

MĂIASTRA

A History of Romanian Sculpture in Twenty-Four Parts

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PART III: PROTEUS

There is hunger in my walk this morning. As I make my way south through Dorobanti, I pass by a few interwar statuary memorials standing languidly in the late morning sun. Their presence along my route heralds the masterpieces of Romanian sculpture I will find waiting for me in the modern wing of the National Museum.

The National Museum of Romanian Art, or the MNAR, is housed inside the old Royal Palace on Revolution Square in Bucharest. The museum is divided into two large wings: the European gallery and the Romanian, the latter of which is divided again between medieval and modern art. With notable exceptions, the European gallery is a gaudy mess of lovely, unimportant paintings by the Old Masters. The modern wing in the Romanian gallery, however, is a vast, comprehensive collection of the surviving remnants of a once-teeming pool of Romanian and Hungarian artists driven by competition and camaraderie to the forefront of European art. The golden age of Romanian sculpture, presented simply in a chronological sequence of well-lit, well-curated galleries, is a story of fathers and sons (and in many, far too often overlooked cases, daughters). [Note: This relationship also serves as a metaphor for the Romanian Academy's filial admiration of the French school of sculpture in the early twentieth century.]

Represented in these galleries are the fathers: elders Karl Storck, Paul Fosaeanu, Wladimir Hegel, Stefan Ionescu-Valbudea, and Ion Georgescu; and their sons: Frederic and Carol Storck; Oscar Späthe, Constantin Brancusi (our mighty Hephaestus), and Dimitrie Paciurea (our Proteus, *le vilain petit canard*). These sons, students of their elders' work, quickly became fathers themselves, teachers to a new generation of sons: the romantic Oscar Han, the sentimental Filip Marin; the indestructible Ion Jalea, and the interminable Ion Irimescu; the socialist realist Boris Caragea and the realistic socialist Constantin Baraschi; and man of the people Géza Vida. And the daughters: Milita Petrascu, the Turkish spy; Parisian ex-pats Irina Codreanu, Céline Emilian, and Margareta Cossaceanu; and professor Zoe Baicoianu, once my colleague and friend.

Among my favorite pieces are Ionescu-Valbudea's *Michael the Fool*, a smirking example of the Renaissance trope of anatomy as allegory, exhibited first in Paris in 1885 and now seated restlessly in the courtyard of the large palace; Gheorghe Anghel's *The Prayer*, a bronze statuette of a rural nun in traditional habit, which, despite what I consider to be Anghel's occasional inconsistency, is certainly one of the finest pieces in the entire collection; and Milita Petrascu's *Angel*, a primitive, abstract form carved from wood and placed atop a marble base, which bears a strong stylistic resemblance to the work of her mentor Brancusi.

The National Gallery's Brancusi room holds a number of the master's early works, as well as some studies for later ones. Like Brancusi's best pieces, however, the room is defined by its absences, namely those sculptures housed in the artist's old atelier in Paris. *Selon moi*, a more appropriate exhibition of this particular artist's oeuvre would be a single white millstone plunked down in the center of an empty white room, though it is certainly fascinating to see evidence of his more representational origins. The Paciurea room of the National Gallery, however, is one of the finest displays of Romanian sculpture in the world. If Brancusi's intent was to strip classical statuary of what Umberto Boccioni referred to in 1912 as its "barbarism and lumpishness," Paciurea made these mythological encrustations his singular focus.

Sculpted mainly in the 1920s, after World War I and the tragic death of his fiancée in 1919, and inspired by Gustave Moreau's paintings and poet Mihai Eminescu's dark odes to the changeling beasts, Paciurea's chimera sculptures were initially poorly received. Many scholars and critics lamented that they were a waste of a talent almost universally acknowledged as masterful. [Note: Paciurea's gifts were first recognized after he exhibited the public work *Giant* in 1906, one of Bucharest's "wandering rocks." See Part I.] Paciurea's obsessive preoccupation with the chimera seemed to some an attempt by the troubled sculptor to transform himself into the elemental forces each of his monsters represented: the night, the sky, the earth, and the air. [Note: This is a preoccupation he and I share. See Part II.]

