VICTOR BRAUNER IN THE COLLECTIONS OF THE TULCEA ART MUSEUM

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Abstract: At the gate of the natural site of the Danube Delta, Tulcea, tourists are surprised to discover the Art Museum of the Museum Complex of North-Dobruja Cultural Heritage of the "Gavrilă Simion" Eco-Museum Research Institute, Tulcea. The main theme of the museum's collections, the Danube River, highlights through representatives and compositions that Dobruja is a land of interethnic coexistence.

Among the most valuable possessions in the patrimony of the Tulcea Art Museum are the works of the artist Victor Brauner (15 June 1903, Piatra Neamţ, Romania - 12 March 1966, Paris, France). The masterpieces are a testament to human creative genius. They have a remarkable universal value.

True art has the mission of translating the spiritual-divine life into the earthly-physical life, in order to raise it to a higher level.

Victor Brauner's creative artistic activity represents the search for personal harmony. It frequently takes us through the author's reveries and introspections. Alongside Victor Brauner, the avantgarde movement is represented in the Tulcea Museum by Hans Mattis-Teutsch, Max Hermann Maxy, Marcel Iancu and Corneliu Michăilescu.

The Institute owns a total of 9 paintings (two of which are painted recto/verso) and 4 graphic works in pencil and watercolour on paper. The pieces were acquired over the years from Lena Constante and Harry Brauner, brother of Victor Brauner (1985; 1989), Ilie Zaharia (1978) and Petre Vulpescu (1989).

The artist made the paintings during his debut, between the years 1921 and 1925. The landscapes evoke the period when the young artist was inspired by Cézanne's cubism. The other seven compositions are performed in Cubo-Futurist and Expressionist manner, in a melancholic and unsettling atmosphere.

Three of the sketches remind of some imaginary characters' bodies that are tailored unpredictably. The shapes take on new meanings by combining anatomical elements with elements from the plant and animal life, or objects with a functional role. In another vein, the character's attire in a drawing subtly touches on the problem of Jewish artists during the Holocaust.

Keywords: Romania, Tulcea, Art Museum, Romanian Avant-garde, Victor Brauner.

INTRODUCTION

At the *gate of* the natural site of the Danube Delta, Tulcea, tourists are surprised to discover the Art Museum of the Museum Complex of North-Dobruja Cultural Heritage of the "Gavrilă Simion" Eco-Museum Research Institute in Tulcea. The main theme of the museum's collections, *the Danube River*, highlights through representatives and compositions that Dobrogea is a land of interethnic coexistence.

The Museum Complex of North Dobruja Cultural Heritage has seven collections, as follows: the Painting Collection (986 pieces / 2022), the Graphic Collection (4262 pieces / 2022), the Engraving Collection (533 pieces / 2022), the Sculpture Collection (292 pieces / 2022), the Icon Collection (760 pieces / 2022), the European Decorative Art Collection (149 pieces / 2022), the Oriental Decorative Art Collection (325 pieces / 2022).

The building of the collections started in the 1950s, from the works of local artists, artists temporarily hosted in Tulcea or in regional camps, donations from artists exhibiting in Tulcea, works of artists from the Balchik area and acquisitions of Romanian art masterpieces. Thus, the structure of the collections went beyond the theme initially proposed and was moulded on the trajectory of the creations of the great personalities of Romanian art.

Among the most valuable possessions in the patrimony of the Tulcea Art Museum are the works of the artist Victor Brauner (15th June 1903, Piatra Neamt, Romania – 12th March 1966, Paris, France). The Institute owns a total of 9 paintings (two of which are painted recto/verso) and 4 graphic works in pencil and watercolour on paper. The pieces were acquired over the years from Lena Constante and Harry Brauner, brother of Victor Brauner (1985; 1989), Ilie Zaharia (1978) and Petre Vulpescu (1989).



Fig. 1. Tulcea Art Museum, Grigore Antipa Street, No. 2.

THE VICTOR BRAUNER COLLECTION

Victor Brauner's creative artistic activity represents the search for personal harmony. It frequently takes us through the author's reveries and introspections. Alongside Victor Brauner, the avant-garde movement is represented in the Tulcea Museum by Hans Mattis-Teutsch, Max Hermann Maxy, Marcel Iancu and Corneliu Michăilescu.

