

#### 4. THE IDEALS OF EASEL GRAPHIC BEAUTY IN BESSARABIA

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**Abstract:** *The present article offers a summarized vision on the situation of the Bessarabian nude in easel graphic, trying to unveil the local specifics of the evolution of the genre. The study reveals the artistic and stylistic particularities present in the nudes signed by notorious artists like Auguste Baillayre, Alexandru Plamadeala, Moissei Kogan, Eugenia Malashevski and others. The mixture of the works mentioned in this study tries to outline the image of the Bessarabian figurative art, marked by oriental and Western cultural interferences.*

**Key words:** *easel graphic, Bessarabia, nude, human figure, drawing*

One of the less known genres in the Bessarabian art, the nude, offers us a better understanding of the establishment of the modern figurative art and the specific artistic means of the graphic and its role in fine arts. Researching the approached genre reveals a world of workshops marked by daily exercising of the drawing of male and female models, this being a part of a practice and a secular tradition of the European art. The history of nude art is an integral part of the art study methodology, preliminary study of sculpture modelling, painting and engraving, designed to challenge the aesthetic perception of contemplating the beauty and the harmonious proportions of the human body.

The introduction of the nude in the local graphic arts reveals the freedom of artistic creation and the laicization of the art, both representing aspects of one and the same phenomenon, i.e. constitution and modernizing the artistic process in Bessarabia. The emancipated and modern aspect of the Bessarabian art from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the cause of the exigencies of that time, where the amorphous character of the local cultural space couldn't exist much longer, being animated by the European artistic tendencies and processes.

Constituting the genre is a part of the art education system and the methodology of the human body studies developed by the art academies. These art centres shaped by the Italian and then French models which appeared in the 16<sup>th</sup> and, respectively, 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, have expanded in the entire Europe until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The uniform academic arts curriculum was based on the rigorous study of the nude model and, in particular, the male nude model. Thus, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the same methods were implemented by the French, German, Italian teachers, as well as by other art institutions from Eastern Europe<sup>240</sup>. An eloquent example is the academic drawings made after the nude models by Michelangelo, Rafael, Annibale Carracci, Peter Paul Rubens, Lorenzo Bernini, Pierre-Paul Prud'hon and others.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the apparition of the realism of the '30s, the perception of the nude has suffered several modifications. Thus, the classical impersonal nudes, with common features and idealized body, captured in heroic

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<sup>240</sup> Boyd, S., Lucie-Smith E., 1989, Life class: The academic male nude, 1820-1920, GMP Publishers Ltd, London

attitudes and gestures, were overtaken by realistic tendencies, this way obtaining an individual physical and psychological representation.

An important role in engraving plays the material used for it. Starting with the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the black rock (or the Italian rock), the red one (sanguine) or the white one (white chalk) were the most common materials used in the nude model graphics. Thus, resorting to Italian pencil, pencil or sanguine demonstrates an attachment to the secular classic traditions. But being adepts of the graphic approach, the Bessarabian artists avoided simultaneous applying of these rocks, preferring drawing in black and white with monochrome shades of red. This means that there was a lack of influences, and a distance from the Rubens-like traditions from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, which implied making sketches with the three rocks – the black served for defining the shapes, the red one for reproducing the skin and the white for placing the lights. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, starting with the 20<sup>th</sup>, the graphic aspect of the nudes gradually moves away from the academic realistic interpretation towards a new post-impressionist and modern vision. As a result, the meticulous and detailed processing of the model disappears, and the mechanical hatching which was used to indicate the volume and the light/shade was replaced by vibrant contour lines which emphasized the form and the shape.

The preferred techniques of the easel graphic remain: the pencil, which, when professionally handled, allows precise lines and modelling of the forms; sanguine, which can obtain natural shades, giving vivacity to the model; and charcoal, which is used in a forth of drawings, like the pencil. This is explained by the possibilities to obtain a much sensual textures than other instruments, which makes perfect harmony with the artistic message transmitted by the nude.