A solemn and solitary man, Paciurea's enigmatic reputation among the cultural elite of Bucharest cast him as a figure simultaneously stimulated and tormented by his fantastical mind, and



rather immune to the trappings of reality. The poet Ion Minulescu wrote of him in 1932: “He spoke little, he spoke rarely, he spoke slowly, he spoke like he was lost somewhere, deep in a dream, he spoke as for himself and his sentences were very much like his Chimeras.”¹ The distance between artist and subject, between Paciurea and his chimerae, is approximately the same distance as that between art historian and artist. The temporary shortening of this distance has sated the hunger of my morning.

Leaving the museum, I cross the busy Calea Victoriei and walk south. I sit down at a once-bustling café. Before she passed, my wife and I would come here in the early evenings to take an aperitif and share department gossip with those admittedly few colleagues of mine she found *sympathiques*. Now the café has lost its *caché*, which is fine by me, as its lack of customers affords a bit of peace as I note some loose thoughts. I order a drink from the young waiter, and start at the sound of what I realize only now are the first spoken words of my day. I let my mind wander over the works I have just enjoyed. As usual, I return to Paciurea’s chimera sculptures: rich, strange objects impossible to comprehend

¹ Ion Minulescu, “Dupa inmormantarea sculptorului Paciurea,” *Adevarul*, no. 14894 (July 26, 1932): 2.

without imagining the dark, roiling interior of the artist’s mind.

At the Official Salon in Bucharest in 1927, Paciurea won the National Prize for his *Chimera of the Air*, the most majestic of all his chimera works. The Salon’s decision was a controversial one, leaving many questioning how this bizarre form qualified as a masterpiece of contemporary sculpture. A human head sits atop a long and winding neck that bifurcates downward into three equally sinuous gypsum streams, each flowing to form the creature’s various parts: rigid goat legs with cloven hooves below, a serpentine tail behind, and a pair of delicate, angelic wings ascending in the space above. The *Chimera of the Air* is perched lordotically on a molten and striated peak, and resembles the enormous Deco hood ornament of some great, grumbling American automobile of the 1940s. She is hurtling forward through time, while her creator fumbles along somewhere far behind her.

Later that night I find myself at a concert of Bucharest’s George Enescu Symphony, the glowing red heart of this city’s cultural scene, housed in the domed Ateneul Român concert hall, exquisitely designed by Frenchman Albert Galleron in 1888. The main *salle* is an ornate and intimate room in the round, its walls covered with garish yet fascinating frescos depicting Romania’s history from the Dacians on through World War I. [Note: This is a history we will be dissecting more carefully in future installments.] Romanian classical musicians are some of the most talented in Europe; this evening they are playing Dvorak and the Bohemians with grace amid the sleepy awe of an older and urbane audience. When the show is finished, not wishing to mill about and make light conversation, I duck out into the warm, dark night and walk south.

Paciurea used to walk the streets of Bucharest at night, “hugging the walls,” as Oscar Han wrote in 1933, “to preserve the distance between him and his fellow human beings,” a distance I’ve been attempting to shrink all day.² Solitary though he was, however, he may not have been entirely alone. *Chimera of the Night*, sculpted in 1928, is a large, bronze owl with a childish face and inconsequential breasts. Unlike most of the other chimerae, she is at rest. I imagine her watching over Paciurea during his evening strolls through the Romani neighborhoods, hugging the walls and stopping only for the occasional contemptuous piss in an alleyway.

As I hug the walls of the dilapidated villas myself, a stray dog barks at me violently, interrupting the quiet of Bucharest’s side streets with her anguished howls. I am walking in the melancholic wake of a satisfying day. In front of me is Paciurea, along with all the sons and daughters of Romanian sculpture, whose *voies* I follow dutifully, as they are all mothers and fathers to me. In our solitude we commune, and once again await the hunger of the morning. 

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² Oscar Han, “D. Paciurea,” *Arta* (January 1933), reprinted in *Dalti si pensule* (Bucharest, Ed. Minerva, 1970), 14.