The works in the Painting Collection were made by the artist in his early years, between 1921 and 1925, in oil on cardboard. The *Balchik* Landscapes and the *Tower of Antim Church* recall the period when the young artist was inspired by Cézanne's cubism. The other seven compositions are executed in a cubist-futurist and expressionist manner, with a melancholic and disquieting atmosphere: *Old Woman Between Two Girls*, *Adam and Eve, Worker / Thracian Knight*, *Boy with a Pitcher*, *Portrait of the Poet Ilarie Voronca / Portrait of X*, *Cortege*, *Portrait of a Woman*.

The composition *Ballerina* (executed in mixed technique: pencil, watercolour, ink/cardboard), although undated, is stylistically among the artist's small graphic works from 1935-1937. It can thus be compared with the sketch *Sans titre* (made in 1936), which is in the Museum of Modern Art in Saint-Etienne Métropole, donated by Jacqueline Victor Brauner.

The other three sketches in the Tulcea Museum of Art's Graphic Collection, made in pencil and watercolour on paper, are reminiscent of the bodies of imaginary characters that are unpredictably adjusted. The shapes take on new meanings by combining anatomical elements with elements from the plant and animal life, or objects with a functional role. In another vein, the character's attire in a drawing subtly touches on the problem of Jewish artists during the Holocaust.

¹ Keita 2014, 47-53.







Fig. 2. Victor Brauner's works in the collections of Tulcea Art Museum: 1. *Drawing* - pencil on thin ochre paper, 32.5 × 20.5 cm, unsigned, undated, inv. 1687; 2. *Ballerina* - watercolour, ink, pencil on yellowed cardboard (dry stamp printed left side, vertical, top and bottom: KATASTRON), 64.2 × 48.5 cm, unsigned, undated, inv. 578 (photo Gabriel Dincu); 3. *Drawing* - pencil on thin ochre paper, front: noted in the work, central, in pencil: essense OR; reverse: charcoal sketch drawing of four masks, 32.2 × 24 cm, signed, undated, inv. 1686.

Victor Brauner (1903-1966)

Victor, the third of Herman and Deborah Brauner's six children, was born in Piatra Neamţ on 15th June 1903. His father, the owner of a sawmill, was passionate about photography and occultism.

Fearing reprisals against the Jews following the outbreak of the peasant uprising in 1907, the Brauner family emigrated to Hamburg, in Germany. In the autumn of 1910 the Brauner family returned to Piatra Neamţ. They stayed here for only two years and then settled in Vienna between 1912 and 1914. For a short time, while enrolled at the Evangelical School in Brăila, Victor became interested in botany and began to paint. His first painting was inspired by an engraving of an alchemist. The family moved to Bucharest and the young man, contrary to his father's opinion, made outdoor studies of the capital's surroundings and the Bellu cemetery. Among the portraits he painted was that of Julia Haşdeu, attracted by her mausoleum and mysterious story.

In 1919, Victor Brauner enrolled at the School of Fine Arts in Bucharest. Interested in Cubism, Expressionism, Dadaism and Futurism, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the academic direction promoted in the university. As a result, he took part in a student strike aimed at bringing Romanian art into line with the modernist movements in Europe and was expelled in 1921.



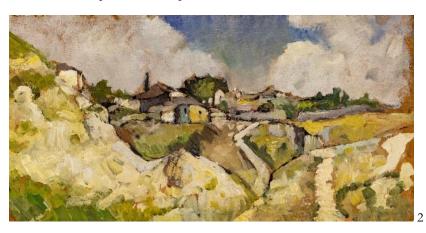


Fig. 3. Victor Brauner's works in the collections of Tulcea Art Museum: 1. *Tower of Antim Church* - oil on cardboard, 35.6 x 27 cm, signed and dated lower right, in red: VICTOR/ 1925, inv. 685; 2. *Balchik* - oil on cardboard, 43,8 x 22,6 cm, unsigned, undated, inv. 686 (photo Gabriel Dincu).