Easel graphics representing nude figures have appeared starting with the 15<sup>th</sup> century. They treated subjects like mythology, religion, mystical and moral ones as the “*The battle of the nudes*” (1470) by Antonio del Pollaiuolo and “*Adam and Eve*” (1504) by Albrecht Dürer. These works were the result of long searches of proportions and harmonious shapes, which were launched by Renaissance artists. A less veiled approach in other stylistic visions was regarded to the 17<sup>th</sup> century nudes, one of a kind being the graphic works signed by Rembrandt. The situation of the morals remained unchanged for centuries, slowing down the evolution of this genre. Only by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, during the rococo period, the admiration towards the beauty of the female body and the laicization of the art contributed to the constitution of this genre in the frame of the easel graphic. Still, at this stage of the evolution we can only talk about the representation in engraving, like nude female bodies by Gilles Demarteau, after François Boucher, and others.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century has substantially enriched the genre, marking a revolutionary stage in its evolution, launching new stylistic visions related to romanticism, impressionism and culminating in postimpressionist art. We can contemplate the romantic vision on the human body in the aquatints of Francisco Goya and the etchings by William Blake, but the apotheosis of the genre in the graphic art was reached only by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, remarkable examples of it

being the “*Nude*” (1890, etching) by Pierre Auguste Renoir, “*The sleep*” (1885, monotype) by Edgar Degas, “*Manao Tupapau*” (1894, xylograph) by Paul Gauguin, and others.

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century stamps on this subject became more popular and frequently seen in the creation of Paul Cézanne (“*The bathers*”, 1900, colour lithography), Henri Matisse (“*Female torso*”, 1937, etching), Pablo Picasso (“*Nude woman in front of a statue*”, 1931, etching), and others.

In Eastern Europe, which in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by the traditions of the “peredvijnic” painters, realist vision in treating the nature was consolidated, and in the frame of the Russian art school there were more and more conflicts between classic tendencies and new ones, which were supported by Piotr Cistekov, Ilia Repin, Vasilii Surikov and others<sup>241</sup>. So, the laborious study of nature, marked by the realism art school, became inherent to the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts from Saint Petersburg, and also to the art schools from Moscow, Kiev, Odessa, and others.

Eloquent in this matter are the early works of Eugenia Malashevski “*Model*” (1895) and “*Model*” (1898), “*Model of a man with sword*” (1899) and the works of Nicolae Gumalic “*Male figures*” (1893), while studying in Odessa.

The cognitive and formative role ensures the genre with continuity and popularity in the frame of the process of constitution of the national Bessarabian fine arts school. The first nudes appear at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, representing laborious drawings in the realistic academic method. In the pre-war period, i.e. before the First World War, a very small number of creations were preserved, a large number of them were undated, but it is certain that throughout that period stylistic transformations have occurred, leading the Bessarabian art towards the modern Western values.

For the constitution of the easel graphic many sculptors, painters and graphic artists have contributed. The works of Moissei Kogan, Alexandru Plamadeala, Militsa Petrashcu, Auguste Baillayre, Eugenia Maleshevski and Theodor Kiriacoff reveal a constant interest for this genre, offering us a broad stylistic and artistic interpretation. In sculpture, the graphic sheets completes the artistic vision of the searches in gypsum, plaster, wood, bronze and clay, while the nudes in easel graphic and stamps done by Auguste Baillayre and Eugenia Malashevski are supported and followed by chromatic and compositional searches from the works of the artists.

Among the creators of the first generation of artists that have contributed to the founding of this genre in the Bessarabian fine arts there is Eugenia Maleshevski, Auguste Baillayre, Moissei Kogan, Militsa Petrashcu, Pavel Shillingovski and Alexandru Plamadeala. The first four had the possibility to watch and follow for a long time the Western artistic process in Paris, Rome, Munich and Amsterdam, and Moissei Kogan even went on a long cultural pilgrimage, contributing to the German, French, Swiss and Dutch avant-garde,

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<sup>241</sup> Д. А. Сафаральева, 1990, Учебный рисунок в Академий Художеств, Изобразительное Искусство, Москва

going back to Chisinau only in 1933 for a short staying, while the loyal supporters of the rigorous drawing P. Shillingovski and Al. Plamadeala stayed the adepts of the realistic traditional vision. The diversification of the artistic climate in the 1920s encouraged the definitive emancipation of this genre. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> decade it is ascertained the increase in the number of artists, stylistic variety and apparition of a considerable number of nudes in drawing, as well as in engraving techniques. In the 1930s the tendencies launched in the previous decade continued, but with less pretension, and during the Second World War the interest towards this genre fades away.

