**Crossroads: Jewish Artists during the Holocaust**, National Museum of Art of Romania, Bucharest, October 11, 2010–February 13, 2011

**Legacies of a Traumatic Past in Romanian Jews’ Artworks**

Holocaust scholars have recently turned to visual artifacts as an important source for understanding the experience of the Shoah, exemplified in the work of Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer on Vapniarka camp and of Deborah Dwork on Terezín.1

Romanian society has lately seen an upsurge of interest in uncovering the truth about the country’s involvement with the Holocaust. Official public acknowledgment of Romania’s responsibility for Holocaust mass murders came terribly late, in November 2004 when the Romanian presidency and government finally admitted the country’s involvement in World War II deportations and killings. As a further step towards retribution, the exhibition *Crossroads: Jewish Artists during the Holocaust* recently opened in Bucharest, at Romania’s National Museum of Art. Jointly organized with the Elie Wiesel National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania, the exhibition’s declared aim was “to retrieve and reinstate in museum space artists who bore the stigmata of coming into the world as Jews,” referring to those Romanian-Jewish artists whom Romania banned from exhibiting in public galleries from 1940 to 1945 (11).2 The exhibition proves the extent to which experiencing the Holocaust affected future artistic creation, mostly drawing the surviving artists away from experimental and avant-garde techniques, towards Socialist Realism and its ideology. Unfortunately, although these aims are wonderfully identified in the written catalogue one could procure from the museum shop, there are no curatorial guiding clues in the exhibition hall proper. This makes it rather hard for the visiting non-connoisseur to fully benefit from the exhibited items.

*Crossroads* features sixteen Romanian-Jewish artists with different trajectories as a result of the Holocaust. Four died in the Nazi camps or immediately after liberation, while their artistic careers were on the rise: Alex Leon (d. 1944 in the Ostrog camp), Aurel Mărculescu (d. 1947 after surviving Vapniarka and Savrani camps), Ernő Tibor (d. 1945, after having been incarcerated at Auschwitz), Iosif Klein (thought to have died in 1944, at Auschwitz). Others survived, but the experience of the Holocaust changed them considerably: some left the country either before the Shoah (Iosef Iser, Victor Brauner, Marcel Janco, Arthur Segal) or afterwards (Jules Peraḥim); others gave up their experimental ideas and took up new forms of expression, most notably those of Socialist Realism (Max Herman Maxy, Lola Schmierer Roth); some withdrew from public life and abandoned creation (Mina Byck Wepper, Lazăr Zin); and others dedicated their art to illustrating the struggle for existence (Egon Marc Lövith, Arnold Daghani, Margareta Sterian).

However, the lack of any curatorial explanations as to the rationale behind the specific positioning and succession of featured artworks and as to reasons for exhibiting pieces created both around World War I and World War II makes the curators’ choices confusing for the viewer. I believe that the 113 paintings in the exhibition could have been divided into four chronologically significant categories: 20 artworks composed around World War I, 57 interwar pieces, 24 works composed during the Holocaust, and 12 post-World War II pieces. This chronological division I propose is necessary in order to grasp the various creative styles initially fostered by Romanian-Jewish artists and the possible shifts of technique and approach triggered by the experience of the Shoah and the atmosphere in Romania leading up to the war.

Though dedicated to artwork created around the Holocaust, the exhibition includes three artists’ works closer to the First World War, the case of Iser, Segal and Tibor. Iser’s works, in particular, vividly record the prejudice characteristic of Romania’s political leaders and bourgeois classes around the First World

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War. His 1911 *Enforcing the Constitution* shows a police officer beating a weak and skinny peasant with the back of his gun. Another piece from 1911, *Cholera*, depicts the image of cholera personified by a scythe-handling Death figure contemplating cemetery crosses, two of which are in the foreground. They are inscribed with the year 1907 when one of the most violently repressed peasant revolts in Romania occurred. Under the drawing, Cholera-Death’s sarcastic words are written in pencil: “I am no longer needed. Brătianu got there before me” (my translation). Iser’s caricature-like black-and-white drawings create a form of social satire which exposes the victimization of the average poor Romanian citizen by authorities, either represented by the police officer who should normally ensure law enforcement, or by political leaders like the Liberal prime minister Ioan Brătianu, well known for his class and ethnic-based prejudices. The exhibition justifies these earlier inclusions by framing artists’ experiences as a result of rampant Romanian discrimination along class and ethnic lines from as early as World War I, and understandable given the bleak economic, political, and social reality that dominated Romania at the time, an issue that has been extensively discussed by historians.3

By the mid-1920s, the economic situation in Europe was improving. With it, new forms of artistic expression developed, in most cases coupled with artists’ attempts to show the pitfalls of the industrial revolution. This resulted in Romanian-Jewish artists’ proliferation of experimentalism. The works from this pre-World War II period encompass five main tendencies: New Classicism, Cubism, Surrealism, escapism into a childhood universe and Socialist Realism.

The exhibition concentrates primarily on the 1920s, positioning New Classicism (Roth, Byck Wepper and Tibor) and Cubism (Iancu, Maxy and Brauner) as evidence of the artists’ preoccupation with new forms of expressing anxiety. The exhibition draws attention to inner turmoil and to the fragmentary nature of modern identity in opposition to traditionalist objective viewpoints. Inspired by Van Gogh’s brush techniques, by Wassily Kandinsky’s conception of art as “self-expression” rather than representation and by cubism’s focus on the inner consciousness of individuals, this modernist strategy of positioning artistic styles in politics emerged as a new approach to art in Western Europe. Soon it also led to a proliferation of experimentalism in the works of Romanian-Jewish artists, since most of them regularly travelled abroad to study and work, mainly in France and Germany, and contributed to avant-garde movements there. Moreover, beginning as early as 1910, they organized several art exhibitions in Bucharest that introduced contemporary modernist art to the Romanian public.4

The last three artistic tendencies mostly characterized compositions of the 1930s, when the rise of fascist parties and their violent manifestations had become a threatening reality. These can be grouped into two opposing ways of dealing with an unwanted reality. On one hand, escapism in a dream-like universe was characteristic of Brauner’s and Perahim’s Surrealist works. These attempted to deny the oppressive reality but proved unable to escape a sense of haunting anxiety. A more successful form of escape from the 1930s was that of a mystical, worry-free, Chagall-like childhood perspective as deployed by Sterian. On the other hand, the militant art of 1930s Socialist Realism directly exposed the fascist threat from the viewpoint of leftist ideology. Klein, Zin and Mărculescu employed this technique much as their predecessors did, in order to show the poverty of the lower classes. Leon’s works are the most disturbing in the accuracy with which the artist managed to delineate the Nazis’ dehumanizing tactics via grotesque figures anticipating the Holocaust by almost a decade.

During World War II, under the immediate threat of massive extinction, the artists’ preference for depicting individual anxieties, which had been characteristic of the pre-World War II period was

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