

## MARCEL JANCO

### One of the founders of the Dada movement and the Romanian avant-guard

By **Stephan Benedict**

The speech was held at the opening of the exhibit *Avant-garde artist Marcel Iancu at RCINY*, the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York

[http://icrny.org/566-Avant-garde\\_artist\\_Marcel\\_Iancu\\_at\\_RCINY.html](http://icrny.org/566-Avant-garde_artist_Marcel_Iancu_at_RCINY.html)

In this presentation, I will underline the contribution of the Romanian born painter and architect, to the European and Romanian avant-guard movements, as well as his artistic activity before leaving Romania forever in 1941, just before Romania's entry in WWII. My essay is based on materials already published on the subject, especially the book of the Romanian art critic Geo Serban, "Intalniri cu Marcel Iancu" published in 2011. "I wouldn't have ever left – he confessed – if the green terror (meaning The Iron Guard) wouldn't have made victim even in my own family. However my roots are still there and I still feel how the pulse of my roots is still beating".

Dada was a unique artistic movement, THE MOST RADICAL ARTISTIC INSURRECTION OF THE 20TH CENTURY, which had a major impact on that century's art. It was established in Cabaret Voltaire, in Zurich, Switzerland, by a group of exiled poets, painters and philosophers who were opposed to war and aggression, thus changing the world culture. Among the founders were Marcel Janco, Tristan Tzara, Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Hans Arp, Richard Huelsenbeck, Hans Richter. Dada soirées featured spontaneous poetry, avant-garde music, and mask wearing dancers in elaborate shows. The Dadaists teased and enraged the audience through their bold defiance of Western culture and art, which they considered obsolete in view of the destruction and carnage of World War I. The Dadaists objected to the aesthetics of Western contemporary painting, sculpture, language, literature and music. The group published articles and periodicals, and mounted exhibitions. The seeds sown in Zurich spread throughout the world, resulting in new Dada organizations in Paris, New York, Berlin, Hannover, and other places. Janco designed masks and costumes for the famous Dada balls, and created abstract reliefs in cardboard and plaster. He had an eclectic and unique style in which he brilliantly combined abstract and figurative elements, expressionistic in nature.

Janco confessed: "The war miseries cut me off from any resource and I had to make a living singing in various Zurich night clubs, old French, English and Romanian folk music. My brother was accompanying me playing piano". And so,

from bar to bar, one night he knocked on the door of Hugo Ball's tavern. I quote: "When he understood that I was a painter and I was frequenting the cubists and futurists, and that I knew some other poets and artists from Zurich, he proposed right away that I take part in his plan to create a literary cabaret. Next day I talked to Arp and Tzara about the project, in order to convince them to take part." Tzara sensed right away its advantage.

"Every night, new friends joined our group. The poets were singing, the writers were reading their writings and their futility, the walls were sparkling of paints and manifests, one could hear the pieces played at piano by Hugo Ball and there were dances on tunes by blacks and Javanese natives, masked in pieces of clothing manufactured by me. They were reciting poems on four voices, simultaneously, in four different languages". (end of quote). Soon after the inauguration of February 5, 1916, the extravagances of the players and poet/ writers were surnamed Dada, a senseless invented word, attributed by some to hazard, by others to the two Romanian animators who were often heard in their conversation: da! da!

Marcel Janco was attracted in the beginning, by the breaking of old traditions, based on his insurrectional spirit. On the other hand, he was turned off by the rudimentary nihilism and the self-destructive extravagance of the new art. He became perfectly adapted to the carnival atmosphere of "Cabaret Voltaire", attracted by the dynamic sense of the grotesque game of masks, which he manufactured himself. But little by little he separated himself from Tristan Tzara, his former companion from "Simbolul" magazine of Bucharest, in 1912, as soon as the Dada spirit shows signs of excessive destructiveness, detrimental to any creative activity, being rather more interested in Constructivism. He prefers to be called radical artist, but even though he deplored the diminishing of the Art till the point of annulation of the public impact, at the same time he detests the sophisticated mystifications, the estranging of creativity, under the effect of settling too long in hazardous areas.

