activity were also highlighted,

both within the ‘Dacia Superioară’ University of Cluj and at the University of Medicine in Bucharest.

We conducted a thorough review of the national and international congresses in which he participated, not only as an organizer, but also as an honorary member, attendee, or representative of Romania, in order both to trace his scientific progress and to demonstrate his pioneering role in the medical, social, and cultural fields.

For his monumental work, he was, over time, awarded various orders, medals, and decorations which, until now, no biographer or historian has succeeded in compiling in their entirety. We considered it necessary to recover these distinctions from a historical perspective in order to complete his biographical portrait. Their presentation has been arranged chronologically, according to the order in which they were identified, with the clarification that the granting documents, diplomas, and insignia that once formed part of these decorations have today disappeared.

Another remarkable aspect, which no biographer has previously managed to identify and assemble in a coherent manner so as to highlight the significance of his gesture, is the donation of his entire fortune to various societies and institutions. The effort to gather the necessary data for identifying these donations proved to be a complex one, requiring a long period of research in the National Archives and in the Archives of the Macedo-Romanian Society.

In a sublime and discreet manner, consistent with the way he had lived his life, toward its end—more precisely around 1940—the scholar distributed the fortune he had accumulated throughout his career, a process that also led to the recovery of his holograph will.

In the final part of the chapter dedicated to the scholar’s biography, we clarified the actual date of his death, which had been transmitted incorrectly over time. After approximately two years of research, we can state with certainty that Professor Nicolae Minovici passed away on the morning of Pentecost Sunday, 8 June 1941.

The second chapter is dedicated to the villa-museum and its collections, offering a detailed analysis of the construction of the villa, the beginnings of the first private museum in Bucharest, the period it endured under German occupation, and the devastating consequences of this period that the doctor’s residence was forced to overcome.

This portrait was further complemented with information about the former commune of Băneasa-Herăstrău, today a district of the capital, as well as details concerning the former owners from whom the physician gradually purchased the land parcels over time. Subsequently, we analyzed the stages of restoration and the numerous interventions the building underwent during the communist period, as well as the interest shown by the Ceaușescu regime in the Minovici villa. In the final part, we presented the collections and the stories associated with them, which the founder, over time, bequeathed to posterity and which we managed to uncover in various archival sources.

At the same time, we identified and analyzed the symbols present both in the interior and exterior decoration of the villa, the influences of its architectural style, as well as the presence of certain elements of purely Romanian architecture. In doing so, we sought to examine this symbolism from the perspective of his affiliation with a Masonic lodge, an aspect that has not been addressed by any biographer to date.

Within the same chapter dedicated to the villa-museum, we also gathered as many references as possible regarding the events and the prominent personalities of the period who crossed the threshold of this edifice, which has since become a monument of Romanian architecture.

With regard to the museum's heritage, we succeeded in identifying the inventory from 1937, compiled by the owner himself, thereby bringing to light today the core of his collections and their subsequent additions. Concerning the iconographic collection, it was displayed in the space specially designated for its exhibition, a space referred to by the collector as the "Church", which still preserves today his vision of display, influenced by his taste for art and aesthetics.

Decorated in the Byzantine style, after the model of the church within the Brâncovenesc Palace at Mogoșoaia, this sacred space acquired a unique character in the capital of the country, as it was the first architectural monument open to visitors at the beginning of the last century, symbolizing as faithfully as possible a medieval reality.

Over time, the building's original purpose changed; from a private residence it became a representative museum and later a national architectural monument whose importance extended beyond the country's borders, becoming a symbol of Bucharest.

For more than a century of its existence, the threshold of this institution has been crossed by numerous personalities, ranging from crowned heads to distinguished figures from the national and international academic world. For this reason, the final part of the chapter is dedicated to the personalities who have visited the Prof. Dr. Nicolae Minovici National Folk Art Museum.

In the third chapter, I conducted an analysis of the core of the legacy left by the collector Minovici, as well as the subsequent additions made both by Eng. Dumitru Furnică and by the communist regime for the purposes of popular propaganda. The analysis was carried out in a chronological manner in order to identify the iconographic corpus, while in the following chapters an iconographic discourse on the Marian collection will be developed.

From the documentary holdings of the museum and from the archives of the Bucharest Municipality Museum, I obtained particularly valuable data regarding the art collection assembled and exhibited by the scholar Minovici within spaces specifically designed for the display of these artifacts.

An admirer of art and authenticity, Nicolae Minovici showed a persistent concern for safeguarding the national heritage and for preserving not only a Romanian style, but also our past and national values. An intellectual and an erudite man, the scholar was regarded as “a man animated by the most admirable ideas for the modern administration of Bucharest, a man with a remarkable sensitivity in appreciating artistic value. Proof of this can be seen in the beautiful park and the renowned Minovici Villa on the Kiseleff Road, which inspires admiration even among foreigners as an ornament of Bucharest, in addition to his activity in the Blue Sector, which also demonstrates his energy as a man of action”<sup>1</sup>.

Throughout the chapter, I have highlighted the beauty of iconographic painting as perceived by a collector and an artist, while also seeking information about the icon painter, the dating of the works, their place of origin, and other testimonies that have been preserved over time.

Although the iconographic collection held by the Minovici Museum is extensive, we chose to analyze only the Marian icons for two reasons. On the one hand, the oldest pieces in the collection are those depicting the Virgin Mary, and they are also among the most expressive from

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<sup>1</sup> *Aurora*, An VII, Nr. 1752, Bucharest, july-september 1927, p.1.

an artistic perspective. On the other hand, these artifacts complete the entire cycle of feasts dedicated to the Mother of God, which served as a criterion according to which the pieces were analyzed and grouped.

The final chapter was dedicated to the cataloguing of the iconographic corpus, with emphasis placed on specific characteristics such as Marian typologies, inventory number, material, technique, dimensions, chromatic features, and state of conservation. At the same time, I attempted to recover the original inscriptions where they existed, transcribing them using the original Cyrillic characters, as well as recording donation inscriptions or indications of provenance, wherever these were specified.

Through this doctoral undertaking, I sought to demonstrate Dr. Nicolae Minovici's commitment to saving and preserving the national heritage and to safeguarding not only a Romanian artistic style, but also our past and our national values. With an almost prophetic vision, the collector observed the rapid development of the world to which he belonged, while the new generations were abandoning the idea of nationality, which they regarded as a relic rather than as an element of identity and heritage.

In conclusion, we may simply state that the purpose for which the scholar founded the first museum of national art in Bucharest — “to satisfy a national sentiment and to ensure that the efforts I devoted for many years to bringing to light the treasures of our Romanian art might serve everyone” — was fulfilled.

The final part of the work highlights the conclusions and the results obtained, as well as the importance of continuing research in this direction, and includes the consulted bibliography and the corresponding appendices, some of which contain previously unpublished material.

**Keywords:** Dr. Nicolae Minovici, scholar, biography, museum, collection, icon, painting on wood, painting on glass, painting on canvas, the Virgin Mary.



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