

THE ROMANIAN AVANT-GARDE - PART OF THE FIRST GLOBALIZATION'S PHENOMENA

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Abstract: The Romanian avant-garde manifested through the interference and the osmosis of new aesthetic directions which Romanian visual arts and literature had experienced since the beginning of the 1920's, aligning itself with a phenomenon that could already have been considered global at that time. In Romania the avant-garde was perceived by almost all its experts as a phenomenon whose appearance and existence were determined by the inter-war Romanian avant-garde magazines as Contimporanul, 75 H.P., Punct, Integral, unu, Alge.

The avant-garde magazine Contimporanul organized the first new art exhibitions in Romania with international participation, they contributed to the crystallization of the avant-garde in visual arts as well as the consolidation of the avant-garde movement in literature.

The Romanian avant-garde was one of the chapters with the greatest international echo in the history of Romanian culture, one of the rare moments of synchronicity with the European art and culture.

Keywords: *avant-garde, avant-garde magazines, art exhibitions, synchronicity*

In Romania, the Avant-garde manifested itself via the interference and osmosis of new aesthetic directions that the autochthonous arts and literature had been in contact with since the early 1920s, thanks to their alignment with a phenomenon that could be considered global, even at that time. Indeed, starting in Europe in the first decade of the 20th century new artistic directions put in question the shapes, the content and the significance of the artworks and even the established social's organization and values. Considering the art produced until then obsolete, the futuristes, dadaistes, abstractionist, suprarealists and many other new art currents proposed new forms in art in accord with the new life conditions created by the industrial development and the society's secularization. Soon, due to the development of communication's means, the new artistic trends spread all over the world from Europe to Northern and Southern America, China and Japan, Africa and Middle East. The first cultural globalization's phenomena was in act, unifying a new kind of conceiving the world and life, not only artistically speaking, and causing in some decades important changes in the societies which led to the modern world as we know it today.

Romania was part and place of this process, offering to the world the contribution of some prominent and influential artists which created and spread new forms in arts.

With roots firmly entrenched in local culture and far from being an imported phenomenon, as Andrei Pintilie remarks in his work *Ochiul în ureche (The Eye in the Ear)*, "the Romanian Avant-garde had already made its 'official' debut abroad, through artists like Tristan Tzara, Marcel Iancu, Hans Mattis Teutsch, and M. H. Maxy, and had been expected, "prepared" in the country, by others, such as Ion Vinea."¹

Indeed, the Romanians Tristan Tzara and Marcel Iancu had been at the origin of the Dada Movement, whose debut was recorded in Zurich in 1916; they had immigrated to

¹Andrei Pintilie, *Ochiul în ureche. Studii de artă românească*, preface by Gheorghe Vida, evoked by Mihai Olos, Bucureşti: Editura Meridiane, 2002, p. 18.

Switzerland during World War I, after having collaborated, in the country, with Ion Vinea on the publication of the magazine *Simbolul*, ever since 1912.

Hans Mattis Teutsch had participated in the Avant-garde events organized by the Hungarian magazine *Ma*, launching, in 1917, a series of exhibitions organized by this magazine in Budapest. He then became a member of the groups “Der Sturm,” in Berlin, “Bauhaus,” in Weimar, and “A bis Z,” in Cologne, displaying his works, alongside Paul Klee, Vasily Kandinsky, Georges Braque and Marc Chagall, in two successive exhibitions organized at the gallery “Der Sturm” in 1921. In his turn, M. H. Maxy had studied in Berlin in the period 1922-1923 and had adhered to the aesthetic program of the movements “Der Sturm” and “Novembergruppe.”

The Avant-garde phenomenon in Romania is perceived by its exegetes almost exclusively from the standpoint of the idea that its emergence and existence were influenced by the emergence and existence of interwar Romanian avant-garde magazines, the most significant, according to the studies devoted to the Avant-garde so far, having been *Contimporanul*, *75 H.P.*, *Punct*, *Integral*, *unu*, and *Alge*.

