

VICTOR BRAUNER (1903-1966)



VICTOR BRAUNER was born in 1903 in Piatra-Neamt, a peaceful town of the Eastern Carpathians in Romania.

He spent his childhood in wandering and in mystery. Brauner traveled a lot with his parents. First to Hamburg and Vienna. In 1918, he went to the Evangelical school of Braila, the home town of Panait Istrati. In 1921 he was in Bucharest, where he sometimes attended the Fine Arts School. That is the time when he painted several paintings that prove his stay at Falticeni (in Moldavia) and at Balcic (on the Black Sea shore, the summer residence of the royal family and the place where the painters of his time loved to go, now in Bulgaria.)

As far as mystery is concerned, he was involved in spiritualism seances, which his father was very passionate about. He must have had contacts with famous psychics. Among the "guests", playwright I.L. Caragiale (1852-1912).

Victor BRAUNER, *Marcel Iancu*

As for the rest, “long winter evenings spent listening to the howling of wolves,” Brauner tells us in one of his notebooks.

Another event that marked his childhood: waiting for Halley’s comet. With it, people expected the end of the world.

These first experiences do not really point to the personality of the future artist. Still, a certain sensitivity type and the taste for the unwonted are there.

The life of Victor Brauner is similar in many respects to an initiatory road: joy and wonder, sacrifice and mutilation, they are all there.

In 1924 in Bucharest, poet Ilarie Voronca took him to the avant-garde movement. It was the era of *75 HP* and of the concepts of pictopoetry and the surrelational. It was also the time of the first one-man show – September 1924 – and of the great international *Contimporanul* exhibition – November-December 1924. After staying in Paris for two years, Brauner went back to Bucharest and contributed mostly to *Unu*, the magazine of Sasa Pana. Several books written by Ilarie Voronca, Stéphane Roll, Sasa Pana were illustrated by Victor Brauner. During a second trip to Paris, the painter met Benjamin Fondane, “the man who brought existential philosophy to France” (Alain Jouffroy); Fondane introduced him to Brancusi. He made friends with Giacometti and Yves Tanguy. The latter took him to the surrealists. He exhibited in 1931 and 1933 at the Salon des Indépendents.

In 1934 he had his first one-man show in Paris, with an opening statement by André Breton. From then on, André Breton’s group considered him one of them. Victor Brauner participated in all surrealist exhibitions. But surrealist painting did not sell very well, so Brauner had to return to Romania, as he had no means of supporting himself in Paris. Some of his old friends or adventure companions had left Romania to go to France. Among them, Ilarie Voronca (1933). *Contimporanul*, *Unu* had ceased to exist, along with other avant-garde magazines. Only the *Meridian* monthly in Craiova tried to provide a replacement. Victor Brauner went on pursuing his vocation, ready to change and start all over again any time. In 1935 he had a new one-man show – the first surrealist exhibition in Romania. But, most of all, Brauner assumed the task of teaching surrealism to young poets that he discovered he had affinities with. Gellu Naum was his



M.H. MAXY, *Victor Brauner*

first disciple. The provoked or almost spontaneously natural paranormal experiences they both had brought them even closer together. Gellu Naum guzzled the manifestos, magazines and books Brauner brought back from Paris. He discovered surrealism, and he felt attracted to it because of his own sensitivity. It was at that time that Gellu Naum published his first two books, both with drawings by Brauner: *Drumetul incendiar* (*The Incendiary Traveler*), 1936, and *Libertatea de a dormi pe o frunte* (*The Freedom of Sleeping on a Forehead*), 1937.

In early 1938, Victor Brauner left again for Paris. He had a date with his own fate: one evening in August of the same year, in a fight among painter-friends, Brauner lost his left eye. Several paintings and drawings, made along the last ten years, among which *Paysage méditerranéen* (*Mediterranean Landscape*), 1932 and *Autoportret* (*Self-Portrait*), 1931, thus became apprehensive, accomplished premonitions.

In Paris, Gellu Naum re-joined Victor Brauner, along with Gherasim Luca, another disciple. Occasionally, painter Jacques Herold, who had been living in Paris for a few years, came to visit the group. In 1940 Naum and Luca went back to Romania and founded the Romanian Surrealist Group. In an excellent monograph about the painter, Didier Semin wrote that Brauner's passion for alchemy, the kabbala, and esoteric matters was "an opportunity to liberate himself from the **law**," including the law of the father. "Read" in psychoanalytic key, Brauner's accident, along with his premonitory paintings, prove a strong Oedipal castration complex:

"The study of dreams, fantasies and myths has taught us that the fear of losing one's eyes, the anxiety that one may become blind is often a substitute for the castration anxiety."

Victor Brauner's desire to liberate himself from the law of the father, the non-oedipal research of Gherasim Luca, and Brauner's esoteric experiences that encounter Gellu Naum's quest for "the world beyond" can all be found in the writings of the Romanian surrealists. These, along with delirious love, make up the Romanians' major contribution to surrealism.

*Translated from French
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NOTES

1. Didier Semin, *Victor Brauner*, Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Filipacchi, 1990, p. 177.
2. Sigmund Freud, "L'inquiétante étrangeté" in *L'inquiétante étrangeté et autres essais*, French version, translated by B. Féron, Paris, Gallimard, 1985, p. 231.