

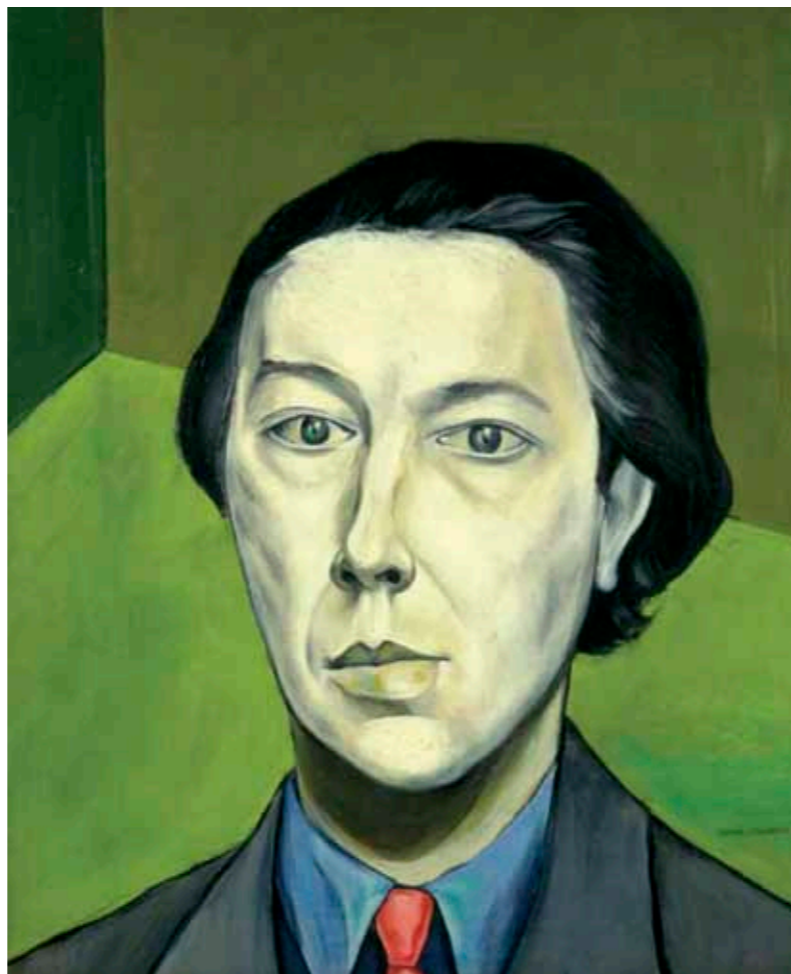
JEWISH AVANT-GARDE ARTISTS FROM ROMANIA Radu Stern

The majority of the artists representing the historical Romanian avant-garde, and the most important among them, were Jewish. Was the high percentage of artists of Jewish descent a coincidence or was there a special affinity between Jews and radical modernity?

Startled at the realization that five of the artists actively involved in the emergence of the Dada movement in Zurich were Jews born in Romania, several scholars have attempted to establish the “true” roots of Dada within Hasidic culture, still alive around 1900 in some Moldavian shtetls. However, these artists – in particular Tristan Tzara (born Samuel Rosenstock), Marcel Janco, and the elder Arthur Segal – were not observant, and certainly cannot be considered Hasidic. They were very far from Hasidism and rejected Orthodox Judaism in favor of modern civilization. Neither were the families of the other two major Jewish avant-garde artists from Romania, Victor Brauner and M. H. Maxy, religious. The Jewish artists belonging to the second wave of the avant-garde from Romania, Paul Păun and Jules Perahim, were secular as well.

The explanation for the overwhelming presence of Jewish artists in avant-garde circles is not to be found in the hypothetical influence of Hasidism or Kabbalah, but in their complex and complicated relationship with Romanian culture. Jewishness in Romania was not only seen as a religious and/or economic distinction, but also as an ethnic one. In the eyes of Romanian nationalists, who advocated one country for one nation, the very existence of Jews among the native population challenged the project of an ethnically pure, homogenous Romanian society. The nationalists saw the Jews, more than any other “foreigners,” as the enemy from within, a threat to the unity of the nation, which they envisioned as a community linked by blood. Jews were not only seen as culturally but also as racially different. They were not simply called “*străini*” (foreigners), but “*venetici*,” a pejorative term that may be translated as “allogeneic intruders that do not belong.”