The fact that four of the most prestigious Romanian avant-garde magazines, more specifically, *Contimporanul*, *75 HP*, *Punct* and *Integral*, had been founded by both visual and literary artists, is significant for the configuration of the specific outlook of the Romanian avant-garde phenomenon. As Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu noted, referring to the same magazines “around which the first Romanian avant-garde groups came into being, consisting primarily of Tristan Tzara, Ion Vinea and Marcel Iancu’s old friends, who were joined by C. Brâncuși, Milița Pătrașcu, B. Fundoianu, Jacques Costin, Ion Călugăru, M. H. Maxy, Ilarie Voronca, St. Roll, Brunea-Fox, Filip Corsa, Sandu Eliad, Victor Brauner, etc., they included not only writers but also sculptors, scenographer painters and stage directors, these groups organizing ‘demonstrations of new art,’ performances and group exhibitions.”²

The aforementioned avant-garde literary magazines, to which were then significantly added *Punct*, *unu*, and *Alge*, became not only a space for the manifestation of new aesthetic ideas, but also a means for disseminating their propaganda, which was visually reinforced by drawings, etchings and photographic reproductions of works belonging to the new directions that visual artists also followed in Romania.

The visual artists grouped around the avant-garde literary magazines were not limited to providing these publications with illustrative materials, but contributed, through the theoretical articles published by Marcel Iancu, H. M. Maxy, Corneliu Mihăilescu, Milița Petrașcu, and Lucia Demetriade-Bălăcescu, to configuring the critical apparatus, outlining the new conceptual terms and ensuring the “defense” of the avant-garde current.

1. The new art exhibitions in Romania

The avant-garde magazine *Contimporanul* organized the first new art exhibitions in Romania, contributing to the crystallization of the avant-garde phenomenon in the visual arts, as well as to strengthening the avant-garde direction, supported, in the sphere of literature, by the avant-garde magazines.

Issue no. 47/1924 of *Contimporanul* announced the organization of the magazine’s first international exhibition: “In December, the Artists’ Union hall will house the opening of the international art exhibition organized by the magazine *Contimporanul*. The exhibiting artists

²Crohmălniceanu, Ov. S., *Literatura română între cele două războaie mondiale*, București: Editura Minerva, 1974, p. 89.

will be: Brâncuș, Marcel Iancu, H. Maxy, Matiss Teutsch and leaders of the modern movement from across Europe.”³ An extended version, published in order to disseminate the advertisement to other European countries too, appeared in the same issue and, then, in the successive issues numbers 48 and 49, in French, specifying the countries from which the participating artists came: France, Italy, Germany, Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary; at the end, mention was made, in Romanian, of the fact that this was “the first international exhibition of modern art.”

Also for anticipatory purposes, with the intention to prepare the public for the new type of works that were to be exhibited, M. H. Maxy published the article “Demonstrația plastică internațională a *Contimporanului*” (“The International Arts Demonstration of *Contimporanul*”) in issue no. 49 of November 1924. Thus, the public was cautioned that artistic creation did not mean a representation “within the contours of pseudo-material exactness,”⁴ but had to be envisaged as a “vibration that engenders a new sensibility.”⁵ The purpose of the exhibition, expressed at the end of the article, was that it should be “a demonstration of the joint and simultaneous movement in our country and in the other countries of the European homeland,”⁶ accomplished with our own means: “1) without the particular generosity of any patron, 2) without lists of subscriptions, 3) without depleting the fund of the Ministry of Arts, according to tradition.”⁷

The exhibition vernissage is described by Sașa Pană in the volume of memoirs entitled *Născut în '02 (Born in '02)*, where he quotes from the opening speech delivered by Eugen Filotti: “[...] to a greater extent than realistic art, abstract art demands from us an effort to go into depth, to engage in spiritual and intellectual undertakings. And the appreciation of this art will have to come when our culture has become inured to a purely pictorial vision.”⁸ The same speaker emphasized the international cohesion, in avant-garde terms, this exhibition expressed, by entwining, “on the walls of its halls, the most disparate personalities and representatives of so many different countries.”⁹ In his speech, he also mentioned the prominent artists of the international avant-garde, such as Brâncuși, Kandinsky, Vlaminck, Picasso, and Klee.

Issue no. 50-51 of *Contimporanul*, from the month of December, reproduced some of the works included in the exhibition, and the exhibition catalog was published on the last page.