Between 1921 and 1923 he became preoccupied with the synthesis of forms and began to relate to the imaginary. He travelled to Tulcea and Balcic to depict landscapes. He became friends with the Romanian avant-garde poets Ilarie Voronca and Stephan Roll (Gheorghe Dinu). He illustrated Voronca's debut volume, *Restriști*, inspired by the intelligence and originality of his verses, which were highly appreciated at the time by the literary critic Eugen Lovinescu. Attending the place named *La Secol* by the young avant-gardists of Bucharest, he painted the signboard of Enache Dinu's *Dairy*.

In 1924, simultaneously with the appearance of the Surrealism Manifesto in France, he founded with Ilarie Voronca and Stephan Roll the only issue of the magazine 75 H.P., introducing the notion of pictopoetry, a syncretism defining the Romanian avant-garde. Among other things, the magazine praised, in Voronca's words, the artist's attempts and announced the young Brauner's first solo exhibition at the Syndicate of Fine Arts Gallery. The works in the exhibition, cubist, expressionist and constructivist in nature, formed the basis of numerous articles for and against the artistic trends driven by the artist's sensibility. In the same year, together with other artists, he initiated the constructivist art magazine Punct and the Dadaist and constructivist-oriented magazine Integral. In November he participated in the first international exhibition of fine art in the country, an exhibition organized at the Mozart Hall by the magazine Contemporanul.

Between 1925 and 1927 he lived in Paris. Together with Ilarie Voronca, Benjamin Fondane and Claude Sernet, they founded a *Romanian* literary circle frequented by writers and visual artists.

From February 1927 until January 1929 he did his military service in the country. He collaborated with the surrealist magazine *Unu*, which appeared on the initiative of Saşa Pană, of whose editorial board he was a member and in which he published drawings with a surrealist stylistic tinge.

In 1929 he participated in the *Group* Exhibition of *New Art*, held in the halls of the Academy of Decorative Arts, and opened the exhibition *Introductions* at the *Mozart* Hall. Along with nine *Introviziuni* paintings, the sixty works, mostly executed in specific graphic techniques, illustrated his retreat from crisis-ridden society into the world of surrealism. Also, this year he illustrated the volume *Poems in the Open Air* by Stephan Roll.

On 6th March 1930 Victor Brauner married Margit Kosch. The couple went to France and rented a studio in Montrouge. There, they had Alberto Giacometti and Yves Tanguy as neighbours. In the same year he took part in the fourth *Group Exhibition of New Art* and the Retrospective of Romanian Modernist Art, organised by *Facla* magazine. The artist took photographs that were later considered prescient.

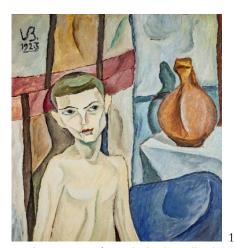




Fig. 4. Victor Brauner's works in the collections of Tulcea Art Museum: 1. *Boy with Pitcher* - oil on cardboard, 74.9 × 68.8 cm, signed and dated upper left, in black: VB./ 1923, inv. 430; *Portrait of the poet Ilarie Voronca* - oil on cardboard, 53 × 71 cm, unsigned, undated, inv. 611 (front) (photo Gabriel Dincu).

1931 was the year he painted the work *Self-portrait with the Eye Out*, as a premonition of the future accident. The artist went on to produce a series of notes, drawings, watercolours and paintings on the subject of *the eye*. He participated in the 3rd *Salon des Surindépendants*. He illustrated Ilarie Voronca's book *Peter Schlemihl*.

A year later, in 1932, he joined André Breton's surrealist group. He took part in the 6th Salon des Surindépendants (1933) and in the Minotaure Exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels (1934). He

created the grotesque character *Monsieur K* and a series of paintings on the theme of the *morphology of the human figure*.

On 7 December 1934 he opened his first solo exhibition in Paris, in the Galerie *Pierre*, presented by André Breton. The content of the works was compared to states of consciousness, providing many contradictions.

In 1935 the artist returned to Bucharest where he opened a solo exhibition of sixteen works, hosted by *Mozart* Hall. Due to material difficulties he was unable to pay the rent of the hall for the exhibition, which is why his works were seized. In the capital he lived in an apartment on General Manu Street. He joined the Communist Party of Romania, from which he broke away after 1937. He took part in the *Exposición surrealista* at the Galeria *Ateneo* de Santa Cruz in Tenerife and the *Exposition de dessins surréalistes* at the *Galerie aux quatre chemins* in Paris.

