

The Salon, the Café, and the Art of Cards: Configurations of Late-Century Social Life

Smărăndița-Elena Costin*

DOI 10.56177/jhss.1.16.2025.art.6

Abstract:

This study explores the reconfiguration of sociability at the end of the 19th century, focusing on three emblematic spaces of interaction: the salon, the café, and the card table. These sites, deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the *fin de siècle*, served not only as stages for refined leisure and polite conversation, but also as subtle arenas of political maneuvering, image construction, and symbolic negotiation. By examining both the performative dimension of social rituals and the material culture associated with them – fashion, accessories, architecture, and etiquette – the article illuminates the emergence of a new *civilité*, one that reflects shifting gender roles, expanding public discourse, and evolving practices of memory and representation. Anchored in historical accounts, epistolary sources, and contemporary cultural theory, the analysis situates these *loci* of sociability within broader dynamics of modernity and national identity construction. As spaces of sociability, the salon and the café host new human types and serve as fertile ground for the emergence of activities inherent to social life. Card games, the learning of foreign languages, and the adoption of the era's behavioral code are representative practices for the individual at the turn of the century.

Keywords: *fin de siècle* sociability, salon culture, cafés, card games, symbolic spaces, memory sites

1. The Royal Path. The Premises of a New World

When it comes to the strictures of a court society, as is the case with Romania during the period under discussion (1866-1914), Norbert Elias emphasizes that etiquette is no longer subject to relative practices but rather becomes a genuine governing principle:

The meticulousness with which every movement during meals, every rule of etiquette, or the art of conversation is refined in court society corresponds to the importance these functions hold for courtiers, both as means of distinction from the lower strata and as instruments in the competitive struggle for the king's favor. The careful arrangement of the house or park [...] the spirituality

* PhD Candidate, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, elenavasilachi99@gmail.com

of a conversation or even a romantic relationship, all these represent [...] not merely personal pleasures of individuals but vital requirements inherent in social position (Elias, 2002: 261).

Beyond etiquette, the opinion of others about the individual seeking to adhere to a “prestigious group” is crucial. This term refers to a group of people united by a shared set of values, recognized by other groups engaged in social competition. This phenomenon emerges as a natural consequence of Romania’s modernization process in the 19th century. Entry into this “prestigious group” is conditioned by customs or rituals, through which the aspirant to symbolic capital gains validation from others. Thus, these forms of social existence implicitly serve to confer identity upon their members. Given the timeframe under examination in this research, the prestigious group in question is the court of Prince and later King Carol I, characterized by the particularities of a constitutional monarchy. In societies based on the monarchical principle of state governance, etiquette – understood as the regulation of behavior meant to command respect and inspire emulation – is not merely a form of ostentatious preciousness but an ally in the country’s political leadership:

Everything that the nobility could highlight in terms of etiquette is also found when viewed from the king’s perspective: distancing as an end in itself, rationality, nuance, control of emotions. However, from the king’s perspective, all these elements hold a meaning beyond the already specified one. Etiquette is not only an instrument of distancing for the king but also a tool of governance (Elias, 2011: 161-162).

Beyond implementing necessary reforms in education, the railway system, infrastructure, agriculture, and the economy, the arrival of Carol I introduced values such as honor, dignity, faith, and balance. Numerous contemporary testimonies about the royal couple, which will be discussed later, serve as living proof of a certain fact: the figure of the monarch exerted a fascination in Romania similar to the one Napoleon Bonaparte inspired in his people at the beginning of the century. Regarding Napoleon’s image, the researcher Constantina Raveca Buleu notes in her work *The Paradigm of Power in the 19th Century* that he embodies “The Savior Figure” in the collective consciousness. This imageological archetype has its roots in the caste of heroes, founders of religions, and creators of new and necessary orders in times of social and human chaos and disarray. Acting against this backdrop, the leader assumes the role of a charismatic figure admired by the “public”. This is also the case with King Carol I, who fascinated the majority of his people while provoking intrigue among those resistant to the

constitutional monarchy. In any case, similar to Napoleon – whose foreign policy actions were highly mythologized (both in and by collective memory) and attributed to the authority of the divinely chosen ruler – Carol I was perceived as the fortunate “product” of a combination of factors such as dignity, bravery, power, and, last but not least, honor. The military discipline he acquired during his years at the cadet school in Münster and later at the Berlin Artillery School is reflected in how he chose to organize the country’s army, which he considered vital for both national security and Romania’s global image. This is evident from memoirs about Carol I, written by individuals who had the opportunity to be in his presence beyond official settings.