The Dada movement, diminishes its force through the break-up of the original group already from the beginning of 1917. The first to quit is Richard Huelsenbeck, the partner of Tzara & Janco in the verbal " simultaneous" interventions. Later on he moved to NY and became a psychologist. The next person to quit in 1918 was Hugo Ball himself, the owner of the cabaret, later on secluding himself into a monastery, as a monk. Marcel Janco wrote to Arp on February 26, that he held, on February 13, in Zurich, in front of the School of Architecture, a conference on that topic. He was pleading for intensification of the conceptual narrowing between the architecture status and sculpture and painting capacity to intervene in combating, with higher efficiency, of the mimetic illusionism, of classic and baroque nature. The program permits the possibility of a future aspiration towards a way of transforming the relationship between the consumers and art producers, transforming the public

mentality without the trauma of the vehement and exaggerated negations sustained and pushed by Tzara.

Later on Janco made additional clarifications. In the catalog of the Dada 1916-1966 exhibition, organized in the spring of 1967 at the Museum of Modern Art of Haifa, he was describing "two speeds" during the process of the movement: one was extravagant nihilist, toning the wake of the creation, the pure hazard, supported by the literary wing of the movement, the second belonging to the visual artists, also exasperated by the old routine, ardent supporters of innovation, but less interested in "scandals" and in the games of gratuitous cynicism. The clarifications of Janco must be associated with Huelsenbeck's associations from "Dada e avant", where he accuses openly the literary wing, of esthetic sterility and hedonism. In general, Zurich left Janco with the image of a resort, inundated by frivolous actions, with an artificial fashioned atmosphere, protected against the war related impediments. Accumulated unhappiness even at the location of the events, will lead to splits and realignments within the avant-guard movement.

As for the naïve art and subconscious depth exposed through the prejudiced exterior data, against figurative art, there are notes kept from his early period. Marcel Janco exhibits the rebellious artistic attitude, becoming one of the first promoters of Abstractionism in Romania. In the avant-guard magazine "Contimporanul" of June 24, 1922, he is offered clear explanations of the geometric radicalization. I quote: "It's within inner self and personal. It starts from the line and color, just like music starts from the sound. And just as music groups creative harmonious sounds, the abstract painting displays the lines and colors, towards a harmonious result. Thus, being freed, painting becomes an abstract construction, like an un-arranged symphony".

More explicitly the sense of the new program is formulated in certain notes with the starting points in the geometrical construction instated by cubism, with which Dada and especially Marcel Janco maintained structural affinities. I am quoting from "Contimporanul" of December 1926: "The line, the volume and the color are plastic elements and cannot be found in nature, but in a disorganized and unconscious fashion. To gather and organize visual elements represents the basic problem of the visual arts. Starting from vision, the art creates visual art realities independent from visual perception. A rendition of nature does not imply artistic beauty. Visual art represents a construction of the intellect, not only of the human feelings".

About virtuosity of the colors, there is a fundamental difference between their physical nature and their artistic power. An absolute distinction among the colors does not exist yet. Many times a red is rather a blue and the green is rather a yellow. About the power of expression of colors, one should never talk about individually, as they should be grouped in accords". In his model, the place of the

passionate artist, of romantic origin, lonesome and pushed by the bohemian environment of the art merchants, is taken by the creator of art, overtaken by the profoundly human belief, rigorous to the asceticism, having as prototype Brancusi, about whom he said: I am quoting: "...he loves life and nature with a virile wisdom. His love is not ecstatic, passive, romantic.

It was also the first generation full of ambitions, among which to get rid of the eternal slavery of Parisian imitation of good taste...Marcel Janco's generation was oriented towards revolt, on a path towards revelation, thought and pain. It's hard to establish the percentage of how much Iser-ism he has acquired, but his doctrinal affiliation with his master remained unquestionable. Through Iosif Iser first, Marcel Janco got close to "new art creeds" and through him he acquired the repulsion toward the scholar dogma and the stigma of academic prejudices.