Between 1935 and 1936 Brauner produced the series *Anatomy of Desire* which, together with *Mr K* and *Morphologies*, condensed two themes characteristic of his work: *the double* and the *metamorphoses of the figure*. He participated in the *International Surrealist Exhibition at the New Burlington* Gallery in London. He painted small-scale works, mainly drawings, in order to make them easily transportable.

He did illustrations for the volumes of poetry *The Incendiary Road* (1936) and *Freedom to Sleep on a Forehead* (1937) by Gellu Naum, a poet he met at the opening of his last solo exhibition. At the same time, he made a photomontage of *Sadism of Truth* by Saṣa Pană.

Forced by the special political and social situation of the Jews in the country, in the summer of 1938 Victor left Paris for good. There he lived in a studio in Cité Falguière. He resumed meetings with the surrealist group around André Breton and took part in the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* at the *Beaux-Arts* Gallery. In August he was caught in an altercation between painters Esteban Francés and Óscar Domínguez, injured himself and lost his left eye. Immediately after the accident he met Jacqueline Abraham, who became his second wife after his divorce from Margit Kosch (4th November 1939). The Braunerian pictorial universe took on a two-dimensional spatial structure. He participated in the exhibition *Collages and Photo-montages at the Guggenheim Jeune* Gallery in London.

Between 1938 and 1939 Brauner initiated a series of works under the name *Lycanthropes* or *Chimères*, which had the *hybrid* as its theme. The compositions were a product of the imagination. The characters took shape and began to be enveloped in a twilight atmosphere, host to metamorphoses. The painter created a symbolic image in which ideas took unexpected forms and objects changed their functionality and became characters.

In 1939 he participated in the group exhibition *Le rêve dans l'art et la littérature. De l'Antiquité au Surréalisme* at the Galerie *Contemporaine* in Paris, followed by a solo exhibition at the Galerie *Henriette* in Avenue Matignon. In the middle of the year he moved into the apartment occupied by Jacqueline Abraham in Paris. He worked in the studio of Gordon Onslow Ford.

In 1940 he participated in the exhibitions: *Exposición internacional del surrealismo* - at the Galeria de Arte Mexicano, Mexico City and *Surrealism To-Day* - at the Zwemmer Gallery, London.

After the occupation of Paris by the German army, Victor retired with Jacques Hérold and Pierre Mabille to Robert Rius's house in Perpignan, then to Canet-Plage, to Saint Féliu-d'Amont and to the villa in Marseille, placed at the disposal of the Surrealists by the American Rescue Committee. In Marseille (1940-1941), during meetings with representatives of the surrealist group, on the occasion of the invention of a new tarot game, he falls in love with Laurette Séjourné. He dedicated to her all the works he produced during his stay in Marseille, as well as a series of texts.

After this episode, in 1942, André Breton and Marcel Duchamp will organize the first surrealist exhibition in New York. Unfortunately, Victor Brauner and Jacques Hérold were not granted visas to the United States. At the insistence of Breton, who wished to promote and exploit the artist's work through exhibitions, Brauner sent a series of paintings and graphic works with Serge and Séjourné, which never arrived. However, André Breton brokered the presence of some of Brauner's works at two forthcoming exhibitions: First Papers of Surrealism and the Art of This Century Gallery in New York.

From the spring of 1942 until 1945 the artist moved several times: from Marseille to Banyuls and back, from Remollon to Plaine de Théus, to Espinasse and to Celliers-de-Rousset. He read occult literature as a result of his interest in esotericism and alchemy, and became familiar with the occult sessions in his parents' home at an early age. Inspired by nature and the writings of the German poet Novalis, the artist developed a new concept, which he called *the uncreated real*. He also experimented with a new painting technique based on paraffin and wax. He created objects with a protective role to overcome the difficult times he was going through, as well as designs for sculptures. Throughout this time, he kept in touch with the New York Surrealist group, art dealers and personalities through correspondence. In 1944 he participated in the *Salon d'automne* at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris.