The works that were reproduced in the magazine included pieces by Marcel Iancu (“Architectonic Volumes,” “Central Building,” “Cabaret Voltaire,” “New Nature,” “Linoleum”), M. H. Maxy (“Moșilor Fair,” “Portrait of Tristan Tzara, Ion Vinea, Marcel Iancu, M. H. Maxy,” “Spatial Construction”), Kurt Schwitters (“Merzbild”), Joseph Peters (“Graphic Construction”), Arthur Segal (“Landscape. Woodcut”), Hans Mattis-Teutsch (“Plastic Art in Wood, Composition”), Charles Teige (“Landscape”), Milița Petrașcu (“North Star,” “Torso”), Marcel Darimont (“Rue”), M. Szczuka (“Fakturkontrast”), Lajos Kassák (“Construction”).

What is significant for the constructivist orientation of the magazine is the selection of the works that were exhibited, prevalent among which were abstract and constructivist art

³ *Contimporanul* no. 47/1924, p. 8.

⁴ M. H. Maxy, “Demonstrația plastică internațională a ‘Contimporanului,’” in *Contimporanul*, no. 49/1924, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ Pană, Sașa, *Născut în '02*, București: Editura Minerva, 1973, p. 175

⁹ *Ibidem*.

items, along with expressions of Dada art, as were Kurt Schwitters's six "Merzpictures" or the works of Hans Arp. The selection of the foreign participants revealed an option for artists with whom the organizing committee members had personal ties: Charles Taige, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Hans Richter, Wiking Eggeling had collaborated with Marcel Iancu in Switzerland, Arthur Segal had been M. H. Maxy's professor and Ludovic Kassák had had previous contacts with Ion Vinea.

The exhibition was presented during the period 30 November-30 December 1924; in parallel with it, there were also organized other events that promoted the new forms of modernist poetry, music and ideas, as was, for instance, the recital of new art held on Sunday, 14 December 1924.¹⁰

A review of this exhibition,¹¹ which provided valuable information about the exhibited works, was published in French in issue no. 52 of *Contimporanul*; the intention was that the story of this event should also reach audiences outside Romania. In the introduction, the review outlined the purposes of the exhibition; according to the author, this intended to demonstrate the existence of a new trend, which, despite public hostility and ignorance, had been manifesting itself simultaneously in music, painting, sculpture, architecture, the decorative arts, theater and cinema, through the promotion of an abstract art that only imitated nature in terms of its creative process.

In what followed, the review listed the countries and the artists representing them, with brief characterizations of the works exhibited: Belgium, represented by Marc Darimont, with stylized drawings, and by Lempereur Haut, with simplified portraits; the Flemish artists Servranckx and Joseph Peters, who had been developing a constructivist spirit; Poland, through Zarnoverowna and Szczuka, with linear and geometric drawing, evincing the influence of Russian purism; Hungary, represented by Lajos Kassák, with compositions "of pure crystalline" quality and lyrical colors; Czechoslovakia, with Charles Teige, who exhibited works in black and white; Germany, represented by Paul Klee's subtle and lyrical works; Hans Arp, described as a mystical connoisseur of the power of lines, who exhibited 7 "Arpaden"; Hans Richter, designated as the one who steered the spirituality of German constructivism, with older works that captured attention through their prophetic clarity; Schwitters, with a series of lithographs; Sweden, represented by W. Eggeling, who exhibited abstract drawings from the period of the Radical Group of Zurich; Serbia, represented by Jo Kleck, with paintings using colored paper.

Left to the end, the Romanian participation was described in much greater detail. The list started with Constantin Brâncuși, who was said to be almost unknown in his own country, while his exhibited works were amongst those that had brought him glory.

Milița Petrașcu, a student of Brâncuși's, was mentioned next: she had exhibited a sensuous torso, made of white marble, while her wood carvings were said to encapsulate a dark elementary force. Maxy followed next, with purely constructivist works, whose abrupt colors were deemed a suitable means of expression for the new art. Hans Mattis-Teutsch was described as being concerned with rendering a symphony of colors while voluntarily neglecting construction. Brauner was presented as a young but vigorous talent: despite his still undecided intentions, he had managed to capture the interest of the reviewer. Also mentioned were the utilitarian objects, the furniture and the vessels that were said to have had an immediate success with the public.