One significant source of testimony regarding King Carol’s military posture in service to the nation is Martha Bibescu, one of the most emblematic women of the early 20th century. Through her father, Ion Lahovary, Minister of Foreign Affairs during Carol I’s reign, she spent part of her childhood at the royal court. This experience left her profoundly impressed by the king’s austere demeanor, which she captures vividly in her book *Images d’Épinal*:

Employing courtesy in speech, the same manner as the offered hand and the greeting, he addressed individuals by name only when he wished to bestow special honor upon them. Thus, his words carried a general meaning, and only with a brief, fixed gaze upon the interlocutor – one might say the prey – did he draw the assembly’s attention to the individual [...] Lacking any of the external attributes of human majesty – neither very tall nor particularly handsome, without what one might call imposing presence or grand demeanor, and even less so, radiance – King Carol nevertheless commanded respect through an indefinable quality, something internal that transcended his small stature, his modest court, his restricted kingdom: an immense sense of royal dignity. Very upright, holding his head high to make the most of the limited height nature had granted him, with his left arm bent and his thumb hooked – like Napoleon – through the buttonhole of his uniform (that of an infantry general, the simplest rank in the army), he imposed through his grave expression and rare gestures (Bibescu, 2021: 152-153).

The same impression of austerity and rigor was shared by Elena Văcărescu, who, as a lady-in-waiting to Queen Elisabeth, participated in all court ceremonies, invariably attended by the King. He remained patient and unwavering, showing no sign of fatigue, always displaying the posture of an incorruptible monarch, as reflected in his extensive correspondence with Queen Elisabeth:

Later, when I became a lady-in-waiting to Queen Carmen Sylva, the Easter service, despite its splendor, became simply odious to me. King Carol remained motionless throughout the four-hour Resurrection service, which began at midnight. Nothing – not even the thought of the sumptuous feast, the glittering lights and crystal that awaited us afterward at the royal palace – could prevent

us from feeling utterly exhausted. Many times, I was on the verge of fainting (Văcărescu, 2001: 175).

A fascinating perspective on the association between royal authority and divine omnipotence is outlined by French philosopher Jean-Jacques Wunenburger in *The Imaginaries of Politics*, where he asserts that people need to perceive in their ruler an analogous image of superhuman omnipotence: “Political power is not, in itself, the power of a man, but that of a son of a god” (Wunenburger, 2015: 19).

The king himself was conscious of his civilizing mission, as revealed in a letter he wrote to Emperor Napoleon regarding a financial loan request for Romania:

Accepting the throne of Romania, I was aware that the tasks awaiting me were enormous. Yet, I must confess that the difficulties to be overcome are even greater than I had anticipated [...] The happiness of the Romanian nation has become the goal of my life. I have dedicated all my time and aspirations to this mission (Kremnitz, 2014: 39).

The king’s presence inherently conveyed honor and responsibility, making a protocol-driven conduct increasingly desirable. This was guided by new codes (behavioral, sartorial, and ideological) introduced into Romanian society alongside a new sociological mechanism of power representation and, at the human level, a model figure – the gentleman. According to historian Mihai Chiper, in Romanian culture, the practice of dueling played a decisive role in crystallizing this type. Rather than a literal fight, the duel symbolized the defense of masculine honor, an essential coordinate on the moral map of any *bon viri* at the century’s end. The modernization of Romania reached its peak during this era, in which a new lifestyle emerged, shaped by princely etiquette. The image of King Carol I thus became emblematic of an honorable, devoted, and uncompromising military leader, as attested by the accounts of Elena Văcărescu and Martha Bibescu.