Analyzing the specific techniques of the Bessarabian graphic, we notice the domination of techniques afferent to engraving, which constitutes three fourths of the total number of nudes. The works of the Bessarabian artists Alexandru Plamadeala, Eugenia Maleshevski, Moissey Kogan, Auguste Baillayre and Moisey Gamburd are rich in drawings in pencil, charcoal and sanguine. These materials allow artists to solve the fundamental artistic problems which refer to the anatomic construction of the body and reproducing the volume in art space. The few artists, among which was Militsa Petrashcu, made nudes in ink, ink wash painting (literati painting) in combination with mixed techniques by adding chalk, watercolours and gouache. Others, especially the graduates of the Fine Arts School in Chisinau, like Elena Barlo, Elisabeth Ivanovski, treated the nude as a simply decorative art, using watercolours and gouache.

The necessity to explore the forms through the techniques of the stamps was also felt by the Bessarabian artists, who have conceived the sinuous composition, mostly vertically, by using techniques like xylography, etching and linocut. The number of figures varies from one to four, being represented *en face*, few of them from the back, and rarely from three fourths and from profile. The space of the graphic works is dominated by monumental shapes of the models, and often the background is absent ("*Two curled up women*", 1929, xylography), or it is purely decorative like in "*Jizo*"(10) (1922, xylography) by Moissey Kogan. In the stamps of E. Maleshevski and Th. Kiriacoff the model is always inside, together with its attributes, sometimes even presenting a daily action like in the "*Nude putting socks on*"(1927, xylography) by Th. Kiriacoff.

Eugenia Maleshevski (1863-1942) possessed a perfect technique of the academic drawing, learned while studying at the Drawing School in Odessa and then at the Fine Arts Academy in Saint Petersburg. Between the study years of 1892 and 1903 she makes laborious nudes in Italian pencil with dense and short hatching, which virtuously models the form and the volume. As mentioned above, the majority of the nudes were made after male bodies, respecting the academic tradition. The next stage of the study programme is constituted of female nudes, most of them lacking the date of the creation. At the National Arts Museum of Moldova there are preserved around 80 sketches, studies and drawings made by Eugenia Maleshevski. They present female and male nudes made in Italian pencil, pencil and colour pencil (brick-red), sanguine and charcoal, but also a stamp in etching. The compositions of the artist are arranged

mostly vertically, having one or two figures. The double nudes are placed according to different compositional formats. They are placed in a space and are united through an action, a common state, they are overlapping vertically and in different colours, or they are placed separately horizontally, being delimited by an empty space. Most of the times, the models are presented standing up, in static poses, but there are some dynamic drawings, representing fighters. Most of the nudes are made with minimum hatching, the artist applying a vibrant and spiral line which sinuously models the figure. The presence of contour, the lack of mechanical effort and the shade processing of the short and dense hatching make these drawings different from the ones made in the early years of the academic studies. Plus, the nudes made after 1898 are lacking the background, giving them a pronounced graphic aspect. The models presented by Eugenia Maleshevski are young and they correspond to the classic proportions. A large number of the nudes are made in sanguine or red and brick-red crayon, these natural shades increasing the effect of the delicate and tender skin.

Among the graphic works made in the engraving techniques which are emphasizing this subject, only one work was preserved – the stamp in etching “*Female nude*”, made after graduating school, and the stylistic vision of the work inclines towards *Art nouveau*, the style which she will embrace in the ‘20<sup>242</sup>. The nude had a distinct and original position in the work of Auguste Baillayre (1879-1961). From 1918 until 1940, while living in Bessarabia, he works as a teacher together with Al. Plamadeala at the School of Fine Arts from Chisinau, giving his personal contribution in forming tens of Bessarabian artists. His creative and pedagogical effort brought the Bessarabian art to a new qualitative and aesthetical level, making us call this Frenchman one of the most important Bessarabian artists of the era. From his graphic heritage of his Bessarabian period, very few works are preserved. We only know the “*Female nude*” made in charcoal in the 1940s and “*Landscape with nude*” (1957, gouache), “*Nude*” and “*Landscape with nude*” (the 1950s, gouache) from the period of his staying in Bucharest, which are in the personal collection of A. Baillayre.