Until the distinct clarifications of the positions, there was an inoffensive parallelism, vaguely marked by independent gestures. The Dadaism chronicle, for instance, records in June 1918, several meetings with separatist flavors, held by Marcel Janco, however it was his poster that, at the same time, announced the agitated night when Tzara stunned the audience with some explosive declarations that were to speed up the separation process. In December, the painter was still creating the front cover of the 3rd issue of "Dada", then next month he made known his intention to quit the movement, exhibiting at the prestigious "Kunsthaus" of Zurich with the group "Das Neue Leben". By April 1919, the dispute between the two Romanian artists of renewal was already in public.

Back in Bucharest in 1922, Marcel Janco acted simultaneously as painter, graphic artist, texts illustrator, stage designer, architect, urbanist, public speaker and commentator of current topics and fine arts. He possessed all those skills and even more: a very dynamic animator, promoter of a modern and flexible view, oriented towards the emancipation of the creative energies from the risks of limitation and marginalization (provincialism, apathy, comfort, etc.). He was preoccupied to get rid of anything that would diminish the chances of his works to answer the exigence of the authentic values and the communication with a pretentious public.

The publication CONTIMPORANUL, edited by Marcel Janco, Ion Vinea and Jacques Costin, was the most lasting among all the avant-guard Romanian inter-bellum publications, for close to 10 years and with over 100 editions. Its most important contribution was in the area of visual art. Numerous internal and international exhibitions were dealt with, along with nightly poetical, theatrical and musical avant-guard gatherings, architectural innovations, decorative arts, which took place under its auspices, the "motor" behind it being Marcel Janco. On his return to Romania in 1922, he brought with him a wealth of knowledge, experience and international relationships. The break from Tristan Tzara Dadaism was based on his

moderate and constructivist position. Marcel Janco performed his activity as a modern mediator between "mainstream" and "avant-gard". He was named by Brunea-Fox, as "the portraitist of the Romanian writers". He practiced a mix of abstractionism, realism, post-impressionism, cubism, expressionism, etc., being at the same time the most distinguished theoretician and promoter of Constructivism in Romania.

The emergence of Marcel Janco in the local artistic environment, upset the native art atmosphere, strictly tied up by the rural and archaic rigid moldings and customs. The dynamism is the quality based on which he imposed his way of expressing himself, in the amalgam of lines and colors, in the severe composition of cross intersections of planes, combined and superseded. To Janco, it doesn't count as much the new artistic procedures, as the actual pulse, translated at the level of a superior synthesis. Marcel Janco is searching for partners everywhere, plotting an unprecedented exhibition in Bucharest, with participation of his closest team members of the Zurich campaign: Hans Arp, Paul Klee, Hans Richter, Kurt Schwitters, Wiking Eggeling, Kassak Lajos, Karl Tiege. The opening took place in November 1924, and among the native painters were Arthur Segal, Mattis Teutsch, Victor Brauner, M.H. Maxy, Militza Petrascu, under the patronage of some of the Brancusi sculptures, placed on purpose in dominant spots, drawing the attention that the new spirit, the modernity, far from having to be imported, received itself important Romanian support, fully recognized as being at world level.

Just on the day of Eugene Ionesco comment, Marcel Janco was holding a conference on the topic of "Modern Visual Art". In a totally filled up room, the painter was returning to the legitimate optional preoccupations, from the cubist revolution, through re-establishment the connection with "the great primitive traditions". I quote: "Starting from Cezanne and especially from Picasso, one can assist to a rebirth of a strict visual art". In fact this represented the signal of a larger action of public dialogues. Now he is considered among the initiators of the Art, Philosophy and Literature association "Criterion". A more vehement satiric accent marks part of his works exhibited in 1937, under the feelings of dark premonitions of the emergence of extremist forces. It's the moment of consistent presence in the papers of his graphic art, on the current acute social topics (unemployment, the uncertainty of peace, political demagogy and the misery of incompetence, in clearly anti-dictatorial publications and anti-fascist magazines like: Facla, Cuvantul Liber and Timpul). A bright note brings the exhibition of 1939 along with Militza Petrascu, with works inspired by a recent visit to The Middle East in 1938. It will follow the darkest period of his life with the fascism dominance of Romania and his forced exit from his country, as I mentioned at the beginning of my presentation.

Thanks for your attention!