“The lives of our parents passed smoothly like a river flowing through gardens and orchards […] To us they seem as far and estranged as the brave ones killed at Valea Albă were to them.¹ […] They opened their eyes in the soft cradle of a life of Oriental habits; we came [into this world] in the blast of new ideas; the eyes and thoughts of our parents looked to the East, our eyes gaze to the West.”² This is how Alecu Russo (1819–59), writer and literary critic, described the gap separating fathers and sons in the Romanian Principalities around the middle of the nineteenth century. This gap between the generations was the awareness of history: time was ticking differently for those born after 1800, and they were swirled away by the powerful wave of historicity. The dynamics of progress, which was busily elaborated in the West, had reached the backward peripheries of the continent. Eager to keep pace with this modernity, which appeared to embody the most visible sign of the “civilized” world, the young Romanian generation discovered the inescapable force of historicity, gradually becoming aware that history was an indispensable instrument with which to spread the values of progress to which they aspired. Hence, it became essential to look back to their past in order to prepare their future as part of the concert of the modern nations.

The interest in history raised in the midst of the modernization process which, in addition to promoting the assimilation (when not mere imitation) of Western models, stimulated also the rise of a national discourse. In a peripheral country like Romania, where the pressure to be perceived as an identifiable nation equaled the much desired emancipation, both politically and culturally, the development of such a discourse gained a particular meaning. If identity was seen as a necessary criterion

¹ One of the most important battles in the history of the Principality of Moldavia, in 1476, which involved the armies of the Ottoman empire and the Moldavian ruling prince Ştefan cel Mare.

² Alecu Russo, Scrieri, second and definitive edition, ed. by Petre V. Haneş (Craiova: Scrisul românesc, without date), 17. Writer, Russo was also one of the ideologues of the 1848 revolution in the Romanian Principalities.
for integration into the “civilized” world, this was the consequence of the Western gaze, nurtured by Kant’s *Anthropology* and Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, which made a clear distinction between nations with a “defined character” and those unable to attain it, or “historic” peoples and those who were “but half-awake.” The Balkan countries seemed to be, in both cases, condemned to remain outside the ascendant frame of time.

History, understood as the sedimentation of an acquired degree of civilization, thus became a founding concept of the national discourse of modern Romania, which, after unification in 1859, grew to be a “State affair,” closely controlled by official politics. The historians of the young Romanian State developed a different strategy than their Transylvanian colleagues, who had favored—for political reasons—the ancient period (exploring particularly the alleged Roman origins of the Romanian nation): from the entire narrative, they chose to focus on the Middle Ages, seen not only as the precursor to the modern state (through the formation of Wallachia and Moldavia), but also as the embodiment of one of the most important features of Romanian identity, that is the continuous struggle against the Ottoman Empire.

From the pages of books industriously written by the new generation educated in Western universities, history contaminated other means of expression, primarily affecting the use of artistic language as a powerful medium of affirming identity. The narrative forged by local historiography exerted a nurturing and lasting influence on the nascent discipline of art history and inspired artists eager to transpose it into meaningful images. In Gheorghe Tattarescu’s (1818–1894)³ “The Awakening of Romania” (1848)—a title clearly alluding to Hegel’s categorization of nations—the vestiges of history surround the young woman embodying the nation; the landscape where she is set is picturesque but desolate, however she seems promised to enjoy a bright future guided by arts, humanities and science, under the auspices of religion.

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³ First educated as a religious painter at the Archbishopric School in Buzău, he received a fellowship to study painting in Rome (from 1845 to 1851). In addition to numerous churches, he also painted historic compositions, often with allegorical subjects.