In 1945 Brauner returned to Paris. At Breton's request, he painted and, with the help of Michel Herz, produced four sculptures. He took part in the 12th Salon de Surindépendants, the Surréalisme exhibition in Brussels and published several texts.

In March 1946 the exhibition *Hommage à Victor Brauner* opened at the Galerie *Pierre* in Paris, and in June he married Jacqueline Abraham. Between 1946 and 1947 the artist executed the series of paintings *Codex du poète*.

On April 15th, 1947, the first solo exhibition of *Victor Brauner paintings* in the United States opened at the *Julien Levy* Gallery in New York. Among the works on view were those held in custody until 1946 by Laurette Séjourné and Victor Serge. In the same year he participated in: *L'Exposition internationale du surréalisme en 1947* (Galerie *Maeght* Paris), *Tanguy et Brauner* exhibition (Galerie *Cahiers d'Art*), *Mezinárodni surrealismus* exhibition (Prague), *Exposition de peintures et sculptures contemporaines au Palais des Papes* (Avignon) and the XIV *Salon des Surindépendants*.

Victor Brauner, along with the young Sarane Alexandrian, Claude Tarnaud, Francis Bouvet, Alain Jouffroy and Stanislas Rodanski, were excluded from the Surrealist group in 1948. The latter formed a group around Brauner which proposed a renewal of Surrealism. Brauner returned to the group of mute Surrealists years later, in 1959.

Between 1948 and 1949 he produced the cycles of works entitled *Mammalie* and *Onomatomanie*, inspired by Marguerite Sechehaye's book *Réalisation symbolique*. The first retrospective of his work, *Victor Brauner ou la clé des mythes*, opened on 17 December 1948 at the *René Drouin* Gallery in Place Vendôme.





Fig. 5. Victor Brauner's works in the collections of Tulcea Art Museum: 1. *Old woman between two girls* - oil on cardboard, 70 × 100 cm, unsigned, undated, inv. 427; *Adam and Eve* - oil on cardboard, 70 × 100 cm, signed and dated lower right: VB./ 1923, inv. 428 (photo Gabriel Dincu).

In 1949 Alexandre Iolas became the main dealer of Victor Brauner's works, representing him in exhibitions in the United States and Europe. Some of his solo exhibitions between 1949 and 1966 were held at: Hugo Gallery in New York (1949, 1951, 1954, 1955), Cahiers d'Art Gallery in Paris (1949, 1950, 1955, 1961), Hanover Gallery in London (1951), Zürich (1953), Galleria d'Arte Cavallino in Venice (1953), Allan Frumkin Gallery in Chicago (1955), Rive Droite Gallery in Paris (1957, 1958, 1960, 1961, 1962), Selecta Gallery in Rome (1958), Alexander Iolas Gallery in New York (1958, 1959, 1963), Naviglio Gallery in Milan (1958), Richard Feigen Gallery in Chicago (1959), Leicester Gallery in London (1959), Alexander Iolas Gallery in Paris (1958, 1959, 1961, 1965, 1966), Attico Gallery in Rome (1961, 1964), Salone Annunciata Gallery in Milan (1961, 1964), Schwarz Gallery in Milan (1962), Le Point Cardinal Gallery in Paris (1962, 1963), Alexander Iolas Gallery in Geneva (1964), Hanover Gallery in London (1965).

The artist has also participated in open group exhibitions at prestigious galleries and museums of modern art: São Paolo Biennial (1955), Victor Brauner and Roberto Matta: Intervisions at the Galerie du Dragon in Paris (1956), Art from France at the San Francisco Museum of Art (1956), Surrealism in Houston (1958), Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Art at Carnegie Mellon Institute (1958), Exposition internationale du surréalisme (1959), Intrusions in the Enchanter's Domain at the D'Arcy Galleries in New York (1960), The Art of Assemblage at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1961), Art Has Many Facets: The Artistic Fascination with the Cube at the St. Louis Museum of Art (1961). St. Thomas University in Houston (1963), Out of This World. An Exhibition of Fantastic Landscapes at St. Thomas University in Houston (1964), La clé des champs at Galerie Le Point Cardinal in Paris (1965).