2. Royal Sociability – From Whist to the Politics of Courtly Control

The Ottoman legacy, once deeply embedded in the social practices of the Romanian people, began to gradually fade, while, as Nicoleta Roman observes, the competition among elites striving to emulate the customs of the Royal Court triggered rapid shifts in attitude among the representatives of royal power, who sought to maintain their social distinction. From the perspective of sociability, the reign of Carol I was marked by a remarkable versatility in forms of entertainment. At the Court, one of the principal customs associated with conviviality and social interaction was card playing, which served a dual function – as a

source of amusement and as a strategic means of better understanding one's opponents. The fact that King Carol diligently fulfilled his role as ruler and defender of the country, regardless of the context in which he found himself, profoundly influenced the manner in which he chose to spend his so-called "leisure time". The interpretation of this phrase, in light of its contextual usage, is provided by Vasile Docea, professor at the West University of Timișoara, who has dedicated part of his scholarship to the forms of "recreation" favored by Carol I:

Leisure time and work time are not, at the Court of King Carol I, two entirely opposed concepts, as they are for most people of the era [...] This manner of perceiving things – the absence of a clear distinction between the two concepts – is a specific trait of the European aristocracy. It is, to some extent, the way in which it sought to set itself apart from the 'bourgeois world' (Docea, 2015: 110).

The King's preferred games included piquet and whist, both frequently mentioned in his personal journal, where he would also record the context of the games and the identity of his partners. Vasile Docea's observations suggest that these were never merely gratuitous social pastimes; their execution was often underpinned by various strategic intentions: either to rekindle the conjugal bond (as in the King's visits to the Queen during her exile), to establish a familial atmosphere (notably through his pleasure in playing whist with family members during travels to Sigmaringen, or with his mother-in-law and wife at Neuwied), or to extract information from his interlocutor – who, during his stays in Sinaia or Bucharest, was invariably a figure involved in contemporary politics (such as Petre Mavrogheni).

Taking into account the entries from the King's journal (Carol I of Romania, 2007), one may conclude that card playing represented, perhaps unconsciously, an expression of the King's desire to be perceived as "a man of the people" by those under his rule:

The game smooths over asperities, brings together divergent viewpoints, and enables the transmission of messages that, if formulated in another context, might provoke undesirable reactions or open opposition. In such instances, the game becomes a diplomatic instrument (Docea, 2015: 121).

3. The Aesthetic of Presence: Salons, Balls, and the Reconfiguration of Female Identity

Life beyond the castle gates was far from dull. The balls previously mentioned, the competition for luxury, and the chase after shops offering the finest fabrics and cuts all fueled the elite's desire to approximate the lifestyle of the Royal Court. Alongside balls, salons served as venues for fashionable conversation and cultural activities, aspiring to mirror, albeit on a smaller scale, the refinement of princely

courts. As liminal spaces, the salons of the time permit a dual perspective: on the one hand, they reflect changes in the domestic space of the home – reshaped according to Western fashion, though still retaining aesthetic elements of Ottoman provenance; on the other hand, they reveal the newly adopted behaviors of salon hosts, who were predominantly women:

The homes of the wealthy began to open up. Columns appeared, wide and luminous windows, and internal staircases. One of the period's image clichés became the descent of the lady of the house, clad in full evening dress or crinoline, into the midst of her guests [...] The furniture changed, but the noblewomen quickly adapted. Porcelain dinnerware, silver cutlery, and Bohemian crystal glasses replaced the previously poor-quality silverware. Turkish furniture gave way to French styles, notably that of Louis XIV [...] By the end of the century, the two most prestigious salons in Bucharest were that of Princess Grigore Suțu on Colței Street and that of Madame Oteteleşanu on Calea Victoriei (Bulei, 2006: 87–88).