This was also the conception held by the anti-Semitic university professor A. C. Cuza (1857–1947), who applied these notions to artistic creation. In 1908, he published *Naționalitatea în artă* (Nationality in Art), which carried the motto “Nationality is the creative power of human culture – culture is the creative power of nationality.” Though the “ethnocratic” ideologist Nichifor Crainic described Cuza’s text in 1935 as the “fundamental truth of our life” and lamented that it had not become “a classic guide for Romanian creation,” the book had considerable impact and was reprinted several times, turning into the reference book of extreme Romanian cultural nationalism. Following the same line of thought as the philosopher Vasile Conta, Cuza regarded the nation as an ethnically homogenous entity that must share the same body and the same soul. This blood-based unity must also be territorial, as “any territory can serve the development of only one nationality.” Cuza defined national identity as “the ethnic individuality of any people,” deducing that “from the moment that peoples imitate the culture of other peoples, they will merge with the other peoples and no longer exist.” Art, as the highest expression of culture, must be intrinsically linked to nationality, and the artist must necessarily represent his nationality. Thus, art can exist “only as a national art.”



ויקטור בראונר, דיוקן אנדרה ברטון, 1934, צבעי־שמן על בד, 61 × 50 ס"מ, המוזיאון הלאומי לאמנות מודרנית של פריז

Victor Brauner, *Portrait of André Breton*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 61 × 50 cm. Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris

A national art implies a national style, as “it is obvious that a work of art that does not bear the manifest signs of nationality could be only untrue.” Consequently, the representatives of Romanian culture must be ethnically Romanian, as foreigners cannot embody the true character of Romanian culture. The

“foreigners” that Cuza had in mind were first and foremost the Jews, the actual targets of his book. The *jidani* (kikes), to use Cuza’s term, “an absolutely inferior ethnic combination,” are of a different race, of a different faith, subscribe to different cultural principles, and are inassimilable. In spite of this, “with the characteristic impudence of their race,” they dare aspire to play a role in Romanian culture, striving to spread unhealthy ideas and dissolve the national soul. Therefore, “kikes cannot create Romanian culture,” and must be barred from the Romanian cultural scene.

Though born in Romania in 1896, Tristan Tzara was not a Romanian citizen at birth. His birth certificate reads: “Samuel Rosenstock, of parents of mosaic religion, Israelite nationality [sic], not subjected to any protection.” This was also the case with M. H. Maxy, described in his birth certificate as the son of a “foreign carpenter of Israelite nationality.” Maxy applied for citizenship only in 1923, though he had volunteered for the Romanian army during World War I. The global emancipation of Romanian Jews took place only in 1919, pursuant to great pressure exerted by American President Woodrow Wilson, leading to the resignation of Ion C. Brătianu, Romania’s Prime Minister at the time. Romania

was the last European country to grant citizenship to its Jewish population. The new 1923 Constitution confirmed the Jews’ right to citizenship; however, less than fifteen years later, royal decree no. 169, dated January 21, 1938, compelled the Jews to reclaim their citizenship, requiring a considerable number of documents within an intentionally short period of time. Consequently, 36.3% of the Jews lost their civic rights. Both M. H. Maxy and Marcel Janco had to submit themselves to this humiliation.

Cuza’s affirmation that true Romanian art must be a national art, as well as the idea that only Romanians by blood could be genuine Romanian artists, were adopted at the time by the majority of Romanian intellectuals. It is not surprising, then, that traditionalist criticism was not directed merely against the artistic innovation of Jewish avant-garde artists, but precisely targeted their ethnic origins. For instance, Victor Brauner’s first exhibition in 1924 was decried as a product of “dark foreignness” that should be reported to the State Secret Police as a subversive act. The sculptor Horia Igiroșanu, who also served as art critic for *Clipa* (The Instant), the conservative journal published by the Society of Fine Arts, not only called Janco and Maxy “crazy,” but also “aliens to our land.” In another article, Igiroșanu declared that “it is an unprecedented impudence in our ploughmen’s and shepherds’ country, with vast and fertile plains, to have these intruders in our fine arts. . . . Artists that do not have a country and do not understand to have one, do not have anything to do amidst ourselves. . . . There are enough people in this country to fight for our art, to develop it, not to diminish it, and to send to the madhouse and abroad those who do not understand and cannot love this small country.” He concluded his text with a threat: “I will not talk a lot to these fools; I will deal with them in another way if they do not understand to get out of here.”

The demand for a “national art” became the central element in the Romanian debate concerning artistic creation. The discussion focused on the definition of “national specificity.” In practice, “national specificity” was thought to be connected to values of autochthonism, which idealized Romanian national values as embodied by the peasant, in contrast to the “foreign” decadent urban population. For Cuza, the notion that “beauty has no homeland” was heresy. Romanian national art must derive from Romanian sources of inspiration alone.