Fig. 6. Victor Brauner's works in the collections of Tulcea Art Museum: 1. *Worker* - oil on cardboard, 98 × 69.5 cm, signed and dated lower right, in brown: .VB/ 1923, inv. 429 (front); *Cortege* - oil on cardboard pasted on canvas, 69.5 × 81.5 cm, signed lower left: .VB, undated, inv. 610 (photo Gabriel Dincu).

In 1953 Victor Brauner spent some time in the south of France, at Golfe-Juan, in the company of the Gomès and Pierre Mabille. In Madoura he met Picasso and Max Ernst and worked in Ramier's studio.

In 1954 the first monograph dedicated to the master, Victor Brauner l'Illuminateur, was published by Sarane Alexandrian at Cahiers d'Art.

In 1959 he moved with Jacqueline Brauner to an apartment at 72 rue Lepic and from 1961 to a house in Varengeville, Normandy.

In 1963, after a long stay in France, Victor Brauner received French citizenship.

Between 1965 and 1966 a travelling retrospective of Victor Brauner was held at the *Museum des 20 Jahrhunderts* in Vienna, then at the *Kestner Gesellschaft Hannover*, the *Karl-Ostaus Museum* Hagen and the *Stedelijk Museum* Amsterdam.

Before being admitted to hospital (1965), the artist worked on the cycles *Mythologie* and *La Fête des Mères*. His last painting, *La mère universelle*, which remains unfinished, completed the cycle *Fête des Mères*.² Victor Brauner died on 12 March 1966 in Paris and was buried in *Montmartre* Cemetery.

The Tulcea Art Museum values and promotes Victor Brauner's works from its patrimony. The replicas of the pieces can be found in several national and international publications. In the museum archive there is the 2007 Victor Brauner Calendar, promoted at the opening of the Victor Brauner exhibition on 10th March 2006, on the floor of the Tulcea Art Museum. There is also the catalogue Victor Brauner's Works in the

² Petrov 2012, 198-209.

Collections of the Tulcea Museum of Art, printed by the institute in 2015, whose chronology was documented after Mihaela Petrov's research work.

The works included in the permanent circuit of the Tulcea Art Museum are admired by visitors and often requested for loan by national and international institutions promoting the Romanian-born surrealist artist. The masterpieces are a testament to human creative genius. They have a remarkable universal value. The most frequently borrowed compositions in the last 30 years, according to the circulation register of the Painting Collection's pieces, are *Adam and Eve* and *Old Woman Between Two Girls*. Some of the events that paid homage to Victor Brauner's work were:

- 1994 Exhibition, Belgium-Marlens;
- 2005 Exhibition Romanian Painting from Classics to Avant-garde, Auvers, Belgium;
- 2007 The Colours of Avant-garde Exhibition, Brukenthal Palace Sibiu, Romania;
- 2007 Exhibition at the National Museum of Art, Bucharest, Romania;
- 2009 Exhibition Colours of Avant-garde, Chiado in Lisbon, Portugal;
- 2009 The Colours of Avant-garde exhibition, National Gallery in Prague, Czech Republic;
- 2009 The Colours of Avant-Garde Exhibition, Brukenthal Palace Sibiu, Romania;
- 2011 Exhibition Romanian interwar avant-garde, Joods Museum Amsterdam, The Netherlands;
- 2011-2012 Exhibition Jewish Avant-garde Artists from Romania, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel;
- 2015 Exhibition, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Strasbourg, France;
- 2016 ArtSafari Exhibition, Bucharest, Romania;
- 2023 Retrospective Exhibition Victor Brauner: inventions and magic, Timisoara Art Museum, Romania.

True art has the mission of translating the spiritual-divine life into the earthly-physical life, in order to raise it to a higher level.³ The mysticism in Victor Brauner's life was projected into the work and translated through symbols. It requires a higher understanding than the creations of most representatives of Surrealism. His creative universe tells us about the multidimensional experiences of the self, about the dramas and programs that unfolded in his mental body and metamorphosed into compositions, about the unreal projections of the chimeras and dimensions of the planetary realms, about fantasies. Brauner did not only find a favourable environment for promotion in Paris during the fertile years of Surrealism, he is reborn and vibrates under the gaze and understanding of any awakened spirit he comes into contact with through works in museums or private collections around the world.

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³ Steiner 2021, 68-69.