These few works reveal a totally separate artistic vision towards this genre, dominated by a formalist, postimpressionist aesthetic, in essence – a true cult of beauty. The master ability and originality of his artistic searches is presented in the “*Nude. Homage to Goya*” painting (1945)<sup>243</sup>. In the nudes with background landscapes, which were made in gouache, as well as in “*Nude. Homage to Goya*” painting, the subtle overthrow of the genre is introduced, this being obtained by placing the human figure in a natural environment and still objects. This experiment provokes a sudden psychological effect, after which the perception of the nude is changed, depending on the frame.

The unusual forms of this genre are present in the work of the sculptor and graphic artist Moissey Kogan (1879-1943). The female figure represents the

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<sup>242</sup> T. Stăvilă, 2003, Eugenia Maleșevschi, Editura ARC, Chișinău

<sup>243</sup> T. Stăvilă, 2004, August Baillayre, Editura ARC, Chișinău

main theme of the artist's work, initially approaching it in sculpture, decorative art, graphic, and starting with the 1920s, in engraving as well. In museums from Germany, Switzerland, France, Belgium, USA and Poland, there are about 150 works of the artist, made in the technique of engraving, as well as its afferent techniques<sup>244</sup>. Moissey Kogan has systematically exercised the drawing in red and brick-red sanguine, in pencil and red-brown pencil, in charcoal, but also in linocut. The nudes in the easel graphic are presented in different positions: standing up, bent over, laying down, curled up, and sitting. The figure is placed in the main space of the drawing, and the backgrounds, in pencil, sanguine and charcoal are absolutely empty. The brick-red, brown and reddish shades of the sanguine and the coloured crayons suggest the skin colour by using contour lines, but also the hatching, which blurs the contour, materializing the voluptuous volumes of the nudes: "*The woman sitting, seen from behind*" (paper, sanguine), "*Nude*" (paper, sanguine), and others. Female nudes are always placed in a space and form groups united by loving gestures. Even if the female models appear to be very thin, they correspond to the canonical proportions. Overall, the works create a state of mind full of lyricism and tenderness and demonstrates the admiration towards the beauty of the female body.

The etchings, xylographs and linocuts of the artist have a decorative nature and are very stylized. The figures have various gestures and attitudes, being melodious and full of rhythm. The characters dance, meditate or relax, always communicating between them through a language of gestures. The single figures are rare, the largest number of the works presenting compositions of two and three nudes, rarely four. The artist uses three procedures for presenting the figures: the figure appears as a dark-black, brown or black-olive silhouette on a light background of the paper, this technique is applied in the following linocuts and xylography: "*Female nude with the legs crossed*" (1927, linocut), "*Two female nudes curled up*" (1929, xylography). In other cases, the figure, as well as the background, is dark-black, brown or black-olive and the white lines delimit the silhouette of the nude, this method being used in the "*Male nude sitting*" xylography. Another version presents the figure and the background light, as the colour of the paper, and a dark-black, reddish or brown line models the contour of the silhouette, the method being applied in the following etching and xylography: "*Two female nudes standing up*" (1922, xylography), "*Four female nudes*" (1929, etching).

Unlike the nudes made in the afferent techniques of the engraving, the graphic works made in xylography and linocuts have varied backgrounds. Thus, the figures are presented on: white background – light background covered by dense white texture made with the chisel; decorative background – strongly stylized and vegetal background with grass or trees. In the 1920s, Moissey Kogan makes a few engravings on mythological themes: "*Daphnis and Chloe*" (1920, etching), "*Diana*" (1922, xylography), "*The three graces*" (1929,

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<sup>244</sup> H. Shiner, 1997, *Artistic Radicalism and Radical Conservatism. Moissey Kogan and his German Patrons*

etching) and “*The woman with the reindeer*” (1926, linocut), which served as a wonderful opportunity to present the female nude. Moissey Kogan is very far from the aesthetics of the German expressionists, his work exploring the ancient beauty and its sophistication.