As noted, salons were localized adaptations of the Court's grandiose social events. The balls hosted by the Royal House were without equal at the time, occurring only twice a year – much to the dismay of those who awaited the indispensable written invitation. Participation in Court balls or in the salons maintained by the era's aristocratic women was an inherent part of social advancement. Beyond the dress codes imposed, the unfolding of these events was anything but spontaneous, especially at Court, where protocol was strictly observed:

The royal couple would enter the ballroom of the Palace around 10 p.m., following three ceremonial strikes of the sword upon the floor by the royal adjutant [...] At midnight, dinner was served in successive rounds in the downstairs hall, and guests descended the stairs led by the sovereigns, followed by a dazzling procession adorned in sumptuous jewels and resplendent uniforms and evening attire. This descent was a most captivating spectacle, bathed in the glow of light filtered through chandeliers and lamps. The other courses – three in total – followed, according to the importance of each group. The King and Queen would retire after the first round, while the guests continued to enjoy themselves until dawn, dancing, dining, or socializing at the buffet – except, of course, the political invitees – senators, deputies, or high-ranking officials – who discussed politics while awaiting their companions (Bilciurescu, 2003: 48).

The salon was not only a venue for showcasing various forms of acquisition – ranging from attire to mastery of foreign languages – but also a platform for the elevation of women's social status, still constrained by patriarchal norms at the time. Dan Dumitru Iacob discusses the salon's emancipatory function:

Societal events prompted, in a particular manner, the acceleration of shifts in the mentality and behavior of the boyar class with respect to matrimonial politics and the woman's role in both family and society. They offered opportunities for the assimilation – albeit sometimes superficially – of new codes of civility. These changes spanned the entire behavioral spectrum, from seemingly banal but essential rules of politeness to affective relations. Thus, in an era when the discovery of eros coincided with the discovery of poetry, the salon became the ideal space for a new kind of sentimental conduct, enabling mutual and unmediated acquaintance between potential partners (Iacob, 2015: 152).

The manifestations of female emancipation, which began to emerge – albeit timidly – in the second half of the nineteenth century, included more than the adoption of Western-inspired fashion codes and formative practices acquired in girls' pension schools (such as piano playing, learning French, and acquiring proper conversational etiquette). They also encompassed the creation of distinctly feminine spaces – both physical and symbolic – whose access by men, if not entirely forbidden, had to be earned. These spaces included both tangible locales, such as salons or the wartime nursing wards into which some were later transformed, and imagined communities shaped by a shared desire to escape the dominant patriarchal authority. New practices, interpreted as signs of female solidarity, sustained this impulse. Letters exchanged among women, wherein they shared reading impressions; the patronage of cultural salons – such as that of Catinca Rolla, sister of poet Vasile Alecsandri; and the initiative to transform these salons into recovery rooms for the sick and wounded during the War of Independence, all served as essential coordinates in the transformation of women's status.

Equally decisive was the figure of Queen Elisabeth, herself a writer and advocate for women's causes and pursuits. As historian Alin Ciupală notes, the Queen's image played a significant role in redefining women's status during the period. He also highlights the importance of literary encouragement received by women writers from members of the *Junimea* society:

Women were also literary authors in this period, and two factors were key in removing the taboos surrounding their creative work: the sustained literary activity of Queen Elisabeth, and the supportive stance toward women's writing adopted by the Junimea Society, whose critics encouraged young female authors, some of whom – like Smara, Aida Vrioni, Calipso Dumitriu, Adela Xenopol, or Veronica Micle – came to be recognized (Ciupală, 2003: 81).

Queen Elisabeth's literary engagement not only supported the emancipation and artistic development of women with creative potential but also contributed to shaping a “fairy-tale” image of Romania abroad. Though King Carol I was personally reserved regarding his wife's

cultural endeavors, he nonetheless supported her literary activities insofar as they served the Crown's interests¹ – particularly by promoting, through the Queen's texts, a favorable foreign policy rooted in the traditional and folkloric dimension of the country:

Princess Elisabeth of Neuwied, upon arriving as Prince Carol's consort, struggled to adapt to local realities, which fell short of her status expectations. Her openness to the arts and her ability to find purpose in her new role enabled her to valorize Romanian cultural heritage in the interest of improving her adoptive country's image. In a way, this became one of her new duties. The Oriental framework within which Romania still functioned was not eradicated but rather integrated into a broader narrative – that of a fairy-tale kingdom, whose identity emerged through the figure of a victorious king and a queen whose poetic inclinations compensated for her husband's militaristic demeanor (Roman, 2013: 149).