If only ethnic Romanians could create a “national art,” it followed that there was no place in this field for Jewish artists, condemned forever to exclusion from a cultural domain to which they did not belong. Assimilation, including religious conversion, for those willing to undergo the procedure, was not a valid option in order to gain recognition as a Romanian artist. Even the abandonment of their faith could not modify the Jews’ status, just as baptism could not modify their blood. “Several drops of holy water,” wrote Cuza, “cannot change anything.” For many, they would remain “christened” Jews, pejoratively called “Pseudo-Romanians.” As such, they were still inevitably rejected as non-native, lacking the organic link to the soil and to the genuine Romanian ethos. “The Jews are unable to have a global vision of Romanian life. . . . They could not have . . . the perspective of the wide landscape, of the artistic picturesque flooding Romanian art because, living faraway, their life is crushed by revolt and helplessness.”

True Romanian artists were expected to express their “Romanianess” and reject the transnational approach of Modernism, which was considered incapable of expressing national character. It is obvious that, under such conditions, it would have been difficult for Jewish artists to identify themselves

with a cultural trend that rebuffed them. The barrier erected between them and “national art” compelled them to search for another kind of art, in which their “otherness” was not insuperable. “We energetically reject the false tradition of the soil and we bow to the endless tradition of man. The first is conservatism, the second is civilization,” could be read in an editorial published by the avant-garde magazine *Integral*. The universalism and cosmopolitanism of the avant-garde were an obvious draw. In this sense, the Jewishness of the artists, perceived as an insurmountable obstacle to the creation of a “national art,” offered easier access to radical modernity than to Romanian culture, preoccupied with a search for “national specificity.” In other words, the fact that the majority of the avant-garde artists from Romania were Jewish indicates a problem with Romanian culture of the period, rather than with Jewish culture.

The attraction of several young Jewish artists to radical modernity appears to have been an obvious choice. In October 1924, Victor Brauner published, along with poet Ilarie Voronca (born Eduard Marcus), the magazine *75 HP*. Described by the literary critic Eugen Lovinescu as a “purely Jewish endeavor,” the single issue of *75 HP* was the most experimental avant-garde publication in Romania. The earliest Romanian avant-garde periodical was *Contimporanul*, edited from 1922 to 1932 by Ion Vinea (born Ion Iovanaki), of Greek origin. *Contimporanul*’s artistic director and main theoretician was Marcel Janco. Toward the end of 1924, the *First International Art Exhibition of Contimporanul* was organized, and proved to be one of the major European avant-garde shows. Curated by M. H. Maxy, with the help of Janco, the exhibition was a veritable “Armory Show” for the Bucharest public. Besides the local representation of Brauner, Janco, Maxy, Milița Petrașcu, and Hans Mattis-Teutsch, the public could view four sculptures sent from Paris by their compatriot Constantin Brâncuși, three paintings and a print by Arthur Segal, as well as works by Belgian, Czech, German, Hungarian, Polish, and Swedish avant-garde artists.

In March 1925, Maxy published *Integral*, another avant-garde publication, subtitled “magazine of modern synthesis.” *Integral* aimed to synthesize all previous avant-garde *isms* into a new one: Integralism. Both Janco and Maxy published articles and reproductions of their works in *Puntea de fildeș* (The Ivory Bridge), a cultural Jewish magazine issued to raise money for the construction of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In the second and last issue, printed in May 1926, Marcel Janco published the architectural plan for a reinforced concrete villa in Palestine, designed in collaboration with his brother Jules. In an article significantly entitled “*Noi și noi*” (We and We) in the same issue, Maxy suggested strengthening the connection between Jewish artists from Europe and from Palestine. The new type of Jewish art advocated by Maxy for the Promised Land was akin to Western avant-garde art, “letting aside any Yiddishist or Hebrew passion”; curiously, he offered Picasso and Chagall as two diverse examples. This new art was characterized by a “spirit of invention, organizing system, surprise, dissociation, abstraction . . . the actual virtues of the Jewish plastic art mind.”

The second wave of Romanian avant-garde artists gathered around *Unu* (One), a new magazine published by Sașa Pană (Alexandru Binder). The artist most

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מ"ה מקסי, עירומה עם פסל אילי (פרט), 1924, צבעי־שמן על בד, 101 × 75.5 ס"מ, המוזיאון הלאומי לאמנות רומנית, בוקרשט

M. H. Maxy, *Nude with Idol* (detail), 1924. Oil on canvas, 101 × 75.5 cm. The National Museum of Art of Romania, Bucharest

דווקא:

אמני אוונגרד יהודים מרומניה

Jewish Avant-Garde Artists from Romania