¹⁰ *Contimporanul*, no. 52/1925, p. 5.

¹¹ Its title was *L'exposition Internationale du "Contimporanul."*

A review of the exhibition was published by Scarlat Callimachi in issue no. 3 of the magazine *Punct*, on 6 December 1924 (presenting the Romanian artists), continued in issue no. 4, published on 13 December of the same year (presenting the foreign artists). The section on foreign artists deplored the absence of artists from France or Italy and offered details about the participating works and artists: Josef Peeters, with a “passion for new, spectacular materials (sheets of gold, silver, etc.),”¹² Kurt Schwitters, who exhibited an album of colored lithographs, Arthur Segal, whose compositions extended onto the picture frame, Hans Richter, with two drawings from the year 1915, Lajos Kassák, “who sent three small paintings,”¹³ and Charles (Karel) Teige, with “independent sensitive drawings.”¹⁴

Another exhibition promoted by the magazine *Contimporanul* was the one scheduled for 1 April 1929, advertised in issue no. 80 of the magazine; including works of sculpture, painting and drawing, the exhibition was to open in the halls of the Academy of Decorative Arts on Câmpineanu Street, no. 7, with the participation of the artists Milița Petrașcu, Marcel Iancu, M. H. Maxy, Victor Brauner, Corneliu Michăilescu, Alexandru Brățeșanu and Hans Mattis-Teutsch.

In a review of the exhibition that was published in issue no. 13/1929 of the magazine *unu*, St. Roll stated, in the very first sentences, that it was “the event that interests us the most in the sphere of the Romanian visual arts.”¹⁵ The first references were to the favorable attitude exhibited by the art critics and the public towards the new forms of art, even though these artists had made no concessions in order to win acclaim. This review, illustrated in the magazine with two reproductions from the exhibition, “Nudes at Sea” by Marcel Iancu and “Integral” by Corneliu Michăilescu, demonstrated that *Contimporanul* had continued to turn the arts into a vector for promoting the new artistic conception; the artists pursued their innovative artistic trajectory and also obtained recognition from the public and the officials. Thus, in the same issue no. 13 of the magazine *unu*, under the column Vestiar (Cloakroom), it was stated that “the Ministry of Arts bought for its collection, from the exhibition of the Group for New Art, one canvas by each of the artists Marcel Iancu, M. H. Maxy, Corneliu Michăilescu, and Victor Brauner, as well as a sculpture by Mrs. Milița Petrașcu”.

The next exhibition of the *Contimporanul* group was held, in the period 17-30 March 1930, at Ileana Hall (Cartea Românească, Academy Boulevard) in Bucharest, the exhibiting artists being Irina Codreanu, Marcel Iancu, Milița Petrașcu and Merica Râmniceanu. The magazine *Contimporanul* drew attention to this exhibition in a laudatory article published by Emil Riegler-Dinu in issue no. 91-92/1930, illustrated with reproductions from the exhibition: “Bronze,” “Femme Assise,” “Frolic” by Irina Codreanu; “Gypsy Head,” “Youth,” “Rest” by Milița Petrașcu; “Sevilla,” “Landscape with Peanuts,” “Amalfi” by Marcel Iancu; “Flowers,” “Nude” by Merica Râmniceanu. Like St. Roll’s review, this text started with considerations on the public’s reaction, which appears to have been negative this time: the “form and expression of the exhibiting artists confused, scandalized [...] their death was decreed in *Omul Liber* and *Universul*.”¹⁶

Moving on to the analysis of the works presented, the author noted that the exhibition stood under the sign of cubism and expressionism, whereby Romanian art had been reborn,

¹²*Ibidem*.

¹³*Ibidem*.

¹⁴*Ibidem*.

¹⁵ St. Roll, “Expoziția grupului de artă nouă,” in *unu*, no. 13/1929, pp. 4-5.

¹⁶ Emil Riegler-Dinu, “Cei patru din Sala Ileana,” in *Contimporanul*, no. 91-92/1930, p. 13.