4. Mapping Sociability: Sites and Models in *Fin-de-Siècle* Urban Culture

If the salons belonged to women, cafés and pastry shops were, at least theoretically, open to all those eager for sociability, consumption, and self-display. Coffee, which can easily be transformed into a symbolic seal of spiritual gathering, brought together not only people, but also ideas, gossip, and rumors. Around the café – as a symbolic space² – two postures gradually took shape: that of the *bohemian*, who conceived of life and artistic creation as inherently tied to these liminal, transitional spaces and who attracted public scrutiny through his nonconformism (in dress, behavior, or mentality); and that of the *causeur*, whose fundamental rhythm found nourishment in short or extended conversations, upon which he thrived.

What is particularly compelling is that these publicly performed postures were often embraced in private correspondence as well, as will be discussed in the following chapter. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the most prestigious cafés in Bucharest included *High Life*, “the café of the elite”; *Kubler*, “frequented by the city's German colony and

¹ “But not all of her writings were allowed to see the light of print, as it was Carol I himself who subjected her to harsh censorship”, states Dan-Silviu Boerescu in *Carmen Sylva. The Queen with an Artist's Soul. Docu-dramas and Controversial Historical Myths, Accompanied by Press Accounts and Other Sources Related to the Stories of Romania's First Queen and of the Figures Whose Paths Intersected with Hers*, Neverland Publishing House, Bucharest, 2023, p. 20.

² Recently, I have written a comprehensive study on other symbolic spaces of the 19th century: Smărăndița-Elena Costin, “Intimate Correspondence as a Site of Collective Memory. Postures & Image Commerce in the Epistolary Texts of Romanian Writers From the Second Half of the 19th Century”, in *The Review for Literary History and Theory*, New Series, XVIII, 2024, p. 168–182. doi: 10.59277/ritl.2024.18.16.

by a circle of writers, musicians, painters, and sculptors”; and the *Café de Paris*, where:

post-theatre suppers were held, dance soirées were scheduled, and the most fashionable melodies from around the world could be heard, performed by Grigoraş Dinicu’s orchestra (Bulei, 2006: 52).

However, the true *lieux de mémoire*³ remained *Capşa* and *Fialkowski*, known not merely as cafés, but more famously as pastry shops. The assortment of sweets, ice creams, and chocolate confections often remained in the background, as these two spaces became essential in the study of turn-of-the-century sociability, particularly through their character as *genius loci*. The historian Ion Bulei offers insight into the atmosphere that governed these sites of memory:

At *Capşa*, one could encounter renowned writers, major landowners, foreign ministers, and political figures of the day. In the café’s private booths, all wagers, all duels, all adulteries, all political machinations, and all diplomatic intrigues of the late nineteenth century took place. [...] The *Fialkowski Café*, located next to the National Theatre, was a newly established venue, decorated in Parisian luxury. Here one could find Parisian bonbons of the highest quality. [...] The game rooms were frequented by all lovers of billiards, backgammon, ghiubahar, and dominoes. The café also had a salon for patrons of coffee, chocolate, and tea (Bulei, 2003: 53).

Historian George Potra records that at *Fialkowski*, “nearly all marble tables were stained with coffee and ink, and on some, one could find all kinds of notes or verses” (Potra, 1992: 260).

It appears that King Carol I himself appreciated the high-quality services provided by the *Capşa* brothers, who were entrusted with organizing most of the buffets served during events held at Court. This detail is noted by Mădălina Niţelea, curator at the National Cotroceni Museum, in her study *Ceremonial at the Court of Carol I of Hohenzollern (1866–1914)*:

The *Capşa* buffet was a staple at every banquet and reception hosted by the Palace and was also present in the great households of Bucharest. It was

³ According to Pierre Nora’s understanding, *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) may be regarded as those spaces which, although no longer physically present in contemporary reality, retain a certain permanence within a specific spatio-temporal context due to their symbolic value: “Indeed, it is this very push and pull that produces *lieux de mémoire* – moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded [...] it is also clear that *lieux de mémoire* only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications.” (Excerpt from Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” in *Representations*, no. 26/ 1989, p. 12–19).