The graphic nudes made by the avant-garde sculptress Militsa Petrashcu have an original touch. She was the pupil of several famous sculptors like: Antoine Bourdelle, Constantin Brancusi and Henri Matisse. Being a passionate drawer, in the 1930s, the sculptress created several nudes in ink and derivate mixture of techniques, like ink, literati painting, watercolours, white chalk and gouache, a large part of them being preserved at the National Art Museum of Romania. Stylistically, these nudes oscillate between the fate and the vivacity of the brush typical for the drawings of Bourdelle, and the spontaneous effect of the *a la prima idée*, observed in the early sculptures, with ragged style with impressionist touches of Auguste Rodin. The model is placed in the centre, occupying the whole space of the sheet. In the often white background, there are silhouettes contoured with spontaneity, by using the black ink pen. The resulted line is so vivid, that the model looks like it is moving, suggesting the dynamic illusion even in an apparently static position (“*Female nudes*”, 1930-40, ink, literati painting and watercolours on paper). The silhouettes of the figures either remain as the colour of the background (“*Female nudes*”, 1930-40, white pencil on black paper and “*Nude*”, 1930-40, ink on paper), or are given a slight colour by using literati painting, offering a strange transparency effect (“*Nude on his knees*”, 193-40, ink, literati painting and watercolours on paper). The easel graphics of Melitsa Petrashcu present female nudes, as well as male nudes (“*Male nude*”, 1930-40, ink on paper) and the compositions are formed by one or two figures (“*Couple*”, 1930-40, ink on paper). The anatomical construction of the figures is slightly deformed, and the proportions are stretched. The essential charm of these works is the spontaneity and virtuosity of the execution. Melitsa Petrashcu has actively participated at exhibitions in Bucharest and European cultural centres like Paris, Milano and London. Even if she worked and lived in Bucharest, she would often visit Bessarabia and participate at Fine Arts Salons in Chisinau (1938)<sup>245</sup>.

A separate page in the history of the easel graphic of Bessarabia constitutes the easel graphic drawings of the sculptor, painter and teacher Alexandru Plamadeala (1888-1940). The artist was a theologian by formation and he was following a lucid and rationalist logic, where the contemplative spirit would offer him a limited but distinct space. This character of his work is illustrated in the “*Nudes*” collection, preserved at the National Art Museum of Moldova<sup>246</sup>. Unlike the complex compositions of the avant-garde artists, the drawings of Al. Plamadeala are simple, laconic, composed by only one figure which dominates the entire format of the sheet. The layout of the page and the frequent lack of the portraits of the models suggest a spontaneity and a

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<sup>245</sup> I. Vlasiu, 2004, Milița Petrașcu, Editura ARC, Chișinău

<sup>246</sup> T. Braga, 2007, Alexandru Plămădeală, Editura ARC, Chișinău

pronounced aspect of a sketch in many of his nudes (*"The kneeling nude"*, 1930s, pencil; *"Diagonal torso"*, 1930s, charcoal; and others).

The graphic work of Al. Plamadeala lacks the stamp technique. The sculptor exercised only the natural drawing. This effort was oriented towards the study of the complexity of the human body, being in different dynamical, static, symmetrical or relaxed positions, sitting or laying down. In the 1920s to 1930s, when the graphic nudes were made, the artist also explores this theme in sculpture: *"Sappho"* (1920, wood), *"Despair"* (1921, patina plaster), *"The girl with circle"* (1921, patina plaster), *"The woman with a shell"* (1921, patina plaster), *"Torso"* (1922, plaster), *"Nude, boy"* (1921, patina plaster), *"Sketch"* (1930, bronze), *"Nude"* (1933, wood), *"Torso"* (1938, plaster). The multitude of the works makes us ascertain that the nude genre, as well as the portrait, is a dominant theme in the creation of the artist. But the nude graphics were a part of the workshop and it was not exhibited in the frame of the *Drawing and Engraving Salons* in Bucharest and the exhibitions of the Fine Arts Society from Bessarabia. Everywhere the form is marked by a steady contour line, which in the case of the charcoal drawings is much more plastic and subtle. In some of the drawings, the artist models the surfaces by the usage of halftones and the eraser drawing. (*"Nude"*, 1920s, charcoal on paper). The background is empty, only the white of the paper is crossed by the dark lines of the silhouettes. The position of the models are individual, and their proportions correspond to the canon (*"Bent over nude"*, 1930s, charcoal).