“having stepped beyond naturalism and the impressionism that was compromised by the firemen.”¹⁷

Although the activity of *Contimporanul* ended in 1932, the nucleus of the artists who had revolved around the magazine and were joined by others, as well, continued to exhibit their works, forming further artistic groups; such was the New Art group, formed in 1932, the “*Criterion* Visual Artists’ Group,” formed in 1933 or the “1934 Visual Artists’ Group,” formed in 1934.

Thus, the “New Art Exhibition” was organized at the Ileana Hall in Bucharest between 25 January and 8 February 1932, featuring works by Nina Arbore, Cornelia Babic-Daniel, Henri Daniel, Lucia Demetriade Bălăcescu, Michaela Eleutheriade, Olga Greceanu, Marcel Iancu, M. H. Maxy, Claudia Millian, Milița Petrașcu, Lucreția Popp, Merica Râmnicănu, Tania Șeptilici, and Margareta Sterian. Known as the exhibition of female artists, painters and sculptors, this was the exhibition with the widest participation in the 1930s, with echoes in the press of the time (*Vremea*, no. 6, February 1932; *Adevărul literar și artistic*, January-March 1932, *Floarea de foc*, January-February 1932).¹⁸

In February 1933, the exhibition of the *Criterion* group of visual artists opened at Dalles Hall. This was a group of visual artists formed around the already established *Criterion* Association. It included only the artists Henri Catargi, Cornelia Babic-Daniel, Henri Daniel, Michaela Eleutheriade, Ionescu Sin, Marcel Iancu, Petre Iorgulescu-Yor, M. H. Maxy, Corneliu Michăilescu, and Margareta Sterian, even though the association had been created with the participation of Lucia Demetriade-Bălăcescu, Merica Râmnicănu, Milița Petrașcu, Mac Constantinescu and Ion Jalea as well.

In April 1934, the exhibition “1934 Visual Artists’ Group,” opened in Bucharest, at Ileana Hall. The group had formed by changing the name of the previous group, “*Criterion*,” and by co-opting the artists Vasile Popescu and Aurel Kessler. Although only 10 members of the group participated, the “others merely attending the event and exhibiting their solidarity,”¹⁹ there were exhibited 62 works by the artists Cornelia Babic-Daniel, Henri Catargi, Michaela Eleutheriade, Marcel Iancu, Petre Iorgulescu-Yor, M. H. Maxy, Corneliu Michăilescu, Margareta Sterian, Vasile Popescu and Aurel Kessler.

In his study on *Societăți artistice bucureștene (Artistic Societies of Bucharest)*, Petre Oprea shows that the exhibition was not successful with “the public, the press and the art lovers,” so the participating artists “returned to the initial form of intimate collaboration, of the kind practiced at the ‘*Contimporanul*’ society, and organized the third exhibition under its aegis.”²⁰

The third *Contimporanul* exhibition was held at the Mozart Hall in Bucharest from 24 February to 15 March 1935. This exhibition had an international character, foreign artists having been invited to participate: Walter Becker, Eugène Berman, Giorgio de Chirico, Léonor Fini, Philippe Hosisson, Filippo De Pisis, Yves Tanguy, Pavel Tchélitchew, Léon Zack, alongside Cornelia Babic-Daniel, Henri Catargi, Henri Daniel, Marcel Iancu, M. H. Maxy, Corneliu Mihăilescu, Milița Petrașcu, Vasile Popescu, and Margareta Sterian.

The fourth *Contimporanul* exhibition was held at the Dalles Hall in Bucharest from 19 January to 14 February 1936. It was the exhibition with the most meager participation, as only

¹⁷*Ibidem*.

¹⁸*Apud* Vida, Mariana, *Grafica Modernistă în România anilor 1930-1940*, exhibition catalog, the National Art Museum of Romania, Cabinet of Drawings and Etchings, 2003, p. 6.

¹⁹Oprea, Petre, *Societăți artistice bucureștene*, București: Editura Meridiane, 1969, p. 76.

²⁰*Ibidem*.