Grigore Capșa, in fact, who prepared and served the official banquet at Turnu Severin during the festivities marking the inauguration of the Iron Gates Canal on September 15, 1896, in the presence of King Carol, Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria-Hungary, and King Alexander of Serbia. Over the years, various important occasions also inspired the creation of pastry, confectionery, and culinary products dedicated to the to the sovereigns (Nițelea, 2009: 61-62).

The new form of civility unfolds within symbolic spaces that must be examined not only as settings conducive to sociability, but also as subversive arenas. The salon, the ballroom, the café – all these social nuclei, wrapped in gowns, tailcoats, monocles, wristwatches, and lace parasols – conceal many of the political and diplomatic interests of the time, as exemplified by the ball hosted in Rosetti's house, on the very night when the decision to depose Prince Cuza was made, upstairs in the same building.

REFERENCES:

Primary sources

Amintiri despre Regele Carol I, editate după volumele de memorii consemnate de Mite Kremnitz și cu o introducere de Sidney Whitman, traducere din limba engleză de Mihai-Dan Pavelescu, Meteor Publishing, 2014.

Bibescu, M., *Imagini de album. Evocări, impresii, portrete*, traducere din franceză de Elena Bulai, prefață de Alina Pavelescu, Editura Curtea Veche, București, 2021.

Jurnal. Carol I al României, stabilirea textului, traducere din limba germană, studiu introductiv și note de Vasile Docea, vol. I (1881-1887), Editura Polirom, Iași, 2007.

Potra, G., *Bucureștii văzuți de călători străini, secolul XVI-XIX*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1992.

Văcărescu, E., *Memorial în mod minor*, traducere de Anca-Maria Christodorescu, Editura Compania, București, 2001.

Secondary sources:

Bilciurescu, V., *București și bucureșteni de ieri și de azi*, Editura Paideia, București, 2003.

Bulei, I., *Lumea românească la 1900. Oameni, obiceiuri, moravuri*, vol. II, Editura Fundației Pro, București, 2006.

Ciupală, A., *Femeia în societatea românească a secolului al XIX-lea. Între public și privat*, Editura Meridiane, București, 2003.

Costin, S.-E., "Intimate Correspondence as a Site of Collective Memory. Postures & Image Commerce in the Epistolary Texts of Romanian Writers From the Second Half of the 19th Century", în *The Review for Literary History and Theory*, New Series, XVIII, 2024, p. 168–182. Doi: 10.59277/ritl.2024.18.16.

Docea, V., „Jocuri de cărți și diplomație la Curtea Regelui Carol I al României”, în : Topor, C., Istrate, A., Cain, D. (ed.), *Diplomați, societate și mondenități*.

Sfârșit de „Belle Époque” în lumea românească, Editura „Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Iași, 2015.

Elias, N., *Procesul civilizării. Cercetări sociogenetice și psihogenetice*, vol. II: *Transformări ale societății. Schița unei teorii a civilizării*, traducere de Monica-Maria Aldea, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2002.

Elias, N., *Societatea de curte. Sociologia monarhiei și a aristocrației de curte*, traducere din limba germană de Hans Neumann, Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Iași, 2011.

Iacob, D. D., *Elitele din Principatele Române în prima jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea. Sociabilitate și divertisment*, Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Iași, 2015.

Nițelea, M., *Ceremonialul la Curtea lui Carol I de Hohenzollern (1866-1914)*, București, 2009.

Nora, P., „Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire”, în *Representations*, nr. 26/ 1989.

Roman, N., „Femeie, călător, străin. România primilor ani ai secolului XX din perspectiva celuilalt (1900-1914)”, în: Cioflâncă, Adrian, Mihalache, A. (coord.), *O altfel de istorie recentă: perspective culturale*, Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Iași, 2013.

Wunenburger, J.-J., *Imaginariile politicului*, traducere din franceză de Ionel Bușe și Laurențiu Ciontescu-Samfireag, ediție îngrijită de Ionel Bușe, Editura Paideia, București, 2015.