This generation of artists was followed by a flux of young and talented artists, who have, like their predecessors, travelled throughout Europe. Few of them have returned to the home country, less of them to Bessarabia, Chisinau. The next stage of the development of the nude was marked by Th. Kiriacoff, M. Gamburd, E. Barlo și E. Ivanovschi, all of them being pupils of the School of Fine Arts from Chisinau, of whom only M. Gamburd was marked by the Belgian sober realism, while the other ones were the adepts of the decorative art with a modern character. The painter, the graphic artist and the stenographer Theodor Kiriacoff-Surceanu (1900-1958), while residing in Chisinau (1922-1927), had elaborated one of his most enigmatic works: the stamp cycle *"Bestialities"* (*"Bestialities"*) – an album of 13 colour xylography works dated with the year of 1927, among which there is also a series of nudes. Currently, these works are preserved at the Art Museum of Bucharest. These controversial engravings were made in an uncommon to his predecessors' techniques (M. Kogan, A. Baillayre and Gh. Pojedaeff), and it is supposed that this technique was learned by the artist while studying abroad.

The nudes in xylography made in Germany by M. Kogan were analyzed, but the manner of the carving, the modelling of the shape and the artistic vision of both artists are totally different. If in the stylized figures of M. Kogan most the silhouettes are black and white, white and brown or black-olive and the decorative line is wavy, then the nudes in xylography by Kiriacoff are modelled by the line, the hatching and the spot of colour. The technique of the execution of the Kiriacoff's xylography reminds of the British illustrations from the

beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (*Stuff and Nonsense* by Walter de la Mare created by Alan Bold). Still, the artistic vision and the grotesque of the subject remind us about the xylography of the German expressionists, about the nudes by Schmidt Rottluff and the bordello themes with old prostitutes by Otto Dix. “*Nude getting dressed*”, “*Nude with pot*” and others are extremely rare images for the Bessarabian art, where the aesthetic sense of beauty is jammed and marginalized to its limits<sup>247</sup>.

Another Bessarabian painter who was excited by this genre was Anatol Vulpe (1907-1946). After the retrospective exhibition in 1947, the name of the painter disappeared from every channels of the history, it was like the artist never existed. He was known especially as a landscape, static nature, portraits and female nude’s painter. With the last ones he had participated at the Autumn Salons of 1934 and 1937 (drawing, engraving and poster), in Bucharest. With this occasion, at the Autumn Salon of 1934, Oscar Han declared him “*all the way manly and elegant in the noble and steady presentation of his nude, which is more expressive in movement*”. A first comeback of the work of Anatol Vulpe, after a long period of nothingness, happened in 2009 in Bucharest, at the *Bessarabia Moia* exhibition. In the Bessarabian art the nude motive can be admired in the works of such artists like C. Cobizeva, L. Dubinovschi, I. Antoceanu, T. Baillayre-Ceglokoff, D. Sevastianov, P. Piscariov, as well as in the works of B. Anisfeld, M. Larionov, Idel Ianchelevici and others.

Following the evolution of the nude in easel graphic, we can see its multifunctional character. On one side, the exercising of the nude plays a formative role in the process of the study and in the systematic effort to make the drawing perfect, and on the other side the nude becomes the object of the artistic revelation of the beauty, putting up problems more elevated than the simple solving of the form and anatomical shape. Approaching this subject, Bessarabian artists have resorted to multiple techniques of the easel graphic, but also of the engraving – this thing demonstrating the distinct position of this genre in the frame of the fine arts.

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<sup>247</sup> T. Stăvilă, 2006, Theodor Kiriacoﬀ, Editura ARC, Chișinău