Cornelia Babic-Daniel, Henri Catargi, Marcel Iancu, M. H. Maxy, Corneliu Michăilescu, Milița Petrașcu, Vasile Popescu, and Margareta Sterian exhibited their works here. Ionel Jianu published a review of the exhibition in *Rampa*, on 29 January 1936,²¹ the author remarking on the outstanding works of Cornelia Babic-Daniel and Vasile Popescu.

The exhibitions organized by the magazine *Contimporanul* were aimed at disseminating modernist conceptions through art, which was considered by Maxy as the “diplomatic language of our common exertions,”²² a language that overcame language barriers, addressing itself directly to the sensitivity of the public. Even though these exhibitions tended to have negative echoes among the autochthonous public, they nonetheless drew the attention of the press to the phenomenon of modern art and were strongly supported by avant-garde magazines, both through the publication of laudatory reviews and through their illustration with reproductions of works from the open exhibitions. They also represented an endorsement of the new aesthetics promoted by the avant-garde magazines, by practicing the principles laid down in the programs of these magazines: anti-mimetic art, the refusal of traditional formulas, etc.

These exhibitions were not just an extension of the magazine’s activity in the sphere of the visual arts, similar to that of the magazine *Der Sturm*, with which, incidentally, the editors of *Contimporanul* had close relations, but managed to coagulate the phenomenon of avant-garde art in Romania. The first and the third *Contimporanul* exhibitions, with international participation, also had the merit of drawing the attention of the international artistic community on the modern artistic phenomenon that was active in Romania and of integrating the Romanian artists within the international artistic circuit.

2. Romanian New Art Exhibitions Abroad

The works of some artists belonging to the same nucleus of modernist art were selected to represent Romania at the International Exhibition of Futuristic Art held in Rome in December 1933. The artists who displayed their works here were Nina Arbore, Mac Constantinescu, Olga Greceanu, Marcel Iancu, M. H. Maxy, Milița Petrașcu, Merica Râmniceanu, Margareta Sterian, and Tania Șeptilici. The exhibition was highly appreciated by Marinetti, who praised, both at the opening of the exhibition and in an article that he published in *Il Futurismo*, the contributions of Constantin Brâncuși, Marcel Iancu, Ion Vinea, Jacques Costin, M. H. Maxy, Milița Petrașcu, and Ilarie Voronca.

Other significant exhibitions at national and international level, with the participation of some of the avant-garde artists were: the exhibition organized on the occasion of the Congress of the Latin Press in Bucharest, 30 September- 27 October 1927; the International Art Exhibition held in Barcelona, in June-October 1929, where Petre Iorgulescu-Yor and M. H. Maxy were awarded the gold medal for painting and Nina Arbore received the medal of honor; the retrospective exhibition of the *Contimporanul* group organized by the *Facla* newspaper in its own salons, in May 1930, during Marinetti’s visit to Romania, when the artists who exhibited their works were Victor Brauner, Alexandru Brătășeanu, Lucia Demetriade-Bălăcescu, Irina Codreanu, Corneliu Mihăilescu, Marcel Iancu, M. H. Maxy, Milița Petrașcu, and Merica Râmniceanu; the Modern Art Exhibition held in The Hague (Netherlands), 3-25 May 1930, and in Brussels, Giroux Gallery, 20 July-10 August 1930; the Exhibition of Modern Romanian art organized on the occasion of the 28th Congress of the

²¹ Apud Vida, Mariana, *Grafica Modernistă în România anilor 1930-1940*, exhibition catalog, the National Art Museum of Romania, Cabinet of Drawings and Etchings, 2003, p. 8.

²² “Demonstrația plastică internațională a Contimporanului,” in *Contimporanul*, no. 49/1924, p. 3.

Inter-Parliamentary Union, Bucharest, October 1930; the International Exhibition of the Arts and the Industry, June 1936, where Milița Petrașcu received the silver medal, while M. H. Maxy and Margareta Sterian received bronze medals; the International Exhibition from Paris, 1937.

One of the merits of the avant-garde is that it noticed the obsolete nature of art and life in our culture and the need to apply some changes, which were not limited to the aesthetic domain, but concerned life as a whole. In addition to this, the avant-garde artists understood the need to open the art of Romania to the world and to participate in the international exchange of values, which, in time, has proved its importance.

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